

## **An Early NSW Government Attempt at Solving the Unemployed Problem: The Casual Labour Board, 1887-88**

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Throughout the literature little appears to be known about the early Government attempts to provide public employment services in Australia. Subsequently, there appears to be much conjecture over when and where these first occurred, also in what form they took, and who influenced their design. This paper examines the first attempt to provide a public employment service in New South Wales. While both Coghlan and Reeves have claimed that the Government Labour Bureau was the earliest public employment service in New South Wales, it had a predecessor: the Casual Labour Board established on 2 May 1887 later terminated on 29 December 1888. Faced with high unemployment, unemployed deputations and industrial unrest, Premier Parkes established the Casual Labour Board in an attempt to undertake significant labour market reform. Parkes envisioned a system that would assist and support capital development by facilitating the recruitment process, whilst also alleviating the recurring politically sensitive problem of unemployment. During its 18 months of operations the Casual Labour Board was largely successful in placing nearly 8,000 men in employment, of which approximately 30 per cent were placed in private employment. In an economy with a limited industrial base, this was quite an achievement and demonstrates a genuine need for an employment service. However, the Casual Labour Board was largely born out of political necessity and failed to receive adequate long-term support. Ultimately it was undermined by a number of politically sensitive factors: unsustainable costs associated with the Government relief works; political patronage; and allegations of corruption and fraud.

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