

## **Jack Lyon – soldier, democrat, internationalist**

*Mark Derby*

*The following is an edited version of the programme notes for the inaugural Jack Lyon memorial dinner, which took place on Auckland's North Shore on the evening of Anzac weekend, 24 April 2009.*

*The dinner, organised by the North Shore branch of the Labour Party, is intended to be annual non-partisan platform for ideas and actions covering the broad field of New Zealand's security, defence and peace-making, international relations and national identity. The inaugural guest speaker was Bob Tizard, a former Labour Minister and WW2 veteran.*

“Jack Lyon was one of the most loveable members of parliament, respected by all sections,” said acting prime minister Walter Nash, on learning of his colleague's death in Crete in 1941. The tributes that followed from both sides of the House prove that this was no empty phrase. William John Lyon, invariably known as Jack, was an unapologetically leftwing member of the first Labour government, which he entered in 1935 as the member for Waitemata. Yet he was highly regarded both by Parliamentary colleagues and Opposition members for his broad knowledge and sparkling debate, his dedication to principle and above all for his undoubted courage, demonstrated in two world wars and the Depression in between. During his political career those qualities saw him recognised as a potential leader of his party. His death under fire while still an elected MP prevented his full promise from being realised.

### *Son of a silly old Tory*

Jack Lyon was born in England where his father was a “silly old Tory”, and educated at a Brighton grammar school. An outstanding student, he was offered a scholarship to Oxford University. The outbreak of World War One caused 17-year-old Jack to instead put his age up and volunteer for active service. With the East Kent and Northamptonshire Regiments he served with great courage in the trenches of the Western Front and was twice mentioned in dispatches. He was promoted from the ranks and eventually given a captain's commission. He was fluent in German and worked at times as a field interpreter and for military intelligence. His wartime experience convinced Jack that a radical change in the nature of British society was needed to increase equality and secure basic living standards and he worked as an organiser for the British Labour Party in two general elections. Although he was a keen sportsman who played football at senior level, Jack's health had been permanently damaged by mustard gas during the war. On medical advice he left the acrid atmosphere of London in 1927 and migrated with his wife and daughter to New Zealand; a second daughter was born in Parnell in 1932. The family first settled at Hastings where Jack qualified as a teacher but worked for the well-known stock and station agents Williams and Kettle. He also joined the local Labour Party and stood for Parliament in what was then a safe conservative seat. He trebled the Labour vote but did not win, although he was elected to the Hastings City Council and Napier Harbour Board.

### *Socialism on a soapbox*

The family later moved to Auckland's North Shore where Jack gave WEA courses in public speaking and debating. As the international economy lurched into prolonged depression, he spent some time working on relief gangs. He was a tireless representative for the vast numbers of the unemployed and became president of the Auckland Provincial Unemployed Workers' Association. Jack remained a dedicated and clearly leftwing Labour supporter, campaigning vigorously for a democratic socialism in line with his Fabian principles. He regularly and eloquently expounded these principles, literally from a soapbox, at prominent spots around the North Shore. In 1935, while living in Mays St, Devonport, Jack Lyon won the seat of Waitemata to become its first Labour MP, and entered Parliament as part of the first Labour government under Michael Savage. He retained the seat three years later. He aligned himself with the left wing of the party led by John A. Lee and Frank Langstone and was a member of the committee that established the country's free national health service and benefit scheme. He twice moved to nationalise the Bank of New Zealand but did not live to see this goal achieved in 1945. Jack was also a vocal and effective representative of his local constituency and a prominent early advocate for a bridge across Auckland harbour.

### *“A nation of self-reliant people”*

He was widely read and well informed, especially on international affairs, and this made him a dauntingly skilled debater in the House. He gave the 1936 Address in Reply, the first to be broadcast live on radio in New Zealand, in which he supported the then farsighted idea of “a British Commonwealth of Nations consisting of the British Empire and any nation which voluntarily desired to join it.” Jack also served as chair of the House Defence Committee. Unlike several of his Parliamentary colleagues, he did not subscribe to the view that New Zealand could not defend herself against the forces of fascist aggression then massing in the northern hemisphere. He told the House, “Some people have suggested that a Labour Government would be completely pacifist in outlook ... the Government does intend to fulfil its obligation to the League of Nations and it will work to the uttermost to secure to this country and to every other country... some form of collective security to maintain world peace.” His proposals for securing the defence of New Zealand were founded on his conviction, by no means widely shared at that time, that it was the US rather than the UK that would prove the most significant military partner in the Pacific. “It is time that we as a nation of self-reliant people had a self-reliant Government which was attempting to make some form of treaty in conjunction with the British Empire, to bring the big American nation into a comprehensive Pacific defence plan.” His fellow World War One veteran and good friend John A. Lee later said, “When Jack Lyon believed, he was prepared to risk his life for his cause. He fought for his beliefs in politics; he fought for his beliefs on the battlefields of the Empire.” Jack had retained his captain’s commission in the reserve forces of the British Army and on the outbreak of World War Two he applied for and was granted leave to serve with the forces of his adopted country. This time he took several years off his age to ensure he was sent overseas. He was the first Member of Parliament, and one of the first New Zealanders, to enlist, leaving with the First Echelon.

### *A bad knock for A Company*

Jack’s first posting was to Egypt, to train untried Kiwi volunteer troops. He was aged over 40 and found the physical demands of wartime gruelling. In a light-hearted letter to a Parliamentary colleague, he described how he planned to recreate those conditions on his return. “When I get back I am erecting a tent on the dunes of Takapuna with hot-water pipes underneath, heating the sand to a temperature of 115 degrees to 120 degrees... I will go to bed in darkness at 6 pm and freeze.” He was then sent to the battlefields of Greece where he managed to maintain frequent contact with fellow MPs. He had been one of John A. Lee’s greatest supporters but was disgusted by the article attacking Savage that led to Lee’s departure from the Labour Party. In a letter, he told Nash that they shared identical political goals although he felt the party should have accelerated the pace of change. “What a tragedy it was that personal issues were allowed to obscure political ideology and the culminating tragedy, the death of our beloved leader. I realise more than ever how puerile some of our fights in Caucus were, and how ridiculous it was that most of our discussions took place in an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion and the comradeship of 1935 was allowed to be dissipated.” He added that military movements were approaching a climax; they would soon be “in the thick of it”. Against numerically superior and better equipped German forces, the New Zealand troops fell back and in late April 1941 they were withdrawn to Crete, leaving much of their arms and equipment behind. Their orders were to hold the island against an expected attack by massed airborne troops. On 26 May 1941, a week after the first attack on the island began, Captain Lyon was commanding A Company of the 18th Rifle Battalion at Maleme airfield. His company was subjected to heavy aerial and paratroop attack and he began to evacuate his men in small groups. As the regimental history says, “you can’t move 300 men through several miles of straggly olive groves without occasionally coming into view. Suddenly two big Messerschmitt 110s whisked low over the treetops... Again and again they circled and dived, machine guns hammering away, peppering the whole area. A Company caught most of it before it could take cover. Captain Lyon and five others were killed, another half dozen wounded – a bad knock for A Company, already very short of men. The battalion could not afford to lose many like Captain Lyon, one of its few senior officers still on their feet.” Jack Lyon was killed by a machine gun bullet in the neck at the age of 43. He left a wife and two daughters, Dorothy and Pamela, living at Eversleigh Rd, Takapuna. When confirmation of his death reached New Zealand, his seat in the House was draped with a laurel wreath and the flag of his country of birth. Mr Tirikatene, member for Southern Maori, paid him a Biblical tribute. Kahore he aroha kia rite ki tenei, kia tuku te tangata ia ia ano kia mate mo ona hoa. (Greater love hath no man than this, that he lays down his life for his friends.)