

“BLACK AUGUST”*

Queensland's Open Season
On Koalas in 1927

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* Letter from Mrs Eva Wallis in Daily Mail, 28 October 1927

This thesis is my own work containing, to the best of my knowledge and belief, no material published or written by another person except as referred to in the next text

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Australian Archives (ACT Division)
AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
ALP	Australian Labour Party
DAS	Department of Agriculture and Stock (Queensland)
GC	General Correspondence
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
QPD	Queensland Parliamentary Debates
QPP	Queensland Parliamentary Papers
QSA	Queensland State Archives
QWEL	Queensland Women's Electoral League

PREFACE

From 1 to 31 August 1927, Queensland held what was to be the last open hunting season on koalas in Australia. David Stead, President of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, warned that 300,000 would be killed. This figure was ridiculed in certain quarters, but as later events would show, even Stead underestimated the carnage. The Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture and Stock for the year 1927-28 gives the number of koalas “secured” as being 584,738.¹ This official figure, though, accounts only for those koalas whose skins reached the market. The Report fails to take into account the deaths of wounded koalas whose bodies were never recovered, those whose damaged pelts were rejected by skin dealers, those whose skins were sold among those of other marsupials, and young koalas who were uselessly killed or, having deprived of their mother, were left to starve. In all probability, the total is closer to 800,000 – a figure which exceeds the total number of koalas which remain alive today in the whole of Australia.² Before 1927, it was possible in certain parts of Queensland to see large numbers of koalas in their natural habitat. Today, few Australians have ever seen them outside zoos.

Little has been made of this remarkable episode in Australia’s history. The first account of any details was given by A.J. “Jock” Marshall in his 1966 book The Great Extermination. In the second chapter, entitled “On the Disadvantages of Wearing Fur”, Marshall first places the 1927 open season within the context of the trade in koala fur, before looking at the controversy surrounding the Government’s declaration through the pages of the Brisbane Courier. He theorises that the chief factor in motivating Queensland politicians to open the season was the need to secure vital rural votes.³ In 1979, Nora Howlett dealt more directly with the slaughter in her article “The Bear You Couldn’t Buy”. In this comprehensive account, Howlett provides a history of the trade, looks at the lead-up to the declaration, and deals briefly with the controversy itself. Her article provides a number of insights into the motives behind the actions of the various forces.⁴ Today it is possible to find the 1927 open season mentioned in a number of books and articles, but most accounts are brief and tend to feed off one another. The most relevant account for the purpose of this thesis is that which appears in Geoffrey Bolton’s Spoils and Spoilers. Bolton, like Marshall and Howlett, sees the open season as being a vote-catching stunt which by no means had its desired effect. In three poignant paragraphs, Bolton’s book provided the inspiration for this thesis.⁵

¹ Queensland Parliamentary Papers, 1928, vol.II, p.306 (p.14 of Annual Report of Department of Agriculture and Stock for the year 1927-28). In the Queensland Parliamentary Debates, 1927, vol. CL, p.1720 (Wednesday 14 December 1927), Forgan Smith gave the number of koalas killed as being 597,985. The open season made it possible for 8,124 licensed trappers and shooters to procure koala skins to the value of £139,595, the price of the skins averaging 56s 9d per dozen at the local sales.

² W.J. Lines, Taming the Great South Land, North Sydney, 1992, p.171.

³ A.J. Marshall (ed.), The Great Extermination, Melbourne, 1966, pp.26-33

⁴ N.L. Howlett, “The Bear You Couldn’t Buy”, Bowyang, vol.1, no.2, September-October 1979, pp.9-24

⁵ G.C. Bolton, Spoils and Spoilers, North Sydney, 1992, pp.102-4.

CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND

With the gradual annihilation of Aborigines in the eastern states, Australia's koala population exploded during the second half of the nineteenth century. Aborigines had traditionally hunted koalas for food and in doing so kept their numbers relatively low. As Marshall observed in The Great Extermination, "the brown people had struck a sort of bargain and a balance and, as far as we can tell, [koalas] – as [a] species – did not come to harm."⁶ Judging by the number of skins sold to the fur trade over the next fifty years, koalas had reached extraordinary abundance by the 1870's.⁷ By the latter part of this decade, European settlers, having recognised the ease with which they could obtain koalas and having been encouraged by an International demand for fur, had developed a thriving trade in koala skins. Australia, according to Bill Phillips, was "the last great frontier for the international fur trade", and koala fur was soon in great demand in the fashion and trade centres of more densely populated countries, in particular the United States.⁸ Although (fortunately for the koala) not highly valued, the koala's thick, soft fur soon acquired the reputation as being a particularly effective insulator against the cold – ideal for protecting the human body from "the icy blasts of winter in Northern Canada and Europe".⁹ Koala fur was renowned for its ability to withstand any amount of hard usage. Furthermore, it was waterproof, making it ideal for the interior lining of greatcoats.¹⁰ By the 1890's, many thousands of koalas were being killed annually in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland in order to provide skins for the flourishing fur industry.¹¹ By the beginning of the twentieth century, skin hunters had begun to focus their attention on Queensland, as populations of koalas in the southern states had diminished.¹²

An increase in public concern for the koala's survival eventually led to the introduction of protective legislation in some colonies. In Victoria in 1898 a proclamation headed "Native bears to be deemed native game and protected" was issued, but Victorian koalas were still killed, by hunters who were now forced to sell the skins outside Victoria in a colony where the hunting of koalas was still permitted. In New South Wales, koalas were afforded limited protection under the Native Animals Protection Act of 1903.¹³

Unscrupulous shooters and trappers soon developed numerous methods of getting around fauna legislation. For instance, a hunter could continue to procure koala skins and store them until the next open season was declared. Such practices were virtually impossible to control.¹⁴ Furthermore, as Geoffrey Bolton had

⁶ Marshall, The Great Extermination, p.11.

⁷ A. Lee and R. Martin, The Koala: A Natural History, Kensington, 1988, p.83.

⁸ B. Phillips, Koalas: The little Australians we'd all hate to lose, Canberra, 1990, p.21.

⁹ A. Pratt, The Call of the Koala, Melbourne, 1937, p.14.

¹⁰ N. Burnett, The Blue Gum Family at Koala Park, Sydney, 1932, p.17.

¹¹ In his 1894 book, A Handbook to the Marsupial and Monotremata (London), Richard Lydekker observed: the koala must be an abundant animal. Since from 10,000 to 30,000 skins are annually imported into London, while in 1889 the enormous total of 300,000 was reached.

¹² C. Barrett, An Australian Animal Book, Melbourne, 1947, pp. 74-5; J. Barrett, Save Australia, Melbourne, 1925, p.178. The relentless skin trade, along with the disease epidemics of 1887-9, 1898-9, and 1900-3 in Victoria, New South Wales and Central Queensland (at that stage the disease was unknown, but today it has been identified as a form of conjunctivitis) had led to the devastation of South Australia's koala population and the rapid decline of their numbers in New South Wales and Victoria.

¹³ The legislation still allowed for the declaration of further open seasons.

¹⁴ Even if a hunter was found in the possession of skins during a closed season, it would be difficult to prove that the skins were not procured during a recent open season.

pointed out, “[c]ountry justices of the peace were often landowners whose favorite Sunday recreation was a day’s shooting, and if a policeman was zealous enough to launch prosecutions against any of the Bench’s friends, he often found it hopeless to expect a conviction”.¹⁵ So the skin trade survived in New South Wales, and in 1908 a total of 57,933 koala pelts passed through the markets of Sydney alone.¹⁶

In 1912, koalas were granted absolute protection in South Australia. By this time, however, the South Australian koala population had already reached its “critical level”; that is, the numerical level from which a species cannot return.¹⁷

It is not possible to obtain accurate statistics on the number of koalas harvested for the international fur trade in the early 1920’s.¹⁸ Nevertheless Professor Frederic Wood Jones claimed that in the two years 1920 and 1921 (in which no open season was declared), 205,679 koalas were killed Australia-wide for the fur market,¹⁹ while Ellis Troughton asserted that more than two million koala skins were exported from the eastern states in 1924.

By 1924, Queensland, with its vast and dense coastal forests, remained the last real stronghold for the koala. Koalas were extinct in South Australia,²⁰ close to it in New South Wales, and the numbers in Victoria had fallen so dramatically that in the 1920s a rough estimate put the total koala population of that state at some five hundred.²¹ Despite a six month open season in 1919 when over a million were killed, Queensland alone retained significant numbers of koalas.

The Annual Reports of the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Stock, the Department responsible for the administration of the laws relating to fauna, show that by 1905 government officials were aware that Queensland’s koala population was not inexhaustible. In the Report for the year 1905-06, it is lamented that despite the fact that the animal “is threatened with extermination owing to the value of its pelt”, there is no protection for “the harmless native bear . . . which is in no way a pest”.²² The same report asserts that in the financial year of 1904-05, approximately 340,000 koala skins were offered for sale in the Brisbane

¹⁵ Bolton, Spoils and Spoilers, pp.102-3

¹⁶ The origin of this figure is hard to track down, but it is cited by Phillips (p.22), Serventy (pp.65-6), Lee and Martin (p.84), Troughton (p.137) and Ride (p.11).

¹⁷ Marshall, The Great Extermination, p.24

¹⁸ They were not classed as a pest and therefore those who killed them were under no requirement to keep a scalp register. On page 66 of The Koala (New York, 1975), Vincent and Carol Serventy point to a further complication in that the tide of public opinion was forcing hunters to market their skins under the guise of “wombat”, a species long regarded as a pest and having fewer admirers. Alternatively, hunters would simply sell koala skins among those of the “opossum” (possum), an animal for which open seasons were more frequent, or among the skins of other marsupials.

¹⁹ F.Wood Jones, The Mammals of South Australia, Adelaide, 1923-25, p.186. James Barrett, on page 4 of Save Australia, points out that Professors H.F. Osborn and N.E. Anthony gave a figure of 208,677 for 1919-21, a figure which was published in a 1922 issue of Natural History.

²⁰ It will never be known whether, and to what extent, the South Australian koala differed from its cousins in the other states.

²¹ V. and C. Serventy, The Koala, p.66. This, however, was probably an underestimation.

²² QPP, 1906, vol.II, p.132, (p.8 of Annual Report of DAS for the year 1905-06).

market alone.²³ “[I]t is not thought,” the report goes on, “that the breed could sustain a continuance of such destruction for many years in succession, and, consequently, it is submitted that a close season, as suggested by Mr [M.V.] Brown, should find a place in the Statutes”.²⁴ This recommendation was acted on in November, 1906, when the Native Animals Protection Act was passed. This Act provided for a closed season from 1 November to 30 April each year, meaning that like its equivalents in the other states, it continued to offer opportunities for hunting during open seasons.

The 1906 Act, then, was far from a blanket protection. Even the Department of Agriculture and Stock admitted that it was inadequate. Administration of the Act was a virtual impossibility, “owing to the nomadic habits of those who trap for a livelihood, and to the extreme difficulty of supervising them when at their work”.²⁵ The police had no authority to enter and search a camp or conveyance for skins suspected to have been illegally obtained (meaning that they had to catch people actually shooting or trapping before action could be taken), and they had no power of confiscation in the case of a successful prosecution (meaning that a man fined for illegally dealing in skins often had these skins returned to him after the case had been concluded).²⁶ Furthermore, section 9(c) of the Act, under which an Aborigine could kill any native animal for food, provided an easy means of evading the Act. The promise of opium was successfully used by many white hunters to persuade Aborigines to provide them with possums and koalas.²⁷

While some trappers attempted to get around the laws, others chose to disregard them completely. The killing of koalas went on during closed seasons – trappers simply storing the skins until such time as they could legally sell them. Cyanide of potassium and other poisons were easily obtainable and were used freely in defiance of the law.²⁸ The use of cyanide meant indiscriminate slaughter, causing the death of many thousands of animals whose skins were never placed upon the market (most notably those of young koalas). The Queensland Government was keen to put a stop to the practice of poisoning, as it was unpopular with pastoralists, whose stock often took cyanide baits when they were placed near cattle licks.

A closed season was first declared on killing koalas in Queensland on 1 November 1908. The koala-hunting season was reopened from 25 June 1915 to 31 October 1915, and again from 1 August 1917 to 31 October 1917, but it was the six month season from 1 April to 30 September 1919, during which nearly 10,000 licensed trappers procured over one million koala skins, which finally put the issue on the public agenda. The Labour Government of the day was fully aware that the 1906 Native Animals Protection Act was not doing the job. Trappers, it seemed, were running amok. In the Department of Agriculture and Stock’s Annual Report for the year 1918-19, it was conceded that despite the efforts of police, the regulations recently issued concerning the use of poison, “the practice of using cyanide for killing opossums and native bears has been more rampant during the last season [1919] than in previous years”.²⁹ A fear was being expressed within the Queensland Government that the koala was in real danger of extinction.

²³ The author of this report, after adding this figure to that of the skins that were not sold, and to that of those sold in markets outside Brisbane, arrives at the colossal total of 500,000 as being the koala death toll for that year in Queensland.

²⁴ Ibid. Brown had attempted without success to protect the koala by way of a closed season by presenting a Bill to the Legislative Council in 1904.

²⁵ QPP, 1908, vol. III, p.39, (p.35 of Annual Report of DAS for the year 1907-08).

²⁶ QPP, 1909, vol. II, p.287, (p.35 of Annual Report of DAS for the year 1908-09).

²⁷ Abid.

²⁸ Poisoning was preferred by many hunters over shooting and the use of wire snares because it did the least damage to the pelt.

²⁹ QPP, 1919-20, vol. II, p.1116, (p.22 of Annual Report of DAS for the year 1918-19).

The public outcry over the 1919 open season had helped convince the Government that “[p]ublic sentiment for the protection of our native birds and animals [was] beginning to realise that a stand must be made to prevent further depletion if we are to preserve the beautiful and useful fauna we possess”.³⁰ One might think “useful” is a curious word to use here, but this was precisely the line along which government officials were thinking. As far as they were concerned, the survival of the koala as a species paled into insignificance beside the importance of this marsupial as a fur-producer. The only time Departmental reports ever used the word “conservation” was in reference to “our fur resources”.³¹ The Queensland Government’s interest in preventing the extinction of the koala lay in preserving the trade in koala skins. Protection was merely a means of allowing “the breed” [to] revive”.³²

On 1 October 1919 (the day after the six month open season had expired), the Minister for Agriculture and Stock, W.N. Gillies, informed State Parliament that he would be taking action to prevent the extermination of the koala.³³ Consequently, the koala-hunting season remained closed for the next eight years. During this time, the Queensland Parliament passed the comprehensive Animals and Birds Act of 1921, which protected all fauna not specifically named, including the koala. This Act represented both the amalgamation of several previous Acts and the culmination of a number of suggestions made by departmental officials over the previous decade or so. The Animals and Birds Act provided for the licensing of all trappers and dealers in skins; it banned the use by hunters of electric torches and acetylene lamps, and it set out stiffer penalties for law-breakers. Further, it provided for the transforming of reserves into bona fide sanctuaries, which would be patrolled by rangers, and which would be proclaimed in areas where conditions especially favorable to the conservation of native fauna existed.³⁴ The Act was subsequently amended in 1924 to ensure that all royalties accrued through its implementation were used in its administration.

The Animals and Birds Act, like its predecessor the Native Animals Protection Act, was by no means the koala’s saviour. It was extremely difficult to enforce – to a large extent relying upon “the hearty co-operation of the professional trapper, who is keenly alive to the danger of the possible extinction of his industry”³⁵ – and it still provided for the declaration of further open seasons. Yet despite these shortcomings, and despite the fact that the Act was conceived by a government which was thinking with its pocket, it was in no way a backward step for the koala’s cause.

All this good work was undone when on 7 July 1927, the Labour Government’s Minister for Agriculture and Stock (and Acting Premier³⁶) William Forgan Smith, proclaimed an open season on koalas (and possums) for the month of August that year.

³⁰ QPP, 1923, vol. II, p.20, (p.18 of Annual Report of DAS for the year 1921-22).

³¹ QPP, 1925, vol. II, p.298, (p.26 of Annual Report of DAS for the year 1923-24).

³² QPP, 1919-20, vol. II, p.1117, (p.23 of Annual Report of DAS for the year 1923-24).

³³ QPD, 1919-20, vol. CXXXII, p.1064.

³⁴ QPP, 1922, vol. I, pp. 1115-9;
QPP, 1923, vol. II, pp.20-1, (pp.18-19 of Annual Report of DAS for the year 1921-22).

³⁵ QPP, 1923, vol. II, p.21, (p.19 of Annual Report of DAS for the year 1921-22).

³⁶ Premier William McCormack was abroad at the time.

CHAPTER TWO: DECISION

No sooner was the Order in Council issued, declaring an open season on koalas, than it was condemned. This condemnation came from both rural and urban areas of Queensland and from the populace at large as well as the state's elite. On 18 July a letter from Archbishop Sharp appeared in the Courier. In it he called for: 'protests in large numbers, from individuals, and, still better, from groups or meetings or associations of people living in the country (for country dwellers probably are more grieved even than town dwellers), . . . [to] . . . be sent to the Acting Premier in order to bring home to him how strong and real is our feeling about this.'³⁷

It is unclear how much influence His Grace's plea had on the people of Queensland, but over the next two weeks, the Government was bombarded with letters, petitions, deputations and strongly-worded resolutions of protest. Furthermore, hundreds of letters poured into newspapers all over the state. Protests came from scientific bodies, such as the Royal Society of Queensland, the Queensland Naturalists' Club, the Nature Lovers' League, and various Native Birds and Animals Protection Associations. They came from shire councils, city councils, chambers of commerce, Local Producers' Associations, and the United Graziers' Association. They came from Progress Associations, the Playground Association of Queensland, the Australian Natives, Association of Queensland, the Queensland Boy Scouts' Association, and the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia. They came from religious organizations, such as the Theosophical Order of Service and the Church of England Men's Society of Queensland, and from churches of all denominations. They came from women's organizations, like the Country Women's Associations, the Brisbane Women's Club, the Queensland Women's Electoral League and the Queensland Branch of the National Council of Women. They came from state school committees, Sunday Schools and Schools of Art. They came from the University and the Museum. A petition even arrived from inmates of "The Hospice" in East Brisbane. Towns held public meetings to discuss the matter and numerous town councils claimed the support of a large number of local residents in their resolutions. Queenslanders were by no means alone in voicing their opposition. Scientific bodies from New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia all exerted pressure upon the Queensland Ministry. The Armidale Electorate Labour Council³⁸ requested its State Executive to issue a strong protest to Queensland's Acting Premier. Overseas, the London Times and Boston's Christian Science Monitor published articles denouncing the Queensland Government's decision.

To some extent, the target of people's animosity varied. Some, such as the Queensland Society for the Prevention of Cruelty³⁹ denounced the trappers and shooters, while others deprecated those who wore the furs – "the women overseas . . . [whose] vanity . . . requires the life of one of the most beautiful and harmless creatures that ever graced a country".⁴⁰ Most, though, saved their condemnation for the Acting Labour Premier and his fellow Cabinet Ministers. The following anonymous letter reached the Department of Agriculture and Stock in July:

Every man has sorrow some time in the course of his life, but may each man who is responsible for the slaughter of defenseless and harmless Native Bears suffer a double share of sorrow.⁴¹

Why did the Acting Premier stand by his decision amid such a storm of protest? Whilst he was under a great deal of pressure to rescind his proclamation opening the season for koalas, he was also under pressure to hold firm. This pressure was all the more telling because it was not only coming from the rural working

³⁷ Courier, 18 July 1927.

³⁸ In New South Wales.

³⁹ An Organization claiming to represent 30,000 sympathizers.

⁴⁰ "Queensland Native" in Courier, 29 July 1927.

⁴¹ General Correspondence, Department of Agriculture and Stock, Queensland State Archives, AGS/J464.

classes, but from those MLAs who represented them. In other words, much of the pro-open season pressure was coming from within Forgan Smith's own Government.

From January 1927, letters began reaching the Department of Agriculture and Stock requesting that the koala-hunting season be reopened. The vast majority stressed the hardships being faced in country districts. Queensland was hit by a crippling drought in 1926. As a consequence, many rural-based industries suffered major slumps and, particularly after the closure of many of the mines and railways, work was scarce in rural districts. Farmers neither sowed nor harvested, and pastoralists too had little work to offer. In February, E. Bennett, Acting Secretary of the Emerald Shooters' and Trappers' Association, informed Thomas Foley, Labour MLA for Leichhardt, that:

[the] position [is] becoming more acute each week owing to the enormous loss of stock (caused by the drought) and the man on the land having no work to offer, the sheds only shearing with about one third of the men previously used, and the fact that the Railway Department are putting off many of their men each month.⁴²

The opening of the koala-hunting season was suggested as a means of providing the unemployed with "some avenue of work".⁴³ A. F. Kent, Secretary of the Rockhampton Chamber of Commerce, argued that:

the revenue to be derived [from a limited koala-hunting season] will, in a great measure, absorb unemployment, and counteract the present depression, and help tide over – particularly the man on the land – the hard times ahead . . . [M]uch suffering to children will be prevented, as parents will be afforded a means of supplying their families with requirements that otherwise will be lacking.⁴⁴

Clearly, those who sought an open season were not averse to pulling a heartstring or two among those in power. A. Rowley, Secretary of the Unemployed of Mount Morgan, claimed that an open season on koalas and possums would enable "some of the Unemployed . . . to keep their home fires burning".⁴⁵

Correspondents were eager to establish that they were men who usually employed and were willing to work. They did not seek Government relief, but merely the opportunity to earn an income by means of trapping.

Many correspondents claimed that koalas had again become numerous in certain districts. Thomas Foley asserted this in a letter to Attorney-General "Jack" Mullan:⁴⁶

It can safely be assumed that there are as many bears missed during an open season as are shot, and a mathematical calculation based upon a female bear rearing one each year since the last open season . . . show[s] that there must be a bear population . . . [in] . . . Queensland today exceeding several millions.⁴⁷

⁴² E. Bennett to T.A/ Foley, 18 February 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁴³ F.W. Bulcock to W. Forgan Smith, 25 January 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁴⁴ A.F. Kent to J. C. Peterson, 20 May 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁴⁵ A. Rowley to W. Forgan Smith, 5 April 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464

⁴⁶ John Mullan was Acting Premier for several days in late July while Forgan Smith was in Sydney.

⁴⁷ T. A. Foley to J. Mullan, 22 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

Perhaps this was the kind of “scientific advice” which influenced Forgan Smith in making his decision. Foley’s premise – that as many bears were missed during an open season as were shot – was both highly speculative and highly improbable.

The Minister for Agriculture and Stock was also informed that large numbers of koalas, especially in the Western District, were dying out from disease. This prompted Frank Bulcock, Labour MLA for Barcoo, to argue that the very “preservation of the bear depends . . . on the reduction in their numbers from time to time”.⁴⁸ An open season, implied Bulcock, was not only in the best interests of unemployed rural workers – it was in the best interests of the koalas.

Two main arguments, then, were advanced in favour of an open season on koalas: than an open season would provide unemployed rural breadwinners with the opportunity to earning some money in “trying times”,⁴⁹ and that it would allow for the “thinning out”⁵⁰ of a koala population too large for its own good. In a letter to the AWU’s Bundberg Office Secretary, S.A. Munckton combined the two.

It is hard to get work just now, and there are millions of possums and bears in the bush . . . [T]his cry of extermination is all moonshine . . . the cry of the wowser and the big land owners, [and] squatters . . . [who] do not want us in their paddocks. I tell you as one bushman who knows that possums and bears can be bade a two months open season every year and they will never become much less, let alone the foolish talk of extermination. . . . They soon breed up and travel all over the country, and a patch of country which one would think had been practically cleaned up can be gone over again in six months time and they are as plentiful as ever . . .⁵¹

Whilst many correspondents chose to write directly to the Minister for Agriculture and Stock, others chose to enlist the “influential support”⁵² of their local members. Home Secretary James Stopford appealed on behalf of the unemployed rural workers of his electorate, informing Forgan Smith in April that:

the unemployed position is pretty acute in Mount Morgan and also in the Central District generally and the opening of the [koala-hunting] season . . . would undoubtedly provide a means of relieving, to a large extent, the distress which exists.⁵³

Stopford, like the other MLAs who brought pressure to bear on Forgan Smith,⁵⁴ was notified immediately after the decision was made to declare an open season on koalas for the month of August. It seems that their “representations in connection with the opening of the season” must have made some impact.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ F.W. Bulcock to J.Mullan, 22 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁴⁹ T. Richie (Secretary of the Keppel Electorate Executive of the ALP) to J. Stopford (MLA for Mount Morgan), 11 June 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁵⁰ T.A. Foley in Courier, 21 July 1927.

⁵¹ S.A. Munckton to the Secretary of the Bundaberg Office of the AMU, 29 March 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁵² T. Richie to J. Stopford, 11 June 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁵³ J. Stopford to W. Forgan Smith, 9 April 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁵⁴ Bulcock on behalf of the Barcardine Branch of the ALP and the unemployed in the Blackall District; Railways Minister James Larcombe (Keppel) on behalf of the Rockhampton Executive of the Unemployed; Stopford and George Carter (Port Curtis) on behalf of the Keppel Electorate Executive of the ALP; John O’Keefe (Chillagoe) on behalf of the Chillagoe Branch of the AWU; James Peterson (Normanby) and George Farrell (Rockhampton) on behalf of the Rockhampton Chamber of Commerce; Henry Ryan (Cook) on behalf of the Emerald Shooters’ and Trappers’ Association, and Edward Swayne on behalf of people in his electorate of Mirani.

In a period of economic depression, mounting unemployment and industrial unrest, the Queensland Government needed to find a way of securing grassroots rural votes which would not involve cost to the Treasury.⁵⁶ Providing poor and unemployed rural workers with a permit to hunt koalas and possums for one month seemed an ideal substitute for relief payments. Forgan Smith was very much alive to the importance of the rural vote to the Queensland Labour Government. The alienation of small landholders and struggling farm workers had to be avoided at all costs, for, as Marshall observes, “[r]ural votes are often vital votes”.⁵⁷ Forgan Smith may well have seen merit in the contention of the AWU’s Mackay Branch Organiser, C. Fallon, that “if men were allowed to shoot [koalas] a good deal of additional money would circulate”.⁵⁸ The Minister was also aware that the railways, which would be used to transport koala skins to Brisbane, would benefit from an open season and thereby be placed in a position where they could employ more men.

As Munckton’s letter suggests, not all those in rural districts were in favour of the open season. While landless workers and small farmers saw the season as a chance to “lighten their loads considerably”⁵⁹ by regaining an income or supplementing an existing one, pastoralists and wealthy farmers saw it as an invitation to thousands of trappers and shooters to trespass on their land. These men were not about to forget previous hunting seasons (be it for koalas or possums), in which fences and wires had been cut, sliprails thrown down, gates left open and tanks damaged. Moreover, fat stock had been disturbed (and their commercial value diminished) by the sounds of guns and dogs, and by electric torches or acetylene lights flaring from the bush. Trappers had cut timber for their own uses, they had failed to remove snares before vacating a holding, and in some cases up to forty head of cattle had died at the hands of the cyanide baits. The Queensland Producer editorialised that during open seasons,

[f]armers and selectors are at the mercy of men whose regard for proprietary rights and ordinary decencies is less than their regard for their murderous victims . . . [Trappers have a] disregard of any interest save their own desire for easy money.⁶⁰

Pastoralists and wealthy landowners were especially critical of the fact that a trapper’s permit practically superseded any rights of the owner of lessee upon properties covered by the permit. Only holders of areas less than 2,560 acres could have their land exempted, meaning that on the remainder they were unable to refuse the right of access to trappers and shooters.⁶¹ By and large, rural landowners did not oppose the idea of an open season out of any genuine concern for the koala, but because of the costly property and stock damage that could result.

Financial concerns were also paramount among those within the fur trade who objected to the forthcoming open season. While many Brisbane firms favoured the opening of the season from a commercial point of

⁵⁵ This appears on all letters from DAS to MLAs dated 8 July 1927.

The Minister was also presented with numerous petitions requesting an open season on koalas (one, for example, from the citizens of Styx and others from Mareeba, Jericho and Hartley). He was waited upon by a deputation representing the Central Queensland Trappers’ and Shooters’ Association, an organization which agitated enthusiastically and continuously for the opening of the season. See GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁵⁶ Bolton, Spoils and Spoilers, p.104.

⁵⁷ Marshall, The Great Extermination, p.30.

⁵⁸ C.Fallon to W. Forgan Smith, 8 March 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁵⁹ A.R. Hartley of Gorton and Hartley Solicitors, Mackay (on behalf of W.R. Edwards) to W. Forgan Smith, 14 June 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁶⁰ Queensland Producer, 20 July 1927.

⁶¹ Departmental statement, 22 June 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

view, other believed koalas were in danger of being “shot right out”.⁶² The extinction of the koala would, of course, sound the death knell of the trade in koala fur. Some furriers believed that the industry could only be placed on a permanent footing if rangers were given time to get a good grip of the situation,⁶³ and if an end was put to illegal practices such as trapping out of season and poisoning. Poison and wire snares killed indiscriminately, and wholesale slaughter was not in the furriers interest. Young koalas, who pelts were unprofitable, but on which the future of the industry depended, were being killed by the thousand. Fur traders stressed the need to preserve the koala as a source of profit, some even advocating fur farms for marsupials which would guarantee that stocks were maintained.⁶⁴

Whilst self-interest motivated some people to oppose the open season, many more were spurred into action by humanitarian concerns. Many protesters stressed the inoffensiveness of the koala – the fact it does no harm to man and destroys nothing of any value. T.L. Anderson conceded that:

If the bears . . . were swooping down on the cane fields and devouring the cane; if they were mowing down corn crops; mopping up the pastures, and clearing the cotton fields; then . . . there would be some justification for the Government’s listening to a few trappers, who want to have an open “go” at this Dinkum Aussie.⁶⁵

The koala could never be accused of spoiling the farmer’s wheat, or eating the squatter’s grass, or even spreading the prickly pear – it simply “lives its tranquil life among the old grey gums”.⁶⁶ As Anderson observed, the koala’s “only crime” [was] that his coat [was] valuable”.⁶⁷ It was argued that the demands of the skin trade could be satisfied, and the country ridded of vermin, if dingoes (“where there is more money in one scalp than half a dozen bears’ skins”⁶⁸) or foxes were hunted instead.⁶⁹ Some were cynical enough to suggest that the reason such possibilities were not entertained was that the hunting of these pests would require skill, exertion and courage, “which is somewhat distasteful to some”.⁷⁰ A more pressing reason was that overseas fur-buyers did not show enough interest in the skins of these animals – the real demand was for koala pelts.

Koala hunters used any of three methods to kill their prey: snares, poison and shooting. All were regarded as cruel and inhumane by those who objected to the open season. Wire snares or traps set at the bottom of trees frequently did not kill the animal, leaving it to be finished off by a dingo or fox. If the snare was not properly set, which was often the case, the koala might be able to free itself, but would usually die on account of the injuries suffered. Poisoning too meant a slow and agonising death. Shooting was seen as a brutal practice in that koalas were rarely, if ever, killed by the first shot, and often up to twenty shots were required. “At times,” according to M.O’Sullivan, Secretary of the Queensland Society for the Prevention

⁶² R.G. Talbot to W.H. Crank (District Inspector of Stock, Rockhampton), 8 April 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁶³ W.E. Black (Ranger) to E. Graham (Under Secretary for the Department of Agriculture and Stock), 20 June 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

⁶⁴ Barrett, Save Australia, p.4.

⁶⁵ Courier, 15 July 1927.

⁶⁶ “Bush Women” in Courier, 3 August 1927.

⁶⁷ Courier, 15 July 1927.

⁶⁸ “Queenslander” in Courier, 20 July 1927.

⁶⁹ Others suggested that hunters divert their attention to rabbits, flying foxes or even snakes and iguanas, all of which were destructive in some way, and all of which had commercial value.

⁷⁰ “A Queenslander” in Courier, 20 July 1927

of Cruelty, “there are several shots fired into them, and they still cling to the trees and linger on in torture”.⁷¹ W. A. Noble described the shooting of koalas as “a merciless, unmanly procedure”.⁷² The sedentary and somnolent koala provided an easy target for shooters. It had no means of protecting itself, for it did not take refuge in the daytime and, unlike the kangaroo, the wallaby and the agile possum, it was too slow to take evasive action. Moreover, the koala’s trust in man usually led to its undoing.

The koala were renowned for being extremely tenacious of life, and when wounded uttered a pitiful, haunting, child-like cry. “Rosie”, an Aboriginal woman, told K.L. Simpson:

“Me no liking kill that feller: he cry like a piccaninny; big tears come, and he go ‘im-im’ – making a whimpering noise.”⁷³

Newspaper readers were horrified by tales of baby koalas trying to obtain nourishment from the skinless body of a dead mother,⁷⁴ and of hunters skinning their catch without bothering to kill the animal first.⁷⁵

Numerous correspondence attacked the Government’s hypocrisy in teaching schoolchildren to be kind to native animals while encouraging adults to destroy them, while others scoffed at Premier McCormack’s previous guarantee that the Labour Party would be the ‘Humanity Party’.⁷⁶ E. Fling believed that, “lessons learned in the home, school, and House of God regarding kindness of heart have been forgotten by some, whose hearts, for material gain, alas! Have become quite hardened”.⁷⁷

It was the mercenary nature of the exercise which offended many people. The Daily Mail editorialised that “Queensland and Queenslanders are not so poverty stricken that they cannot afford the trifling economic loss of relieving the native bear”.⁷⁸ Scientist Donald Thomson saw no excuse for such “callous and systematic exploitation”.⁷⁹ Forgan Smith was attacked for having yielded to the clamour of “thriftless, greedy profiteers” (trappers and shooters) and other “interested people” (namely unions and fur dealers both here and abroad).⁸⁰ To many, the open season represented indiscriminate slaughter for the monetary gain of a few, and this they found unacceptable.

Margaret A. Ogg, Organising Secretary of the Queensland Women’s Electoral League, argued that “the temporary gain . . . [would be] . . . insignificant . . . compared with the loss to the country”, and that

⁷¹ “A Queenslander” in Courier, 20 July 1927.

⁷² “A Queenslander” in Courier, 23 July 1927.

⁷³ “A Queenslander” in Courier, 18 July 1927.

⁷⁴ “.303” in Courier, 22 July 1927.

⁷⁵ Daily Standard, 26 July 1927, contains a letter from Frank E. Staunton, in which he writes:
A scalper [during the previous open season on koalas] shot a bear and skinned him, leaving him for dead. Later the bear recovered, scrambled to a nearby tree, which he attempted to climb, and when found by me was moaning pitiously, clinging to the tree, his bare flesh twitching and quivering and slowly drying and cracking in the hot sunshine, I killed the brute. . .

⁷⁶ Wakefield to Deputy Premier (W. Forgan Smith), 27 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J463.

⁷⁷ Courier, 4 August 1927.

⁷⁸ Daily Mail, 14 July 1927.

⁷⁹ Sydney Mail, 24 August 1927.

⁸⁰ K. Edmondstone in Courier, 13 July 1927; Courier editorial, 13 July 1927.

“revenue . . . should not be the first consideration of a Government”.⁸¹ In doing so, she displayed a fundamental misunderstanding of what the Queensland Government stood to gain from a month’s open season on koalas. Ogg. Though, was by no means alone. In a letter to the Acting Premier, S. Thompson wrote.

One would think that after taxing every person and every thing conceivable there would be sufficient revenue without having to grasp at the few pounds that the murder of these natural pets will bring to the coffers of the Queensland Government.⁸²

While it is true that the Government did stand to gain from license fees (10 shillings each) and fines for breaches of the Animals and Birds Act,⁸³ the open season was not declared “for the sake of a handful of filthy lucre”.⁸⁴ The Government’s interest did not lay in “grab[bing] a few paltry pounds”⁸⁵ in revenue – it lay in “grabbing” votes for the next election.

The principal reason why the 1927 open season generated more controversy than those before it (which were often much longer), was that many saw the koala as being in grave danger of extermination. Koalas were reported to be practically extinct in many districts where they had once abounded,⁸⁶ and as Queensland retained the only significant numbers of the animal, its disappearance in that state would mean its ultimate extinction. According to “Omega”, science editor for the Daily Standard,

[it] is a well know principle in pest control that if a pest is reduced in numbers by artificial means then the natural enemies see to tit that a further reduction is immediately affected . . . though . . . [the koala] . . . is, of course, anything but a pest.⁸⁷

Many, including “bushmen” and “bushwomen”,⁸⁸ were adamant that koala populations had not noticeably increased during the last eight years of protection. Storekeeper William Wells informed the Minister that between two district mailmen, whose routes ran forty miles and twenty-five miles respectively, only one koala had been seen in the last two and a half years – and this was in a district in which they had been abundant only twenty years previously.⁸⁹

Two main factors were seen as having contributed to the koala’s relative scarcity. First, the koala was a slow breeder (a female having one baby at a time every year) and it was claimed that numbers had not had time to recover since the 1919 season. Secondly, koalas were susceptible to periodic diseases which rapidly diminished their numbers. Due to an unknown disease (largely bound up with drought conditions),

⁸¹ M.A. Ogg to DAS, 21 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464. Ogg claimed that the QWEL had 16,000 members, many of whom were located in the country.

⁸² S. Thompson to W. Forgan Smith, 20 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J463.

⁸³ All royalties from the skin sales, of course, went into a trust fund for the protection of native fauna.

⁸⁴ S.A. White in Courier, 21 July 1927.

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koalas had been dying out in many parts of central and south-western Queensland for several years.⁹⁰ Natural increase, it was pointed out, would be doubly prevented by the timing of the forthcoming open season. Female koalas have their young in the winter and the baby is usually carried in the pouch for three months (say, June through August). Even if an infant did make it out of the pouch by the time the open season commenced, it would still need to be carried on its mother's back for some time. If it survived its mother being riddled with bullets, and if it did not take a cyanide bait or fall victim to a snare, a baby koala would more than likely perish of cold and starvation if its mother was killed. Some suggested that if there had to be an open season it should be postponed until October, when young koalas could fend for themselves in the warmer weather.⁹¹ The Government, though, had been advised by the trapping fraternity that the quality of fur was superior in the winter months.⁹²

Many argued that if the koala was not to be preserved for sentimental reasons, it had to be safeguarded because of its scientific value. The koala is unique both to this country, and in terms of anatomy and habit. Even in 1927, the koala was "famous throughout the world as a rare specimen of archaic fauna".⁹³ Recognised by scientists and zoologists the world over as forming "a link with the prehistoric past",⁹⁴ the koala supplied valuable information on the evolution of marsupials and mammals, "the earth's history, and . . . the origin of species, which is not otherwise available".⁹⁵ Unlike kangaroos, wallabies, wombats and possums, the koala is represented by a single species.

The koala is remarkable for its absence of external tail; for its extraordinarily large appendix, for having a pouch which is widely extended at the side and opens backwards (as opposed to a typical bag-like pouch which opens forwards), and for possessing on either side of the upper jaw a curious structure known as a "cheek-pouch", in which masticated food can be stored.⁹⁶ Perhaps it was the fact that the koala is one of the world's oldest remaining animal species that prompted "Omega" to argue that "[I]ts wholesale destruction would be a national calamity and a scientific crime".⁹⁷ Perhaps it was the fact that contemporary medical researchers regarded the koala as the most valuable Australian mammal for the study of certain human diseases (such as cancer).⁹⁸ Yet according to George Barker⁹⁹ no advice relating to

⁹⁰ Courier, 26 July 1927, contains correspondence from W. Beattie, in which he states that koalas were dying off as a result of "Red Water".

⁹¹ E.g. G.H. Haughton to W. Forgan Smith, 30 May 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J463.

⁹² Several letters to DAS in GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J463-4. The nature of the open season too, many believed, would not be conducive to the koala's survival as a species. Koalas, which are not migratory and were found only along a limited coastal area, would stand little chance against the speedier means of transport and more modern rifles that had been developed since the previous open season. This time, a larger scope of country would be covered and even fewer koalas would be missed.

⁹³ Courier, 28 July 1927.

⁹⁴ S. A. White in Courier, 21 July 1927.

⁹⁵ W.H. Symes in Courier, 19 July 1927.

⁹⁶ Heber A. Longman (Director of the Queensland Museum) in Courier, 19 July 1927.

⁹⁷ Daily Standard, 23 July 1927.

⁹⁸ A. H. Chisholm to W. Forgan Smith, 23 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464; Burnet, The Blue Gum Family at Koala Park, p.34. On pages 34 and 35 of his book, Burnet argues that the koala's constant nibbling of leaves is useful not only in the destruction of parasites, but in providing gums with a "natural pruning" so as to prevent them dying from "rotten top".

⁹⁹ Barker was Honorary State Secretary of the Royal Australian Ornithologists' Union.

the koala's situation was sought from either the University or any scientific society prior to the declaration being made.¹⁰⁰

The Government made no secret of the fact that the chief purpose of the open season was to provide work for the rural unemployed. Many doubted, though, whether unemployed persons would be the only ones granted permits, and argued that if this was not the case the purpose of helping them would be defeated and the koala's future would be placed in further jeopardy. Theoretically, under Regulation 4 of the Animals and Birds Acts 1921-1924, permits were to be issued only to applicants who satisfied the License Board that their principal employment during the open season would be that of trapping.¹⁰¹ In practice, these boards were often open to deception and persuasion, and permits were granted to those who were not out of work but merely looking for a little extra money.¹⁰² "Dinkum Aussie" informed Courier readers of "banana growers in the Wamuran Basin district who are making, . . .out of their plantations, from £500 to £1000 a year, and they may be seen any night in the week flashing lights into the trees in search of . . .[koalas] . . . just to swell their bank books".¹⁰³ This regulation, furthermore, was powerless to stop stationworkers, bullock drivers, and selectors temporarily leaving employment to go trapping for the season, as had occurred in 1919.¹⁰⁴ It was men such as these, who were or had been in permanent employment, along with the professional trappers, who were the only ones with sufficient funds to provide the necessary horses, equipment and camping plant. "Pro-Bear" argued that the idea of:

an open possum or bear season giving work to unemployed . . . [bear] a myth, as I doubt if 5 per cent of trappers and shooters are drawn from the ranks of the unemployed, the main reason being that very few men competent to make a success of trapping, in the unemployed, have the necessary plant.¹⁰⁵

During the August open season, it was reported that unemployed persons were still walking the district, on account of the fact that most of the koala and possum country was being monopolised by employers of landholders.¹⁰⁶

The koala's survival, of course, depended upon the Animals and Birds Act. To many, that Act was a "dead letter"¹⁰⁷ – its penalties were grossly inadequate and the enforcement of its protective laws farcical. The illegal practices of trapping without a permit and trapping on sanctuaries were by no means uncommon, and the use of flashlights and cyanide occurred on a large scale, but it was impossible for five full-time rangers to adequately patrol the whole of the state.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, landowners were loathe to report any breaches of the Act on account of the victimisation which often followed.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁰ Courier, 13 July 1927.

¹⁰¹ E. Graham to A.K. Williams (Ranger, Stock Office, Rockhampton), 7 May 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁰² In particular, council and railway employees.

¹⁰³ Courier, 15 August 1927. It is unclear whether or not these men had been granted trappers' permits.

¹⁰⁴ J. Barbour Jnr. to W. Forgan Smith, 19 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J463.

¹⁰⁵ Courier, 27 July 1927.

¹⁰⁶ Correspondence unknown, 2 August 1927, Card Register of letters received, DAS, QSA, AGS/B50.

¹⁰⁷ G.H. Baker in Courier, 19 July 1927. Barker referred to the Native Animals Protection Act, but he presumably meant the Animals and Birds Act.

¹⁰⁸ Truth, 21 August 1927, editorialised that in the Central District, in which koalas were more plentiful, it was left up to two of these Government rangers to patrol between them about 90,000 square miles of territory.

Concern was widespread over the nullifying effect an open season had on the Animals and Birds Act. There is plenty of contemporary anecdotal evidence to suggest that as long as trappers retained some hope of an open season being declared, they would trap koalas the whole year round. It was well known that the shooting and trapping of koalas had been going on for months, even years, prior to the announcement on 8 July. Eileen Collins informed the Department of Agriculture and Stock in July that “[o]ne man [had been] offering to sell 200 dozen bear skins in Yeppoon – weeks ago” and that a Rockhampton merchant told her that he had “sold thousands of cartridges for bear-shooting – they’ve been out after them for months”.¹¹⁰ A cattleman in the Central District informed the Telegraph that “[f]or weeks carcasses of skinned bears have been seen floating down the Fitzroy River in hundreds”.¹¹¹ Another man claimed to have seen skinned carcasses in the bush as far back as August 1926.¹¹² To many, the open season represented a licence for trappers and shooters to dispose of illegally obtained skins. Trappers, it was argued, prowled over their runs during closed seasons and then looked to their associations to secure an open season, during which they could turn “the products of their nefarious operations into cash”.¹¹³

While the Department generally did its utmost to guard the secret of when an open season might commence,¹¹⁴ it gave little credence to suggestions about how the widespread practice of trapping during closed seasons might be eradicated. Those who suggested ways of differentiating between skins obtained during an open season and those obtained during a closed season,¹¹⁵ along with those who suggested limiting the number to be trapped (so that trappers could easily procure their quota during the open season)¹¹⁶, were rarely taken seriously. Many were concerned by the fact that despite every precaution made, koala-hunting began as soon as the open season was declared, and was likely to continue right up until the last skin sale (in November as it turned out). Furthermore, hunters would probably continue to store skins in the hope of an open season being declared in the following year. For most, the only solution to these problems lay in a permanent closed season - the protection of the koala for all time.

¹⁰⁹ It was not uncommon for the vengeful trapper to resort to arson.

¹¹⁰ F.E. Collins (“A Queensland Country Woman”) to Acting Premier, 25 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹¹¹ Telegraph, 3 August 1927.

¹¹² D. Huopenden to T. A. Foley, 2 May 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J463.

¹¹³ Truth, 21 August 1927. Also see “Naturalist” in Courier, 18 July 1927.

¹¹⁴ Often trappers would write to the Minister for Agriculture and Stock, claiming that for reasons of organization and travel it was essential that they know if and when an open season was coming up. In reality, though, they wanted to know if their efforts would be rewarded if they made an early start. The Department did not fall for these tricks.

¹¹⁵ Some suggested that the trapper’s permit number be placed on the koala’s skin in indelible pencil (GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/B50), while others suggested that there be a stipulation that a certain claw was left on the pelt [e.g. A.K Williams (Ranger, Stock Office, Rockhampton), 2 May 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464].

¹¹⁶ E.g. Trapper and skin buyer William Forbes, in a letter to W. Forgan Smith dated 11 July 1927 (GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J463) suggested that a limit of 30 dozen skins of either the koala or possum (but not more than 30 dozen skins all told) be imposed upon hunters.

CHAPTER THREE: GOVERNMENT

When first announcing the Government's intention statement justifying the decision. In it he said:

It has been strongly represented by trappers and supported by official evidence that native bears are to be found in large numbers in certain areas, due probably to the fact that the season for trapping this native animal has been closed since 1919, and has only been opened for short intervals on three occasions in the past twenty years.¹¹⁷

According to the Acting Premier, the question had received the fullest consideration, and the decision had been arrived at only after a careful survey of the whole position under the Animals and Birds Act.¹¹⁸ The survey he referred to was presumably that in which information in regard to closed and open seasons for koalas and possums was obtained from Queensland's rangers, and from the Departments of Agriculture and Stock in the other states. Rangers were divided on the matter, their advice depending on how scarce koalas were in their particular district. In the end those who strongly recommended that the season remained closed were ignored. Neither New South Wales nor Victoria had opened the season on koalas for many years on account of the animal's extreme scarcity, and South Australia had only 30 koalas, all of which had been relocated and were totally protected.¹¹⁹ Despite going to the trouble to obtaining this information, its significance made no real impression upon the Acting Premier.

Forgan Smith again endeavored to justify the Government's action on 15 July,¹²⁰ claiming that Queensland's Animals and Birds Act "provided a degree of protection for native fauna equal to that accorded to the fauna of any other country in the world".¹²¹

This justification, like those before it, failed to satisfy the open season's opponents. On 20 July the Courier editorialised:

Disraeli once remarked that a blunder is an error, but the perpetuation of it is a tragedy. That is the principle that the Government ought to apply to its order authorising the slaughter of native bears . . . Surely the Government will not antagonise public opinion any longer by disregarding the requests that are pouring in from all parts of the State.¹²²

Many others warned the Government about the implications of the "stolid indifference" with which it appeared to regard the feelings of Queenslanders.¹²³ Whatever the Government stood to gain from an open season would, it was argued, be overshadowed by the shame it would incur. John Brandon felt sure that "Mr Forgan Smith, who has earned esteem for many of his acts, has no wish to go down to fame as the Ancient Mariner of this State, with a slain Koala for his quarterings".¹²⁴

¹¹⁷ Forgan Smith's statement, 7 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J4643.

¹¹⁸ Courier, 8 July 1927.

¹¹⁹ Departmental files, 22 June 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹²⁰ On 12 July he had refused to discuss the matter with a representative of the Courier.

¹²¹ Courier, 16 July 1927.

¹²² Courier, 20 July 1927.

¹²³ Courier, 23 July 1927.

¹²⁴ Courier, 21 July 1927.

On 21 July, a letter (dated 19 July) from Thomas Foley MLA, appeared in most of Brisbane's daily newspapers. The koala, Foley claimed, was in no danger of becoming extinct, for its scarcity in many districts (this he admitted) would afford it protection. "No shooter," he argued, "would bother operating in an area of country where only a few bears existed".¹²⁵ While conceding that perhaps no bona fide shooter would operate in such districts, "Another Teddy" challenged Foley by contending that "in an open season bears are slaughtered wherever seen, whether they are plentiful or not, by those who do not bother to take out a trapper's licence, and dispose of the skins to licensed men".¹²⁶ Foley argued that koalas were, in most districts, "just as plentiful as ever",¹²⁷ but according to E.L.T. Boyce, "[s]ettlement . . . [was] . . . driving the bear back into smaller areas, so possibly they appear to be more plentiful to the less observant person".¹²⁸

What most outraged those opposed to the open season was Foley's contention that due to the prevalence of disease among Queensland's koalas following the recent drought, "it would be to the advantage of the animals as a whole to occasionally have a thinning out[,] as is done by pastoralists and other breeders of domesticated animals when disease attacks them".¹²⁹ Some doubted whether koalas were dying in any exceptional numbers from disease (one ranger suggested that such reports were circulated to try to induce the Government to declare an open season¹³⁰), while others argued that even if they were, this fact would be "a strong argument in favour of their protection, rather than a pleas for the 'thinning out' process of licensed gunmen and trappers".¹³¹ "An Australian Woman" was not alone in insisting that the diseases of the koala be left to "Old Mother Nature" who "will fight for and right the troubles of things living naturally".¹³² According to J.J. Banks,

[Foley's] contention that it is a good thing to shoot bears to prevent them from dying from disease to ridiculous. He might as well suggest that we should all commit suicide so as to preclude the possibility of dying from cancer.¹³³

Foley also came under fire for his comparison of the slaughter of koalas with that of lambs. As the Reverend James Cosh pointed out, "[t]he wanton slaughter of a fast diminishing animal for no other reason than that women wanted furs was a vastly different proposition from the killing that maintained a nation in food".¹³⁴ Sheep are bred by man and slaughtered out of necessity, whereas koalas are native and were to be killed "for the satisfaction of women's vanity, for trappers' pockets, and for the Government's coffers".¹³⁵

Foley concluded his letter with a denunciation of the sentimentalism that was causing people to oppose the open season, and for this too he was attacked in the press. According to W.H. Symes,

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Courier, 23 July 1927.

¹²⁷ Courier, 21 July 1927.

¹²⁸ Courier, 25 July 1927.

¹²⁹ Courier, 21 July 1927.

¹³⁰ W.E. Black to E. Graham, 20 June 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J463.

¹³¹ W.A. Noble in Courier, 23 July 1927.

¹³² Courier, 26 July 1927.

¹³³ Courier, 25 July 1927.

¹³⁴ Daily Mail, 25 July 1927.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Mr Foley ridicules our protest as mere sentiment; he fails to realise that sentiment represents the profound feeling of the whole community, which no man can outrage without being permanently execrated and held in contempt.¹³⁶

From 21 July, Forgan Smith was in Sydney attending a conference of Premiers, and during his absence, Cabinet was under more pressure than ever to reconsider its controversial decision. On 22 July, MLAs Bulcock and Foley wrote letters to Attorney-General Mullan (who was Acting Premier) urging him to stand firm. Bulcock contended that most of the protests were emanating from city-dwellers who had little knowledge of the koala, and whose objections were based upon “maudlin sympathy”.¹³⁷ He claimed that “in those localities where bears are known to exist, the people there are very decidedly in favour of a short open season being declared”.¹³⁸ Foley, too, urged Mullan not to be influenced by the agitation in the press, assuring him that “the public opinion in bear carrying districts of the State, is a hundredfold stronger in favour of the opening than the feeling already presented through the Press against the opening”.¹³⁹ Foley was critical of Archbishop Sharp for having urged people to write to the newspapers so as to influence Cabinet, arguing that “if this was done on every issue the minority would govern”.¹⁴⁰ He pointed out that as the order to open the koala-hunting season had been announced, “many hundreds of men who have gone to a good deal of trouble and expense in getting their equipment together will be greatly disappointed if the decision is revoked”.¹⁴¹ At this stage, however, Bulcock, Foley and others who had pressed for the open season had little to worry about. A letter from Forgan Smith to his close friend Jack Mullan, dated 23 July, shows that he had no intention of allowing “maudlin sympathy” to dictate government policy. In part, the letter reads:

Public clamour is never based on facts, but always upon impression, and because of this a good deal of difficulty can be created for Governments. The important facts to keep in mind are that the Government, in deciding upon an open season, acted entirely on the information obtained from its responsible officers, who advised that it was perfectly safe to have an open season of one month . . . There is no justification for altering that unless sufficient and new evidence is brought forward which would justify a reversion of that policy.¹⁴²

By the next day, though, the same public clamour that Forgan Smith discredited had seemingly borne fruit. As a result of “fresh and valuable information brought under his notice by a former Queensland naturalist . . . now living in Sydney”, Forgan Smith agreed to have the Government’s decision reviewed.¹⁴³ The naturalist referred to was Alec Chisholm, who, between the years 1918 and 1922, was Chief Honorary Ranger and adviser on native fauna to Queensland’s Department of Agriculture and Stock, president of several natural history societies and editor of the Queensland Naturalist.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁶ Courier, 25 July 1927.

¹³⁷ F.W. Bulcock to J. Mullan, 22 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ T.A. Foley to J. Mullan, 22 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² W. Forgan Smith to J.Mullan, 23 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁴³ Courier, 25 July 1927.

¹⁴⁴ GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464 contains a letter from A.H. Chisholm to W. Forgan Smith (although it is unclear whether Forgan Smith ever received it) dated 23 July 1927, in which Chisholm sets out his case for being listened to .

Forgan Smith and Chisholm on 24 July is not officially recorded, but according to Chisholm:

[I] implored him to ban the slaughter. He promised to do so.¹⁴⁵

In his press statement of 25 July, Forgan Smith announced that he would not be returning to Brisbane until 2 August and that if any deputation was projected, it should wait upon the Acting Premier.

Such a deputation, if formed, would require to establish: (a) That there was a danger of an open season causing the extinction of bears, or (b) That bears are so few in numbers that the holding of an open season would be dangerous to them.¹⁴⁶

On 25 July, a small but representative deputation waited upon the Acting Premier (by this time Mines Secretary Alf Jones) and urged him to induce the Cabinet to reverse its decision.¹⁴⁷ Professor E.J.Goddard, acting as spokesman, asserted that the Government had been badly advised in regard to the true position of the koala in Queensland. He argued that “there was no one in a position in Australia to say that the native bear had not already been massacred to the point of extinction”.¹⁴⁸ “Our knowledge,” he contended, “[is] not sufficiently satisfactory to enable us to say definitely that the declaration of a month’s open season for bears would not be attended with risk of extinction”.¹⁴⁹ There is little doubt that the ultimate failure of the deputation to convince the Government of its folly, can, in part, be attributed to the negativity of this line of reasoning. Forgan Smith’s stipulation was that the deputation needed to establish that there was a danger of an open season causing the koala’s extinction. As far as Cabinet was concerned, an insistence that there was nobody to prove otherwise was not good enough.

George Barker concluded the deputation’s case by asking Jones “to use his influence with the other members of the Cabinet”.¹⁵⁰ Jones promised to lay the statements made by the deputation before his colleagues, and announced that the matter would be reviewed by Cabinet on the morrow. This promise was enough for the Courier of 26 July to conclude that “[a]lthough no official pronouncement has yet been

When I left Queensland four years ago I was asked to continue as an honorary officer of your Department, and I have several times been consulted (by letter) on matters affecting native fauna. In addition, I have revisited Queensland several times, and have kept in touch with many of the scores of Nature correspondents I had there. Thus you will see that I have been, and still am, closely in touch with the position of native fauna in your State.

In the same letter, Chisholm claims that in 1921 a previous Minister for Agriculture promised on behalf of the Government that the koala would receive total protection.

¹⁴⁵ A.H. Chisholm to W.D.L. Ride (Director of the Western Australian Museum), 2 October 1970, in Howlett “The Bear You Couldn’t Buy”, p.19. A copy of this letter was sent to Howlett by Chisholm.

¹⁴⁶ Courier, 25 July 1927. This press statement was framed from a letter from W.Forgan Smith to J.Mullan, 23 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁴⁷ The deputation, organised hurriedly by George Barker (representing the Queensland Naturalists’ Club), consisted of representatives of the Royal Society, the Nature Lovers’ League, the Royal Australian Ornithologists’ Union, the Boy Scouts’ Association, the Brisbane Women’s Club and the National Council of Women, as well as Mr Hector Dinning, a farmer from the Stanthorpe district.

¹⁴⁸ Courier, 26 July 1927.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Courier, 26 July 1927.

made, it is generally considered that the Cabinet today will revoke its previous finding, and decide that there shall be no open season for native bears".¹⁵¹

On 26 July the Queensland Cabinet discussed the question of revoking the proclamation, but came to no decision. Apparently, Cabinet was divided into two sections – one strongly urging a reprieve for the koalas; the other emphatically holding that the open season should stand.¹⁵² The Cabinet resolved to obtain additional information and to further review the matter on the next day. The 26th was also the day on which Forgan Smith's Department received a telegram from the Chairman of the Northern Coast District Opossum Board, Mr Kidd. It read:

Paper reports suggest possibility government revoking proclamation declaring open season for bears . . . [B]oard consider too late now as permits have been issued and rifles and ammunition purchased by hundreds of men.¹⁵³

Kidd was obviously trying to convince the government that a rescission of the proclamation would lead to an uproar among the hunting sector. Likewise, J.F. Lindley, Secretary of the Central Queensland Shooters' and Trappers' Association, believed that "[s]uch a proceeding would create chaos".¹⁵⁴ He hoped that Forgan Smith would "frustrate this attempt this attempt to make government ridiculous".¹⁵⁵

On 27 July, at the close of the second meeting of Cabinet held to review the question, Jones announced that the Government had decided not to rescind its proclamation.¹⁵⁶

As was pointed out, the reasons that had prompted the Cabinet to open the season were never officially disclosed.¹⁵⁷

Like Forgan Smith and Foley, Jones sought to justify the Government's original decision. While admitting that koalas had diminished in number in the more settled districts of the state, he did not consider that this diminution was primarily caused by the operations of hunters, believing that the explanation rested more

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Courier, 27 July 1927.

¹⁵³ Kidd to Acting Premier, 26 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J463.

¹⁵⁴ J.F. Lindley to W. Forgan Smith (telegram), 26 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁵⁵ J.F. Lindley to W. Forgan Smith (telegram), 27 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁵⁶ Courier, 28 July 1927.

¹⁵⁷ On 14 June 1974, a letter from J.W. Munro of Gordon park appeared in Brisbane's Courier-Mail. It read in part:

I was culpable in regard the declaration of the [1927] open season. At that time I was administering the appropriate legislation and it was a responsibility I accept. It was discovered that large numbers of koalas were dying and following scientific investigation it was found that the cause was a disease of somewhat the same type as affects humans, venereal disease. It was established that this disease was due to heavy in-breeding. I recommend the declaration of the open season to reduce the large numbers of koalas in an effort to stem the disease. This proved successful and no evidence of the disease is existent today.

It is possible, though, that Mr Munro developed an inflated view of the importance of his role in the making of the decision. Surely the decision would ultimately have been made by the Minister.

with “natural causes”.¹⁵⁸ According to Jones, the fact that two hundred sanctuaries (representing an aggregate area of 2.5 million acres) had been proclaimed under the Animals and Birds Act would ensure the koala’s survival.¹⁵⁹ The Queensland Naturalists’ Club disagreed, pointing out that “the sanctuaries of Queensland are mostly on scrub lands, and as the bear lives and breeds in the open forest country, those sanctuaries are of little use to them”.¹⁶⁰ Jones claimed that “[a] large area of inaccessible and heavily timbered country [presumably along the chain of Coastal Ranges] also affords a natural protection to the native bear”.¹⁶¹ Australians today can be thankful that this statement was partially true.

The Government claimed that no definite evidence had been produced to justify an alteration in the proclamation. Where was the Cabinet’s “definite evidence” to justify the institution of a month’s slaughter? According to Government files, “[t]he preponderance of opinion obtained from official sources [notably Shooters’ and Trappers’ Associations] favoured an open season for native bears and the most suitable months suggested were July and August”.¹⁶² Clearly, the Department was being highly selective. There was, in fact, no definite evidence concerning the koala’s proximity to extinction – it was a question of which advice the Government chose to heed. In the end, it heeded that which suited it.

Jones was insistent that the open season had not been declared in order to obtain revenue. [T]he money received . . . from royalties [raised by Government on the sale of skins],” he pointed out, “is placed into a fund exclusively devoted to the further protection and propagation of desirable native fauna”.¹⁶³ The irony of this justification was not lost on contemporaries, many of whom had a difficult time reconciling this alleged desire to protect koalas with their wholesale slaughter.

Did these Ministers really believe that an open season would not place koalas in danger of extinction? The fact that it was so obstinate in the face of mounting appeals – that it was prepared to flout scientific advice and public opinion – suggests that the Labour Government believed it had more to gain from decision that it had to lose, and any ecological risks were incidental. The Courier editorialised on 28 July:

Who killed the native bears? We, said the members of the Queensland Government . . . because we feared to annoy a few unemployed trappers and shooters.¹⁶⁴

For the sake of expected electoral gains, though, the Government was prepared to wear such scorn.

Labour Ministers were not the only ones who sought to justify the declaration of an open season of koalas. “Trapper” wrote to the Daily Standard ridiculing the “plethora of sentimentalism” about the killing of koalas and possums, and asked “why the unemployed should not be allowed a chance to make some cash from bear skins”.¹⁶⁵ J.S. Wadley claimed that others had to be considered besides possums and koalas, namely “growing girls, brave men, and women with babies at their breasts”. “[T]he great Architect of the Universe, “he argued, “when He planned this world, put the animals on it for the benefit of His people, and, if by the death of many bears and opossums, the skins provide money to buy food and clothing, and help

¹⁵⁸ Courier, 28 July 1927.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Queensland Naturalists’ Club to E.Graham, 22 August 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁶¹ Courier, 28 July 1927.

¹⁶² Departmental files, 22 June 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁶³ Courier, 28 July 1927.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Daily Standard, 26 July 1927.

along those who are fighting to make a success of life in Queensland, why the hue and cry against it?"¹⁶⁶ Nugent Wase Brown informed Courier readers that

[a] bear in the bush is worth sixpence, the same as a magpie. On the market it is worth five shillings. Should they become scarce we can breed them in thousands and probably will.¹⁶⁷

"Bushie" also believed that the skins of koalas were "the only part of them that will ever be of any value", and compared the cruelty associated with killing them with "catching fish with a hook".¹⁶⁸ With attitudes such as these prevalent it is little wonder that in 1927 the wildlife conservation movement was only slowly gaining sympathizers.

On 29 July, Alec Chisholm made a final attempt to wield his influence. From Sydney, he telegraphed Alf Jones:

When Animals Bill passed Upper House. You expect appreciated my assistance. Will you not reciprocate now by sparing native bears.¹⁶⁹

Chisholm was referring to his sponsorship of the Animals and Birds Act of 1921, for which he had received the thanks of both Houses of State Parliament.¹⁷⁰ In reply, Jones informed Chisholm that "nothing further can be done in [the] matter".¹⁷¹ This reply was dated 2 August – by then, the slaughter had begun.

The futility of appeals to the State Government had, by this time, led many of those opposed to the open season to contemplate other means of achieving their aim. It was soon realised that if koala-hunters were deprived of a market for their skins, there would be no point in procuring them. Whilst a number of strategies were suggested,¹⁷² most believed that an end to the slaughter could only be brought about if the Commonwealth Government was induced to act.

On 28 July, Prime Minister Stanley Bruce, who happened to be travelling Queensland at the time, was quoted as telling the Mayor of Warwick (D.Connolly) that he was "continually getting into trouble for interfering with State rights, and the native bear question was a State matter".¹⁷³ Bruce, however, was prepared to concede that the matter of exportation was one of the Commonwealth control. "[T]he Federal

¹⁶⁶ Daily Mail, 15 August 1927.

¹⁶⁷ Courier, 30 July 1927.

¹⁶⁸ Courier, 23 July 1927.

¹⁶⁹ A.H.Chisholm to A.J. Jones (telegram), 29 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁷⁰ T. Kloot, "Chisholm, Alexander Hugh (Alec)" in Australian Dictionary of Biography, vol.13, pp. 422-3.

¹⁷¹ A.J. Jones to A.H. Chisholm (telegram), 2 August 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁷² Some, such as K. Edmondstone (in a letter to Under Secretary E. Graham, 30 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J463) and L.C. Mareinthal (in a letter to Courier, 29 July 1927), suggested that wholesale and retail skin dealers be approached so that they may be persuaded not to deal in koala skins. Courier, 30 July 1927, contains a letter from C.E.M. Graham, in which he suggested that deputations approach shipping merchants to induce them not to accept koala skins onto their ships.

¹⁷³ Courier, 29 July 1927. Australian Archives file entitled "Protection of Fauna and Flora", AA, A461, E305/1/6, contains the information that at a Premiers' Conference held in 1923 to discuss matters of fauna and flora, it had been decided to inform the Prime Minister that native fauna protection should be left to the states.

Government could,” he told Alderman Connolly, “prohibit the export of skins”,¹⁷⁴ though, as he told the press on his arrival in Brisbane that evening, “such action would involve interference with the sovereign rights of the State, which was a matter to be approached with extreme caution”.¹⁷⁵

These ominous words did little to deter the likes of Queensland Native”, who argued:

We know the Commonwealth does not like overriding the August decisions of our State Mikados, but if we can show them that, as Mr [George] Barker claims, 99 per cent of the people of the State object to this horrible killing, they are likely to do what we want.¹⁷⁶

What they wanted was the Commonwealth Government to defeat the purpose of the open season by refusing to issue permits for the exportation from the Commonwealth of any koala skins.

On 28 July, a hurriedly drawn-up, lunch-hour petition bearing several hundred signatures was presented by a deputation to the Prime Minister’s private secretary requesting that the Federal Government prohibit the export of koala skins.¹⁷⁷ The same request was made by the Sydney-based Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia in a strongly-worded letter to Bruce dated 2 August.¹⁷⁸ This organisation, along with numerous others throughout Australia who sent letters to the Prime Minister during August,¹⁷⁹ was fearful that “all Koala skins exported will be represented as from Queensland [,] and the Queensland Proclamation will [,] as on previous occasions [,] be used as a cover for the destruction of [the] Koala in States where [protection exists]”.¹⁸⁰ The Wild Life Preservation Society, then, refuted the claim that the matter was of state concern. On the contrary, it was one “of general Australian interest”¹⁸¹ in that the Queensland Government’s action would neutralise the good effects of protection in the other states. The Society argued that the Federal Government’s placing of an embargo on the exportation of koala skins was necessary, not only to act as a deterrent against the destruction of the koala in Queensland (in that the incentive to hunt these animals would be minimized, if not removed), but to prevent unscrupulous people from killing koalas in states where protection had not been lifted.

A.T. Latham, Secretary of the Victorian Society for the Protection of Animals, expressed the sentiment of many when he contended that the Queensland Government had a “national responsibility” to protect the koala.¹⁸² Forgan Smith’s stock response to this argument was to point to the fact that the other states had

¹⁷⁴ Courier, 29 July 1927.

¹⁷⁵ Daily Mail, 29 July 1927.

¹⁷⁶ Courier, 29 July 1927.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ This letter was published in Courier, 6 August 1927.

¹⁷⁹ For example, the Australian Natives’ Association of Queensland, the National Museum of Australian Zoology, the Nature Lovers’ League of South Australia, the South Australian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Royal Society of South Australia (Field Naturalists’ Section), and the Victorian Society for the Protection of Animals.

¹⁸⁰ D.G. Stead to S.M. Bruce, 2 August 1927, “Flora and Fauna Export of. Main File”, AA, A458, A412/1.

¹⁸¹ Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia to Premier of Queensland (telegram), 30 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁸² A.T. Latham to W. Forgan Smith, 18 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

not upheld their “national responsibility” with regard to the koala.¹⁸³ Clearly, he found solace in the belief that he would not be solely to blame if the koala was to become extinct. For many, though, he would have been.

At a meeting of the executive of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia on 5 September, it was decided to appeal to the Prime Minister to enforce the Federal Proclamation of 1923, which prohibited the exportation from the Commonwealth of the skins of native animals “unless the consent, in writing, of the Minister of State for Trade and Customs has first been obtained”.¹⁸⁴ The Society was not aware, however, that permission to export koala skins had been granted by the Minister (Herbert Pratten) as early as 13 August. Understandably, the fact that this permission had been granted was not publicized.

Each application for a skin export permit – made not by the Government or any Government Department, but by the firms or individuals exporting the skins – was, according to Queensland’s Collector of Customs H.M. Robinson,¹⁸⁵ to be “dealt with on its merits”.¹⁸⁶ Theoretically, only skins procured in Queensland could be exported, as “applications to export native bear skins [were to] be approved provided the Collector [of Customs for Queensland] be satisfied that each bale of skins has been passed by an official of the State Government and stamped accordingly”.¹⁸⁷ Pratten’s consent made it possible for any licensed hunter who procured koala skins in Queensland to have these skins exported, meaning that the Commonwealth Government had, in effect, sanctioned the actions of the Queensland administration.

That this permission to export would be granted, though, was by no means a foregone conclusion. Although the Federal Government ultimately gave the Queensland Government what it wanted, Forgan Smith and his fellow Cabinet Ministers did not go without a few anxious moments.

On 18 July, Professor E.J. Goddard, Chairman of the Queensland Committee of Advice to the Federal Government on the Exportation of Birds and Animals,¹⁸⁸ announced that his Committee:

not only supports the general protests raised at the declaration of an open season for native bears, but is desirous of doing its utmost towards carrying such protests to a successful conclusion. . . . The committee has advised the Minister for Trade and Customs to refuse any permit for the exportation of native bear skins, and has reason to think the request will be granted.¹⁸⁹

Goddard believed that “the greatest good could be accomplished on national lines by opposing an open season”.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸³ The Worker, too, believed that the indignation of people like Latham should have fallen on “the states which have permitted the bear to be exterminated”, not on Queensland, “which has preserved the bear and possesses it in numbers that enable it to be utilised as an industry”. (See Worker, 28 September 1927.)

¹⁸⁴ Proclamation relating to the Exportation of Animals and the Skins Thereof, Customs Proclamation no.89, 5/12/23 (published in the Commonwealth Gazette, no.85, 6/12/23).

¹⁸⁵ Each state had a Collector of Customs who worked for the Federal Department of Trade and Customs.

¹⁸⁶ Daily Standard, 25 August 1927.

¹⁸⁷ R. McK. Oakley to H.M. Robinson, 13 August 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁸⁸ The Federal Government had set up such a committee in each state.

¹⁸⁹ Courier, 19 July 1927. This announcement also appeared in the Daily Mail and the Telegraph of the same day.

¹⁹⁰ Courier, 19 July 1927.

Forgan Smith wrote to Goddard on 19 July attacking him and his Committee for having made no representation to the State Government of Queensland, and for seeking to secure action by the Commonwealth on a matter which was “purely of state concern”.¹⁹¹ As far as Forgan Smith was concerned, the Advisory Committee was asking the Commonwealth “to use an Act which they administer to defeat the purposes of the open season legally declared by the Queensland Government”, and that, he believed, was “tantamount to asking the Commonwealth to resort to a misuse of power with a view to thwarting the State Authority”.¹⁹² In his reply, Goddard argued that he, as Chairman of the Committee, was under no obligation to make any representations to the State Government, and that the very nature of the Committee’s appointment (that is, by the Commonwealth Government) deemed such action improper.¹⁹³ In the same letter, Goddard defended the actions of his Committee, stressing that the Committee had refrained from expressing an opinion until officially requested to do so. Collector of Customs Robinson had, on 18 July, approached the Advisory Committee with the intention of ascertaining its opinion as to whether the Minister of Trade and Customs should withhold permission for the exportation of koala skins, at the same time pointing out that such action by the Minister would no doubt have the effect of minimizing, if not altogether preventing, the koala’s destruction. In reply, Goddard had informed Robinson that the Advisory Committee would recommend to the Minister that the exportation of koala skins should not be permitted, and that the majority of the Committee had endorsed this recommendation. Goddard trusted “that the advice which has been proffered by the Advisory Committee will be regarded as nothing more than the expression of opinion of a Body requested officially to give an opinion”.¹⁹⁴

When Goddard led the deputation that met with Acting Premier Jones on 25 July, he expressed regret that the Committee’s action had been construed as being an appeal to the Commonwealth Government to override the action of the State Government in declaring an open season for koalas, pointing to the fact that he had been a scientific adviser to the Queensland Government on many problems of national importance.¹⁹⁵ The Queensland Government, though, remained unconvinced, and Goddard continued to receive letters (mainly from Under Secretary E. Graham) questioning the purpose and legitimacy of the State Advisory Committee. For this, and for its questioning of the role of Queensland’s Collector of Customs in the matter, the State Government was, on 27 August, given a rap over the knuckles by R. McK. Oakley, the Comptroller-General of Customs.¹⁹⁶ The Queensland Government, though, was prepared to accept this reproach gracefully, for a fortnight earlier it had been informed that applications for the export of koala skins were to be approved.

Why did the Commonwealth Government effectively aid and abet the Queensland Government by permitting the export of koala skins? When questioned on the matter in Federal Parliament, Herbert Pratten contended that as the Queensland Government had recently seen fit to remove the protection from koalas for one month,

[a] number of skins thus became available for export, and as the animals had already been killed, and no good purpose would be served by refusing to allow the skins to be exported, the Minister reluctantly consented to such exportation.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹¹ W. Forgan Smith to E.J. Goddard, 19 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁹² W. Forgan Smith to J. Mullan, 23 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464. In the same letter, Forgan Smith told Mullan that he had spoken with Bruce on the matter.

¹⁹³ E.J. Goddard to W. Forgan Smith, 21 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Courier, 26 July 1927.

¹⁹⁶ R. McK. Oakley to E. Graham, 27 August 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

¹⁹⁷ Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates, vol. 116, p.214, Wednesday 5 October 1927. Pratten was speaking in reply to a question from D.S. Jackson, MP (Tasmania).

This was a clear attempt on the part of Pratten to shift the blame for the slaughter onto the Queensland Government.

By dismissing the advice of its State Advisory Committee, the Commonwealth Government was able to avoid confrontation with the Queensland Government. While electorally secure during this period, Bruce's Conservative Government was in the midst of a number of industrial disputes, and the last thing it wanted to do was lock horns with a Labour State Government which was determined to get its way. Unfortunately for the koala, the matter was not viewed as being important enough to warrant the Federal Government sticking out its neck. At the same time, Pratten realised that the possibility of further open seasons on koalas had to be removed.

On 12 October, Pratten gave orders for the seizure of a consignment of koala skins, the export of which had been attempted without his permission, stating that "no shrift will be given to any exporter who does not obtain the permission of the Minister".¹⁹⁸ Pratten professed to be "entirely in sympathy with the protection of the native bear", conceding that its protection could not be achieved "without the co-operation of State and Federal bodies".¹⁹⁹ "Respecting the export of skins," he continued, "Federal action must be buttressed by State protection of the animals".²⁰⁰

Recent events, it seems, had exposed a serious problem that existed in game control throughout Australia – the lack of uniformity and harmony between various State Acts. The slaughter of the koala, according to David Stead, was a prime example of this lack of co-ordination between states,

the animal being rigidly protected in two States, while another chose to undo all their efforts at rehabilitation the species.²⁰¹

The problem emanated from the fact that the protection of Australian fauna was a matter entirely within province of the governments of the different states. Groups like the Wild Life Preservation Society argued that in order to provide a more thorough protection for native animals, while at the same time putting an end to illicit trafficking in their skins, the Commonwealth Government should take over the responsibility for the protection of native fauna.

In a letter dated 8 September, Stead suggested to Prime Minister Bruce that he

call immediately an all Australian conference . . . to discuss the whole question of the preservation of our [wildlife], with a view to a greater correlation and co-ordination of effort throughout Australia, and with the ultimate object of the Commonwealth obtaining wider powers in this regard.²⁰²

In the same letter, Stead stressed the necessity of a date being fixed for the final issue of export permits. The Customs Department was keen to make 12 October the last day for issue, but after communicating with Queensland's Department of Agriculture and Stock, announced that 10 November would be the last day. Stead could see "no sound reason" for the Commonwealth Government having postponed the

¹⁹⁸ Courier, 12 October 1927.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, Annual Report for the year 1927-28, p.4. This appears in Australian Archives file entitled "Flora and Fauna Export of. Main File", AA, A458, A412/1.

²⁰² D.G. Stead to S.M. Bruce, 8 September 1927, "Flora and Fauna Export of. Main File", AA, A458, A412/1.

prohibition of export until this date.²⁰³ “In effect,” he contended, “it was simply an invitation to the dealers to get their stock of skins out as quickly as possible, and even to add to them in the meantime”.²⁰⁴ By 10 November, trappers and shooters had had over four months to procure koala skins for export. The Commonwealth Government’s apathetic attitude towards putting an end to a slaughter which it knew had not ceased made the task of saving the koala an even more difficult one.

²⁰³ Sydney Morning Herald, 24 October 1927.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR: OPPONENTS

One thing is quite clear so far in understanding the arguments in favour of an open season on koalas, and that is the part played by self-interest. Those who pressured the Queensland Government into opening the season on koalas were only interested in what suited them. Similarly, no politician made any real attempt to dispute the fact that political expediency was his prime concern. But what about those who opposed the open season? Did they stand to gain from the stance they took? Were all of the appeals made on behalf of the koala strictly altruistic? It has already been noted that many pastoralists and landowners who objected to the open season had little concern for the koala (and infinitely more for their financial well-being), but few sought to hide this fact. Were those who claimed to represent the koala's interests using the agitation as a means to other ends?

Those who supported the open season made frequent attempts to discredit those who opposed it and to cast doubt upon their motives. The official AWU paper The Worker claimed that

[t]he agitation originated in the city amongst people who make a pose of loving the wild Australian bush . . . but who have never seen the bush except from a railway train, and who know nothing either of it or of its furred and feather [sic.] denizens except at second-hand.²⁰⁵

The writer of this was mistaken, for just as many protests emanated from country districts as from cities.

The Worker also sought to create a class split on the issue, launching the following attack on "Tory agitators":

These people who are protesting against the native bear being killed out . . . are the same people who would, if they had their way, kill off little children with hard work and long hours of it. . . . If they have a genuine emotion in the matter [of the open season] at all, it simply is of the same putrid nature as that which prompts a sex-perverted woman to clasp a poodle to her bosom while her carriage wheels splash mud on the starving children of a city slum.²⁰⁶

The Worker argued that the middle classes, for whom the agitation was a mere novelty, had no right to question a working man's right to provide for his family. Its writers saw middle-class agitators as "shameless and smellful hypocrites"²⁰⁷ - being "representatives of the class" who had been responsible for the exploitation and extermination of other species of fauna.²⁰⁸ Charles Collins, Labour MLA for Bowen, expressed similar opinions.

[W]ho will wear the furs that will be made up from the slaughter of the bears? The working population? No. One is quite safe in saying that 90 per cent of the furs will be worn by the wealthy classes (who live as rule upon the Labours of others) . . .²⁰⁹

Collins, like writers for the Worker, not only presumed that all those who opposed the open season were from the middle and upper classes, but was intent on blaming every middle-class person for what some sections of that class had done. Many of the Worker's writers were concerned with class distinction to the point of paranoia.

²⁰⁵ Worker, 14 September 1927.

²⁰⁶ Worker, 27 July 1927.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Daily Standard, 4 August 1927.

It is true that some of those who opposed the open season felt resentful towards those among the working classes who were willing to kill koalas, and expressed this resentfulness in terms which many Labour people would undoubtedly have found abhorrent. "Bush Lover" suggested that the open season was "a sop to the army of unemployed *and unemployable*".²¹⁰ "Queensland Native" described koala-hunters as "poor, ignorant, callous fools".²¹¹ It occurred to "Pro-Bear" that "if employers of labour of the class that comprise shooters were to adopt the policy of our friends and strikers, and declare all bear shooters 'black', it might have a deterrent effect on shooters".²¹² Malicia Demons, too, believed workers deserved some of their own medicine, arguing that:

[i]f it be right that a section of humanity shall format illegal strikes, and strive, in contravention of every law, to enforce by violence their viewpoint upon those who do not see eye to eye with them, would it be so great a violation of justice if those districts who have so ably championed . . . [the Courier's] . . . cause should stand to their protestations and resist with the violence of the law-breaking striker, the invasion of the slaughtering guns?²¹³

These people, it seems, were as willing to generalise as were those who criticised them. By no means were all koala-hunters militant strikers.

On 21 July, a letter of protest from Arthur Moore, State Opposition Leader and Leader of the Country and Progressive National Party, appeared in the Courier. In it, Moore claimed that the Labour Government had opened the koala-hunting season "in order to secure a few votes in a by-election, and to wring a little more revenue from their skins to relieve the Government – if only ever so little – from the inevitable results of its unbusinesslike administration".²¹⁴ The Government, according to Moore, seemed "intent on making bad records", yet he doubted "whether anything it has done or left undone will cause more general contempt and condemnation than the latest proclamation permitting the butchering of the koala".²¹⁵ Moore was also critical of the Government's handling of strikers at the South Johnstone sugar mill, comparing "the shrinking timidity displayed by the Government in dealing with a powerful and recalcitrant union" with "its boldness in tramping on . . . [koala] . . . that cannot hit back".²¹⁶

It was statements such as these which led Forgan Smith and other Labour politicians to claim that the State Opposition was using the controversy to its own advantage, and was even helping to intensify it. In his letter to Mullan dated 23 July, Forgan Smith wrote:

Whilst some of the criticism of the Government . . . is no doubt due to a laudable desire to protect the native bear, there is no doubt that a good part of it is actuated by political malevolence, as witness the outburst by Mr Moore in Wednesday's [papers].²¹⁷

²¹⁰ Courier, 16 July 1927.

²¹¹ Courier, 29 July 1927.

²¹² Courier, 27 July 1927.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Courier, 21 July 1927.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid. Arthur Moore was not the only one to contrast the Government's treatment of South Johnstone strikers with its treatment of the koala. The apparent inconsistency was pointed out in the Courier of 23 July 1927:

²¹⁷ W. Forgan Smith to J. Mullan, 23 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464. This section was reproduced in Courier, 25 July 1927.

And while some one in the Government is posing as “the strong man” unmoved by public opinion, the Government as a whole is showing itself as weak as water in the face of the lawless strikers who have set up a reign of terror in the South Johnstone area. The contrast is very notable: abject effacement where militant strikers set themselves up in defiance of the law, and unwavering firmness – some would call it mulish obstinacy – where the authorisation of the slaughter of poor little native bears is concerned.

In the Courier of 29 July 1927, “Disgusted” criticised Forgan Smith for his “weak attitude towards a handful of ruffians at the South Johnstone [mill], and his ‘firm’ one towards the helpless and defenseless native bear”. As Queenslander readers were reminded on 25 August 1927, the koalas “had no powerful vote-wielding union to back them up”.

Was Arthur Moore truly concerned with the fate of the koala, or did he only oppose the open season because it was declared by the Government? Would he, in the same position, have done anything different? It is interesting to note that Moore did not register his protest when the announcement of intention to hold an open season was made. Instead, he waited until 21 July, by which time it was clear that the public reaction to the open season was somewhat less than approving. It is doubtful whether Moore would have publicly condemned the Government’s decision if the public had been in favour of it – there would have been no political points of score.

A good deal of anti-Labour sentiment can be detected in many of the editorials and letters of protest that appeared in the so-called “Tory” newspapers. “Lover of Animals” was critical of Labour politicians who “[c]lothed with a little brief authority, which, by the way, they owe to a minority vote, . . . turn deaf ears to reasonable requests and pleadings from all sides, although these have been so numerous as to show clearly the trend of public opinion”.²¹⁸ A sub-editor of the Telegraph claimed to be “not at all surprised [by the declaration of an open season on koalas], it being natural for the present Government to do the wrong thing”.²¹⁹ An editorial on 12 October in the same newspaper makes references to “the Socialist Government in Queensland” and the “Queensland Socialist Ministry”.²²⁰ In his poem “The Death of Bill Bluegum”, J.F. Harding refers to Labour politicians as “Bolshies”.²²¹

Did this anti-Labour sentiment motivate people to oppose the open season? The Worker was adamant that it had. According to an article which appeared in its issue of 27 July, the object of the “Tory” press agitation was not to save the koala, but

to embarrass and to injure the Labour Government. To that end any means is, of course, justifiable . . .²²²

The Worker deprecated the way in which “the Labour Government is compared to Herod, and Beelzebub, and Lenin”.²²³ In the Daily Standard of 29 July, “A Labour Man” argued that the “native bear issue” was

²¹⁸ Courier, 3 August 1927.

²¹⁹ Telegraph, 28 July 1927.

²²⁰ Telegraph, 12 October 1927.

²²¹ Queenslander, 11 August 1927.

²²² Worker, 27 July 1927.

²²³ Ibid.

being used by some (namely ecclesiastics) as a weapon against Labour.²²⁴ Professor Goddard was one of many who refuted such a change, strenuously denying that he was “in any way influenced by politics” in his advocacy of protection of the koala. He “regretted that politics had been introduced into this question”.²²⁵ Archbishop Duhig contended that the “overwhelming majority” of Queenslanders opposed the open season “not for political reasons, but because it was repugnant to all their feelings of kindness and humanity - a far more cogent argument than mere political bias”.²²⁶

It is true that many of those who opposed the open season were also opposed to the Labour Party, but to suggest that the agitation was prompted by considerations of party politics was, as “Willie Wagtail” put it, “barking at the wrong tree”.²²⁷ The open season was opposed by all classes of people from all over Queensland, and as Archbishop Sharp asserted, “by people of all politics and of all creeds”.²²⁸ There is little doubt that Labour’s policy was losing it the support of many traditional Labour voters, meaning that many saw the issue as being important enough to transcend party allegiance. “One-Time Government Supporter” wrote that

in [last week’s] . . . “Courier” someone [stated] that native bears had no votes. I would like to contradict that statement. In this house alone, the native bear has no fewer than eleven votes, and he will not forget to use them when the next election comes on. Last election they were given to his persecutors (Labour politicians), but never again.²²⁹

“Ex-Labourite” informed Courier readers that “[t]here are seven adults under our roof, all except one being staunch Labourites until this day, when one and all expressed their decision never again to support such a narrow-minded party”.²³⁰ Veronica Waters claimed to have “heard more Labour men hotly denouncing . . . [the open season] . . . than any others”.²³¹ The Reverend James Cosh thought “[t]he action was unworthy of so splendid an institutions as a Labour Government”.²³²

In all probability, much of the anti-Labour sentiment that one finds in the correspondence arose out of frustration with the Government’s obstinate stance on the issue. The claim that anti-open season crusaders were motivated by political malevolence was, in most cases, just another attempt on the part of those who supported the open season to discredit those who opposed it.

Despite being warned by Archbishop Duhig on 21 July that it needed to “do something promptly to allay public feeling, as it is evident that the agitation will gather strength and be used against the Government”,²³³ the Government chose to persist with its policy. In doing so, it failed to accurately assess public opinion on the matter. Far from increasing the Government’s popularity in country districts, the policy had become unpopular amongst an increasing number of rural voters. The Government’s decision

²²⁴ Daily Standard, 29 July 1927.

²²⁵ Courier, 26 July 1927.

²²⁶ J.V. Duhig in Courier, 30 July 1927.

²²⁷ Courier, 30 July 1927.

²²⁸ Courier, 22 July 1927.

²²⁹ Courier, 13 August 1927.

²³⁰ Courier, 29 July 1927.

²³¹ Daily Mail, 15 August 1927.

²³² Daily Mail, 25 July 1927.

²³³ J.V. Duhig to J. Mullan (as Acting Premier), 21 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

unquestionable placated a large number of trappers and skin dealers, but, as Nora Howlett argues, “[t]he trapper was not well educated, or politically astute; in no way was his voice or his vote as organised as were those of the graziers and towns people”.²³⁴ The Government’s plan to win votes had backfired. The ideas of open seasons on koalas had become offensive to a large proportion of the community, and many people believed that the Government’s decision would cost the Labor Party its majority in the next elections. “Disgusted” believed that “[s]uch a despicable and heartless decision is worthy only of a decent nation’s utmost contempt” and hoped “that at the next election true Queenslanders will pick candidates who have some interest and regard for the future of this State”.²³⁵ “Willie Wagtail” argued that “[w]hen a Government deliberately and obstinately ignores the magnificent display of public sentiment, it is only fit for the scrap heap”.²³⁶ Many others looked forward to “the day of electoral reckoning”²³⁷ when, it was hoped, “the electors will inflict just punishment” on the Labour Government.²³⁸ Hector Dinning wrote the following in a letter which appeared in the Courier on 20 July:

It is quixotic to expect that the fate of the native bear . . . should ever be ranked amongst the questions on which elections are fought. There are, however, people fantastic enough to vote at elections upon these specific grounds alone – though not many, unhappily. But there are more people who would vote against a Government which sanctioned the extirpation of native bears, not so much because of that sanction in itself, as for the state of mind and point of view of which that sanction is a symptom.²³⁹

J.R. James suggested that an open season be declared

for a variety of fauna which of late has increased alarmingly – I refer to incompetent politicians. I think the season could be prolonged indefinitely.²⁴⁰

He was not the only one to suggest that an open season for Cabinet Ministers would be more in accord with the feelings of the public.

Forgan Smith had received petitions for and against an open season being declared on koalas. As is the case in most political decisions, the Acting Premier had to upset somebody. Forgan Smith chose to appease his rural working-class supporters, and in doing so had no idea that he would alienate so many traditional Labour voters.

Since the 1919 open season, Australians had begun to perceive the koala differently. By 1927, it was regarded less as a resource – something to be “farmed” or “harvested” – and more as a national symbol. The koala had begun to *mean something* to Australians. According to a Queensland Times editorial, men, women and children “entertain for the little inoffensive bear an affection deeply related to their affection for the land of their birth”.²⁴¹ The koala was seen as “the pride of every true Australian”.²⁴² Norman

²³⁴ Howlett, “The Bear You Couldn’t Buy”, p.21.

²³⁵ Courier, 29 July 1927.

²³⁶ Courier, 30 July 1927.

²³⁷ H. Dinning in Courier, 20 July 1927.

²³⁸ Telegraph editorial, 28 July 1927.

²³⁹ Courier, 20 July 1927.

²⁴⁰ Courier, 29 July 1927.

²⁴¹ Queensland Times, 29 July 1927.

²⁴² Daily Mail, 16 July 1927.

O’Kelly believed that the koala’s existence was “vital in contributing to the formation of a national feeling in the youth of our land”, arguing that “[s]uch extinction of indigenous animals and birds is deplored in other countries, because it is found that the effect does prejudicially re-act on the young”.²⁴³ H. A. Jones reminded Thomas Foley that “my own and fellow Australians shed their blood on the cruel battlefields to protect these self same symbols of their heritage”.²⁴⁴

Geoffrey Bolton suggests that the publication in 1918 of Norman Lindsay’s The Magic Pudding, still among the best-selling Australian children’s books, may have made a significant contribution to the koala’s growing popularity.²⁴⁵ Innocent, inquisitive, friendly and charming, the book’s chief character, a koala named Bunyip Bluegum, exhibits most of the qualities used to describe the koala during the 1927 controversy. On examining the many letters of protest, one soon becomes aware of the extent to which the koala itself was the catalyst for the opposition to the open season. By 1927, many people had begun to see the koala as Australia’s “national pet”. It was a “denizen of our bushlands”, and an “emblem of the Australian bush”. Quaint, lovable and cuddlesome, the “teddy bear” or “bush baby” was seen as being symbolic of Australia’s children, and was portrayed as such in the press and in popular literature – in stories, cartoons, poems and songs. It was the koala’s endearing appearance (its resemblance to a teddy bear) and its ability to charm the Australian public which ultimately ensured its survival. Many other animals have not been so lucky. Although perhaps only clouding the issue, Alf Jones raised an interested point when he questioned the deputation of 25 July as to why the possum had not been included in their plea for protection. The implication of much of what was written in the Worker was that the middle and upper classes regarded the koala as a special case because it was more “cute and cuddly” than the possum or any other native animal. There is an element of truth in this.²⁴⁶ Middle-class people generally had occupations which did not require the sacrifice of harmless native animals – they valued “cuteness” because they could afford to. The true working classes could rarely afford to place any value on something so intangible.

Governments too, as a rule, had placed little value on the koala’s “cuteness”. By 1927, though, people had begun to realise that this “cuteness” was worth something, and that if governments could be made to realise this they would be more inclined to ensure the koala’s survival. The Queensland Naturalists’ Club argued that the koala was “an asset to Queensland and should be safeguarded”.²⁴⁷ Similarly, K. Edmondstone described the animal as “one of Australia’s priceless assets”.²⁴⁸ M. Thynne was one of several who saw the open season as an act of false economy. He argued that:

A more profitable traffic to this country than the comparatively small results the royalties on the skins of our so few furred animals bring to it, is the tourist traffic. Twenty-five years ago Japanese statistics showed that the tourist traffic averaged £200 per head to that country’s finances . . . The bear alive is of more value than all the dead ones put together, and there is no sense, anyway, in killing “the goose that lays the golden eggs.”²⁴⁹

²⁴³ N.O’Kelly to T.R. Roberts (MLA for East Toowoomba), date not given, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464. O’Kelly was Honorary Secretary of the Toowoomba and District Society for the Prevention of Cruelty.

²⁴⁴ Courier, 26 July 1927.

²⁴⁵ Bolton, Spoils and Spoilers, p.103

²⁴⁶ The killing of possums, though, was a somewhat different proposition to that of koalas. Possums were not as rare and bred much faster. Moreover, they were often destructive to fruit and crops, and in some areas had reached pest proportions.

²⁴⁷ Queensland Naturalists’ Club to E. Graham, 22 August 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

²⁴⁸ Courier, 13 July 1927.

²⁴⁹ Courier, 30 July 1927.

Alec Chisholm pointed out that “Queensland is the last refuge of the koala, and there is a possibility, given wise conservation, that the remarkable animal will in time become as world-wide an attraction as is the Great Barrier Reef”.²⁵⁰ Arguments along these lines became more and more frequent as time went on, conservationists realising that their efforts were most successful when they spoke to Governments in a language which they understood – that of the tourist dollar. In 1932, Noel Burnet, the founder of Sydney’s Koala Park Sanctuary, wrote:

“Bears” possess individual personality . . . No two bears are alike. American visitors insist that they are live toys. Australia possesses a unique novelty in the Koala, and humanity would be so much the poorer if the little Bear passes away for ever.²⁵¹

This argument for protection is explicitly human-centered, but necessarily so. Governments had to be convinced that the protection of the koala was worth something to them. Perhaps Burnet had learned that in matters of wildlife conservation the animal itself was usually the last to be considered.

²⁵⁰ A.H. Chisholm to W. Forgan Smith, 23 July 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J464.

²⁵¹ Burnet, The Blue Gum Family at Koala Park, p.29.

CHAPTER FIVE: AFTERMATH

Months before the last skin sale was held, moves were afoot to ensure that the koala in Queensland was protected for all time. Marshall records that in August 1928, a group of Queensland naturalists sent a circular letter to the city, municipal, town and shire councils, and Dingo Boards of Queensland, seeking information regarding the number of koalas remaining in their districts. In only three of the 102 districts surveyed were koalas described as plentiful.²⁵²

In 1935, Frank Bulcock (by this time Minister for Agriculture and Stock) stated that it was “exceedingly unlikely that there would be an open season for [koalas] at any time”.²⁵³ Then in October 1937 the Native Fauna Protection Bill was passed, establishing statutory protection for the koala (and thereby removing the facility for disposing of illegally obtained skins) and introducing heavy penalties for those who killed or maimed one of these animals.²⁵⁴ To some extent, the Act (which was consolidated as the Fauna Conservation Act in 1952) was merely a formality. For all intents and purposes, the death knell of the trade in koala fur had sounded earlier in the decade. In 1930, the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, under David Stead’s presidency, informed US President Herbert Hoover that koala skins, usually labelled “wombat”, were still being imported into North America, and implored him to prohibit the importation of both koala and wombat skins into the United States. Hoover²⁵⁵ acceded to this request and in doing so effectively brought to an end the export of koala fur under the guise of other species. This action, perhaps more than any other, ensured that the koala was given some hope of survival. In 1933, Australia’s Federal Government showed its support for state government initiatives in koala conservation by passing laws

²⁵² Marshall, The Great Extermination, pp. 31-2.

The survey results were:

<i>Bear Plentiful</i>	
<i>Not in favour of protection</i>	1
<i>In favour of protection</i>	2
<i>Bear very scarce of practically exterminated</i>	
<i>In favour of protection</i>	69
<i>No bears seen since open season</i>	
<i>In favour of protection</i>	2
<i>No information as to number of bears</i>	
<i>In favour of protection</i>	7
<i>No bears in district</i>	
<i>In favour of protection</i>	6
<i>No opinion expressed</i>	15
	Total
	102
<i>In favour of no protection</i>	1
<i>Not in favour of opening next year</i>	1
<i>In favour of 5 years’ protection</i>	2
<i>In favour of 10 years’ protection</i>	2
<i>In favour of 10-15 years’ protection</i>	1
<i>In favour of permanent total protection</i>	79
<i>No opinion because of no data</i>	15
	Total
	102

²⁵³ Courier-Mail, 16 July 1935.

²⁵⁴ File entitled “Native Birds and Animals Protection Acts, 1926-58”, Police Department, QSA, A/44797; Courier-Mail, 7 October 1937.

²⁵⁵ A one-time miner on the West Australian goldfields.

which prohibited the export of koalas and koala products. The koala became fully protected by law throughout all the eastern states in the 1930s.

Who benefited from the 1927 open season and who lost? While the majority of the rural unemployed probably gained little (most of the koalas being snapped up by those who were better equipped), trappers and shooters fared considerably better. In a letter to Forgan Smith, in which the Queensland Government is thanked for having proclaimed the open season, Central Queensland Shooters' and Trappers' Association Secretary Lindley wrote:

The shooting season came at a very opportune time for many members of my association and trappers generally. My association wishes further to congratulate you on having withstood the opposition [sic.], which, it is thought, was composed largely of people who knew very little about the matter, and who allowed sentiment to outweigh sense [sic.]; and by others whose one idea was to embarrass [sic.] the Government.²⁵⁶

It was, however, a pyrrhic victory for the koala-hunters. After the season closed, koala numbers were found to have declined so dramatically that trappers and shooters soon stopped pressuring the Government into declaring open seasons. By the mid-1930s, those involved in the fur trade had ceased to regard the koala as a viable commodity entirely.²⁵⁷

As far as the Queensland Government was concerned, the open season was a mistake. The Government grossly misjudged public opinion on the matter and, confronted by an outraged community, was forced to set about saving face. On 11 October 1927, Forgan Smith announced that a scheme had been commenced for the restocking of districts denuded of native fauna.²⁵⁸ Three weeks previously, the Department of Agriculture and Stock had written to the Brisbane City Council offering to release ten koalas on Mount Coot-tha, and this had been done on 30 September.

More painfully for the politicians, Labour lost the next state election. While the loss may have had little to do with the 1927 open season, the party's cause could not have been helped by the uproar the open season produced. It is significant that this was the last open season on koalas. The fact that no politician over the next decade was willing to permit further slaughter is an indication of how unpopular the Government's action was. In the words of Bolton:

there was no point in a government courting unpopularity by flouting conservationist sentiment for short-term economic gains. Only the hope of major economic gain justified taking major ecological risks.²⁵⁹

With the wildlife conservation movement gaining strength, it was no longer politically viable to open koala-hunting seasons instead of providing relief payments. Furthermore, as Howlett observes, "[t]he wild life was diminishing and the cost of policing the seasons rendered the whole procedure uneconomic".²⁶⁰

The Commonwealth Government, courtesy of some careful political maneuvering, managed to emerge virtually unscathed from the controversy. In choosing a policy of non-intervention (when it clearly had the power to intervene), the Commonwealth Government was able to avoid trampling upon the toes of the state

²⁵⁶ J.F. Lindley to W. Forgan Smith, 11 October 1927, GC, DAS, QSA, AGS/J463.

²⁵⁷ Howlett, "The Bear You Couldn't Buy", p.21.

²⁵⁸ *Courier*, 12 October 1927; *Mail*, 12 October 1927. This scheme had been initiated using revenue derived from the royalties on koala skins. In effect, the royalty derived from the killing of koalas was being used to finance the restocking of districts where koalas had been wiped out.

²⁵⁹ Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers*, p.104.

²⁶⁰ Howlett, "The Bear you Couldn't Buy", p.21.

power, yet at the same time it was able to win public admiration of its leading role in ensuring the future protection of the koala.²⁶¹

The real loser in the whole affair was, of course, the koala. Koala populations were ravaged by the open season to a degree where Noel Burnet was forced to conclude in 1932 that its extinction was inevitable.²⁶² Yet it is thanks to the efforts of people like Burnet that the koala today is holding its own in many areas. As early as July 1928, the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia was initiating schemes aimed at rehabilitating koala colonies and restocking formerly occupied areas in Queensland.²⁶³

The history of Australian wildlife conservation has had few success stories, but the tale of the koala's return from the verge of extinction is certainly one of them.²⁶⁴ The koala's recovery, though, has been far from rapid. Queenslanders today owe the survival of what has become the state's faunal emblem to a combination of strict (albeit belated) protection, the benevolence of those patient enough to rehabilitate devastated stocks, and a good dose of luck.

²⁶¹ Moreover, at no stage during the 1927 controversy was the Federal Government hampered by any criticism of its actions by the Federal Opposition. The Labour Opposition knew that if it criticised the Conservative Federal Government for allowing the slaughter to go ahead, it would also have been attacking the Queensland Government – a Labour ally – for having declared the open season in the first place.

²⁶² Burnet, The Blue Gum Family at Koala Park, p.35. Burnet's conclusion was undoubtedly prompted by the koala's susceptibility to disease (an epidemic immediately followed the open season), and its slow rate of increase.

²⁶³ As A.H. Chisholm pointed out in "A Second Chance for the Koala" (Australia's Wildlife Heritage, vol.2, pt.13, 1973, p.782), this process of maintaining and rebuilding the small populations of koalas that remained had, somewhat ironically, begun in Victoria five years before the slaughter of 1927.

²⁶⁴ L. Cronin (ed.), Koala: Australia's Endearing Marsupial, Frenchs Forest, 1987, p. 122.

CONCLUSION

As the last legalised slaughter of koalas in Australia, the open season of 1927 represents a major turning point in the relationship between man and native fauna in this country. The year 1927 saw the Australian public rally to the koala's cause with an unprecedented commitment and intensity, and in doing so, they ensured that this animal would never again be hunted under government sanction. Queensland's Cabinet Ministers knew that by declaring the season open they would be walking the political tightrope, but they had no idea how thin this rope had become. These men had ample time to weigh up the potential political benefits outweighed the possible losses. In doing so, they poorly interpreted the will of the people.

What the Queensland Government failed to realise was that the Australian people's perceptions of the koala had changed markedly over the previous decade or so. The koala had ceased to be just another marsupial – to an increasing number of Australians it had become a national symbol. As the Government soon discovered, the Australian public would no longer tolerate the wanton slaughter of a unique native animal which was in no way menaced, and which, according to most accounts, was fast reaching the point of extinction.

The reaction the open season produced forced the Queensland Government on to the back foot and, consequently, ways needed to be found in which those opposed to the Government's decision could be discredited. The Minister for Agriculture and Stock, along with other supporters of the open season, contended that it was political malevolence which motivated many people to oppose the season, and that the issue was being used as a means to other ends. The evidence suggests, however, that those whose motives were anything other than altruistic were in the minority. The fact of the matter was that the Labour Government's policy of continuing with koala-hunting seasons was losing it the support of many "Red Ribbon"²⁶⁵ Queenslanders. Furthermore, the energy with which many people continued to champion the koala's cause after the controversy had all but died down, indicates that the koala had many genuine friends. Eventually, the Federal and State Governments came to the conclusion that the koala had to be afforded full and permanent protection. Not only had they realised that to permit further slaughter would be politically damaging, but it had become clear that the koala was potentially worth millions of pounds to Australia as a tourist attraction. It could be said that, since full protection was enforced, Australia has ridden not on the sheep's back, but on that of the koala.

²⁶⁵ Labour Supporters.

APPENDIX A

The Death of Bill Bluegum, ²⁶⁶ by J. F. Harding.

“Who killed Bill Bluegum?”
“I,” said Boss Caucus
In a voice that was raucous –
“I killed Bill Bluegum.”

Who authorised it?”
“I,” said Forgone Smith:
“March is only a myth –
I authorised it!”

Then the kiddies of the State fell a-sighing
and a – sobbing
When they heard of the fate of Bill Blue-
gum!, through that jobbing!

“Who caused their tears?”
“I,” said Alf Jones,
In most ruthless tones –
“I caused their tears!”

“Who gets Bill’s hide?”
“We!” said a supporter.
“We back Jones – so we orter:
We get Bill’s hide!”

“Who’ll beg his life?”
“We!” said the kiddies,
“We don’t care what a quid is –
We’ll beg his life!”

“Who else will plead?”
“We!” said the Church. “Yes; indeed!
“Mercy was ever our creed –
We’ll beg his life!”

“Will any one else ask grace?”
“Yes.” We ask for a close season” –
Cried the Nature-lovers: “We’ve reason;
We naturalists ask for grace.”

All the good folk and the kiddies felt
sorry and looked at gum
When they heard the decree against poor
old Bill Bluegum.

The Ghost of Bill Bluegum Speaks.

I have noted; I have heard how they gave
the fatal word;
and to all kind, generous folk I make

²⁶⁶ Queenslander, 11 August 1927.

one plea:
When you vote on polling day, remember
this, I say -
“Give the Bolshies just the mercy they
gave me!”

APPENDIX B

The Koala's Lament,²⁶⁷ by Con.D.

How have I stirred the white man's wrath,
or angered his god of fame?
I hear the whispering blue gums say,
"Fashion's your enemy's name."
White men made this a Christian land;
Now it's harder to understand
Why they bow to a god of shame!

I do not hamper the white man's work,
Or live on his fields of grain;
But I'm doomed to die the dingo's death,
for his greed and gain.
And the tall gums whisper a sad good-
bye-
Your heritage lost, now doomed to die,
For fashion you must be slain.

Blot out my name from you history
books. Don't let your children see
Your dressy coats and bloody gold was
won by the death of me.
Let me live in their thoughts as their
"Teddy Dear,"
Whom they love so well and had no fear;
That is all now I ask of thee.

I was honored once. My name your bore,
In letters of gold in your bushfolk lore.
I hear them coming – my story's told –
They barter their soul for tarnished gold.

²⁶⁷ Courier, 28 July 1927,

APPENDIX C

To the Editor of the Telegraph

Keep up your agitation then
We thank you for your powerful pen;
"Twill surely rouse up some to care
Who can protect our native bear.
A shame it is, and worse, to slay
The harmless innocent; some day
And all too soon his kith and kin
Will vanish as to-day the gin
With her dark comrade of the bush
Are flitting 'near the white man's push.
Oh! God forgive our senseless deed,
And stay our stupid, heartless greed,
Ere Austral's types are wiped away
And all becomes the white man's prey.
Have we no chivalry? No sense
Of honour? Is our standard pence
That we should thus a remnant slay
Of helpless creatures? By the way,
What sort of soul has he who sees
Those eyes? Which seem to say, "Oh, please,
Spare me; I cannot run, nor harm;
I cannot even take alarm!"
Who, then, in cold blood shoots to kill,
To sate his greed, his purse to fill,
We spurn the sordid, ruthless soul
Who for Koalo's blood-bought dole
Or children's pets would decimate
And wipe them from their native state.,
What of our nation's empty boast?
"The van of civilisation's host"
That suffers all this cruel waste,
That closes with deliberate haste,
A species in creative plan
To gratify the greed of man.
Surely a spark divine remains
That shall protect in our domains.
These helpless links with Australia's past.
Before we say: "This is the last." P. Findlay

Telegraph, 21 July 1927

APPENDIX D

The Betrayed Koala, by Amy Thornett

Little Bear, little Bear,
Pet of Australia!
Down through the ages,
Down to our stages,
Nature has fostered thee,
Thou the defenseless one,
Nursed by the old gum tree –
Now to thee death has come!

Little Bear, little Bear,
Pet of Australia!
They blot our pages
Whom thee outrages –
Herods' the Slaughterers!
Slayers' of Innocents!
Herods' the murderers,
Knoweth not love repents

Little Bear, little Bear
Pet of Australia!
Man they blood craveth
Stones his heart paveth –
Man steeped in bloodiest
Deeds known in sunlit lands;
Spoiler of tenderest;
Robber with ruthless hands,
Man the destroyer,
Wanton in mischief,
Beauty's betrayer,
Blood-lover-in-Chief
From days prehistoric

Sent to DAS on 24 July 1927, GC, Das, QSA, AGS/J463