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A Great Pioneer—John Christian 'Chris' Watson

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When Chris Watson died in Sydney on 18 November 1941, one week after the emotional opening of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, and more than two years after the start of the Second World War, he was given a State funeral at St Andrew's Cathedral. The Anglican Archbishop, a Dr Mowil, cogently summed up both the man and his times:

Such lives as his are a challenge to those among whom they are lived, and the life of John Christian Watson calls the people, in this hour of national crisis, to the fullest measure of sacrificial service of which they are capable.

'Chris' Watson, as he was known to almost everyone, was for a period of 113 days in 1904 the third Prime Minister of the infant Commonwealth and, to this day, the youngest ever Australian prime minister. Of globally historic significance, he was the world's first leader of a national labour government.

For this alone, Watson is entitled to a place in the history books, though his life, inside the cauldron of politics and beyond, was a constant challenge to those among whom he lived – by turns, encouraging, inspiring, combative, demanding, disconcerting, unpredictable. The eight pall-bearers at Watson's State funeral were visible testimony to that fact. The funeral cortege was living, breathing, theatre.

With the Labor Party in Australia some 50 years old in 1941, the unlikely assortment of pall-bearers graphically portrayed the seismic fault lines in Australian politics over the previous half a century. They comprised the incumbent Prime Minister, Labor's John Curtin, who had been in the job for barely six weeks; the NSW Labor Premier, former boiler-maker Bill McKell, in a few years to become the country's 12th Governor-General; and controversial former prime ministers, Billy Hughes and Joseph Cook, both of whom had been expelled by the Labor Party decades earlier. Of the remaining four, three of them had also been expelled by the Labor Party when they supported Hughes' two unsuccessful attempts to introduce conscription into Australia during the Great War.

The eighth man was Albert 'Jupp' Gardiner, one of Chris Watson's oldest friends, a former carpenter who was the same age as Watson, a fine sportsman, like Watson, elected into the NSW colonial parliament, like Watson in the early 1890s, but someone who, unlike Watson, strongly opposed the pro-conscription lobby within the Labor Party in 1916.

In summary then, on either side of Watson's coffin were Labor leaders, legends, stalwarts and those whom the hard-liners in the Party referred to as 'Rats'. Rats purged from the ranks.

Acid-tongued historian, MH Ellis, was also in attendance at Watson's funeral, and he assisted former PM Joe Cook—showing all of his 81 years of age and beginning to 'quaver a little'—to depart the cathedral at the end of the service. As Ellis remembered it, some 20 years later:

[Cook] remarked as one venerable colleague after another of the early days, now remote from the movement, came up to greet him: 'It looks like the day of Resurrection'.

Now this may have been a fleeting moment of wishful thinking on Cook's part, for there would be no rising from the Labor dead for him, or for a number of the mourners in attendance. And yet, curiously, for

the man whom they had all gathered to mourn, someone who had actively supported Hughes and conscription in the Great War, and soon after that played little part in politics, the response was quite different. Ross McMullin, author of the history of the Labor Party, *The Light on the Hill* (1991), rightly observes that 'Labor, resentful of defectors as a rule, retained a soft spot for Watson, their first prime minister'.

On the day he died, such was the esteem with which Watson was held by a new generation of politicians across the political divide that the House of Representatives adjourned for five hours as a mark of respect. Before the break, new Prime Minister Curtin, he of impeccable Labor credentials, a man who had once described the Great War as an 'assassin's trade' sparked by the 'greed for wealth', Curtin spoke of Watson as 'a great pioneer. . . who essayed a very difficult task in the laying of the foundations upon which the Labor Party has since built'. For Curtin, who had known Watson for a number of years, Australia's third prime minister was a special individual who, as Curtin put it, 'made friends wherever he went, was an influence for unity, and endeavoured at all times to make Labor a great, and indeed, a permanent force in the political system of the country'.

No-one in the House that day would have disagreed with the last of Curtin's statements—that Watson had indeed left an indelible mark on Australia's evolving political system—but there must have been quite a few on his own side of the parliament who took exception to the suggestion that Watson was throughout a unifying influence. Perhaps Curtin tacitly endorsed the sentiments of his contemporary, HV 'Doc' Evatt, who had once wryly observed that, 'You can't call yourself a true Labor Party member unless you have been expelled at least once'. The stark differences in political orientation of the men present at Chris Watson's funeral accurately reflected the contrasting attitudes he himself had assumed during his own life in politics, and after.

In today's lecture I will discuss aspects of Watson's life journey in some detail, focusing on the politics, but recognising that the scope of his story cannot be grasped only in terms of his brief tenure as a Labor Prime Minister and his dramatic decision, more than a decade later, to support Hughes and the breakaway National Party in the Great War – the two momentous facts in his life for which he is remembered that is, of course, if he is remembered at all.

Recovering Watson for a contemporary audience is no straightforward task. When MH Ellis penned his trenchant biographical snapshots of the early prime ministers for the *Bulletin* magazine in 1961, he pointed out that even at the height of his political career, Watson shunned the limelight. Much like his first wife Ada, he was an intensely private person. Never a big-noter like his controversial Labor colleague Billy Hughes, he resisted use of the resonant phrase in his speeches on the hustings or in parliament; he rarely lost his temper in debate; and his prime ministership was over before it had really begun. McMullin in fact writes that Watson's fledgling government 'disappeared into historical obscurity'.

For the Watson researcher today, the reclamation task is made more difficult because of the dearth of archival material retained by the family. Similar to the predicament encountered with Edmund Barton, George Reid and Andrew Fisher, we have access to few private items, the inviting ephemera of a life that we know was vigorously lived. Why? Well, biographer and extroverted Whitlam government minister Al Grassby relates the story that, after Watson's death, a cache of his private papers was stored in a tin trunk and kept in a garden shed out the back of the eastern suburbs home in Sydney that he had shared with his second wife. The gardener evidently decided on a big clean-up and, along with clippings and branches, the tin trunk was carted off to the dump.

As dispiriting as this information is, it is no worse than the parlous state of scholarship on, and general knowledge about, our third prime minister. Yes, we have McMullin's informative study, *So Monstrous a Travesty – Chris Watson and the World's First National Labor Government* (2004) but, as the title makes clear, the slim volume has a narrowly prescribed focus. Apart from the reliable content of McMullin's book, the only other biographical volume we have on Watson is an account by Al Grassby, co-written with Chilean-born journalist and film-maker Silvia Ordonez, first published by Pluto Press in 1999 and shortly after re-published by Black Inc. in the Schwartz Publishing series on Australia's prime ministers. The reprint contains an introduction by award-winning novelist Frank Moorhouse.

Neither the book nor the reprint's introduction do Watson the justice he deserves. While undoubtedly written from the heart, the Grassby biography contains a number of glaring errors of fact, whole

paragraphs of the text are inexplicably repeated, and one section, the book's 12-page Epilogue entitled 'Chile and Australia: Two Countries in the One Ocean', while informative, hardly befits the authors' combined final thoughts on their primary subject.

Put simply, the only Watson biography we have, badly needed a much better edit, as did its Black Inc reprint, which unfortunately repeats all the errors of the original, while adding a few of its own in the lightweight Introduction.

Chris Watson deserves a comprehensive biography, for he was a complex and important Australian, a man of talent and, we are reliably informed, disarming charisma. He earned a reputation in politics for getting things done. Unlike many of his peers, he was highly respected across the party divide, someone by personality and stature able to contribute wisely and productively, regardless of the political forum, union free-for-all, board meeting, social circle or sporting club gathering in which he found himself. Gavin Souter in his *Acts of Parliament* (1988) reproduces the comment of an unnamed contemporary who knew Watson well: Chris, he observed, could 'down a beer at the Wombat Hotel with [unionist] Mick Loughnane with the same aplomb that he would sip champagne with [the pucker] Bernhard Ringrose Wise at the [Hotel] Metropole'. Watson was at ease in all environments, an ability which, later in life, led to some sharp, and for many of his devoted followers, perplexing lifestyle changes. In the later decades of his life, it is fair to say he spent more time in the Metropole than he did in the Wombat.

The obscure and contradictory details surrounding Watson's birth and early years continue to invite comment from those with an interest in federation era history, especially in light of the upheaval created by Section 44 of the Australian Constitution in recent years. The now notorious citizenship clause. We know with certainty that, wherever Watson was born, it was not in either Australia or the United Kingdom. Technically, as the only one of Australia's 30 prime ministers to date born a citizen of a 'foreign power', he was not legally entitled to be in the parliament, much less Australia's leader. Bede Nairn, who supplied the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry on Watson, unlocked some of the mysteries in a separate article, making it clear that Watson himself was of little assistance. In later life, Watson did give the Chilean city of Valparaiso as his birthplace, though his second wife Antonia, whom he married in 1925, was adamant he was born in international waters, at least 50 miles off the Chilean coast somewhere between Valparaiso and Port Chalmers, Dunedin's sea port in New Zealand. The *ADB* accepts this version, while signalling Watson's unreliability concerning his parents' background information and indeed his own age, as evidenced in the baffling certificates for his two marriages. When we cross-reference the information he there gives us, we end up with no less than four sets of parents for Watson, with four nationalities and several birthplaces.

However, with the assistance of Chilean authorities, the Mormon Church in Santiago and Nairn's biographical note, Grassby and Ordonez do confirm with accuracy key elements of Watson's early years: he was born Johan Christian Tanck on 9 April 1867 in the busy Chilean port of Valparaiso, the only child of German-born Johan Joachim Christian Tanck and Martha Ellen Minchen. The chief officer on board a brig, the *Young Julia*, 27-year old Johan married 18-year old Martha in New Zealand on 19 January 1866, in the Registry Office at Port Chalmers after a whirlwind, four-week courtship. The Tancks departed New Zealand on 2 February, a fortnight after they were married, and Chilean port records confirm that, in the first months of the year following, the ship *Julia* was moored in Valparaiso harbour from 1 April 1867 until 14 May, dates which span the birth of the Tancks' son. Grassby and Ordonez, a trifle mischievously, sum up that we therefore have 'a future Prime Minister born aboard a Chilean ship in a Chilean port to a Chilean-German father and a New Zealand-Irish mother'. Watson's second wife, and his only child Jacqueline, rejected these conclusions, but they are wrong.

It is quite possible that Watson never knew the exact details of his background and that, even though the Grassby biography maintains that he went to considerable lengths to invent a British pedigree, it might simply have been that he opted for the available paths of least resistance whenever background information was requested, all the way to the prime ministership. We'll never know.

Fortunately, we can assemble with confidence a satisfactory profile of Watson's childhood, growing up in the Oamaru district of New Zealand's South Island. We know Johan and Martha separated soon after their baby Johan's birth, and, settling in New Zealand, Martha shortly after married George Watson. Chris Watson's stepfather George, whose surname he assumed as a youngster, was variously a labourer, a miner and a quarryman, and the modest wages he earned, together with the addition of five more

children in the family by 1875, resulted in severe financial difficulties. In January 1876, the District Court of Timaru and Oamaru adjudged George 'a Bankrupt'. Later in the same year the Watsons' oldest boy—10 year-old Chris—left school to work and earn his keep.

His first job was as a nipper on a railway construction site, holding up the dog-spikes while the sleepers were driven in. In his first bleak winter of work, 1877, the cold almost paralysed his hands, and he often had to break basin ice to have a wash. One of his unshakeable memories as a boy was the time he came across a prison chain-gang at work, and was shocked by the sight of the guard carrying a gun: 'It was so horrifying to see human beings treated like beasts that one could not help sympathising with them'.

When he was still only 13, his life changed completely. Against the odds, he got an apprenticeship as a compositor at the *North Otago Times* newspaper and, a year or two later, described as a 'lanky, alert-looking youth', he secured a job with the *Oamaru Mail* newspaper. How did he manage it, with so little education? Like Andrew Fisher and Joseph Cook—both of them in the coal mines as kids—Watson was effectively self-taught and an avid reader, a 'book worm'.

At the *Oamaru Mail*, he was exposed to the exceptional leadership of his newspaper's proprietor, a man called George Jones. Remembered by Watson as 'a great democrat' and role model of influence, Jones went into politics in the early 1880s representing the Waitaki electorate. According to one historian, he was 'one of the most advanced, forceful and enlightened politicians of that period' in New Zealand. He reconstructed the *Oamaru Mail* during Watson's years at the paper, encouraging his employees to be 'independent thinkers'. During his apprenticeship, Watson joined his local union branch. As he recalled: 'I took a deep interest in current politics, such as land nationalisation [and] equal voting power. . .' His social conscience took root, and his determination to make a difference became a lodestone for life.

Aged 19, Watson made a life-changing decision: to try his luck in Sydney despite having no family there or contacts of any kind. The reason for the move is unclear though he was well-equipped for a fresh challenge, having worked in the newspaper industry for six years, and perhaps he felt that with eight half-siblings already and one more soon to be added to the strained logistics of the family home, he needed to lighten the load for his embattled parents. When he headed across the Tasman in January 1886 he had completed his apprenticeship, he was a card-carrying member of the Typographical Union and he had joined the New Zealand Land League, with its links to social theorist Henry George. The American famously argued for the creation of a more equitable society based on a single tax, as set out in his world best-seller, *Progress or Poverty* (1879).

When compared to sleepy Oamaru, Watson must have found Sydney to be a bustling, boastful metropolis. Opportunity abounded, but for a newly arrived Kiwi with little money and no connections at all, it was a case of taking whatever work was available. Watson landed a billet as a groom at Government House, mucking out the horse-stalls in the employ of the NSW Governor, Lord Carrington, an Eton and Trinity College-educated English liberal politician who was popular with the Sydney public because of his generosity to the city's poor and its many homeless orphans. When Watson was asked years later about this first job, and being the recipient of Lord Carrington's largesse, his clipped answer tells us far more about Watson than it does about the charitable Vice-Regal. Carrington, he remembered, was 'a good little man. I worked in his garden a bit. One day he spoke to me as I was going off and asked me about myself. He gave me sixpence for a beer . . . and I spent it on a book'!!! The young Chris was firmly fixed on the future, and advancement was not far away.

In 1887 he got the job he was after, as a compositor with the *Daily Telegraph* and then the *Sydney Morning Herald*, his ability impressing Sydney newspaperman W.H. Traill, the hard-nosed editor of the *Bulletin* in its dramatic growth years in the 1880s. Traill mentored Watson, encouraging him to accept a position with the new, Protectionist newspaper, the *Australian Star*, in 1888. He was only 21, and had started to rub shoulders with some of the heavyweights of the labour movement in NSW like Peter Brennan, JD Fitzgerald and George Black, as well as the radical leaders of the Trade and Labour Council. The rise and rise of Chris Watson had begun.

He joined the NSW Typographical Union, his New Zealand experience during his teens sound preparation for the cut-and-thrust of union meetings in Australia. His workmates, the trade compositors of Sydney, committed union men, took to him immediately. How could they not? Here was this stripling newcomer from across the ditch with demonstrated union nous and experience well beyond his years, who also

happened to be a talented cricketer, rower, cyclist, and rugby player. Watson was good at billiards, brilliant at cards, and he loved a beer and a good yarn. Manning Clark, at times grappling with the mindset of the working man in his six volumes, quotes one source as calling Watson 'a good sort'. Tall and handsome he was, but it was the character of the man that stood out for those who got to know him. Among his growing list of admirers was a woman he met in early 1889: Ada Jane Lowe.

Chris and Ada were married later in the same year, in the Unitarian Church in Liverpool Street, Sydney, on 27 November 1889. He was 22, she was 34. Born in Kent, Ada had arrived in Sydney with her family ten years before Chris was born. One of five children, Ada was a seamstress and dressmaker. How much do we know about her? Very little, I'm afraid. The snippets of information don't help much and, mysteriously, there is not a single photograph of Ada to be found anywhere, newspapers included, even though she and Watson were married for more than 30 years—through, and well beyond, his prime ministership.

Late in Watson's life, his only child Jacqueline asked her father about his first wife, Ada, and he said she was 'a lovely woman'. She provided her husband with a stability and repose in his home life, a welcome counter-point to the often fiery and unpredictable political gatherings and confrontations that, as the volatile 1890s progressed towards a new century, became the bread-and-butter of his activist public life.

By the end of 1890, the labour movement was licking its wounds after a strike by wharf labourers, from mid-August to October – the bitterly contested Maritime Strike – triggered industrial chaos across the country. Union protest was crushed by ruthless employers. Then, from January to June 1891, Queensland and NSW shearers went on strike over pay and freedom of contract. This too was dealt with brutally by government and industry.

At such a crucial time in the early history of industrial relations in Australia, hard lessons had to be learned by the eclipsed forces of labour or they were likely to experience more of the same in the future. It was time for working men to stop talking about political representation. Something had to be done. They needed to put able men into the parliament who would give them a voice.

With an election due in NSW in June 1891, the Trades and Labour Council founded a new political party, the Labor Electoral League, authorising the creation of branches across the colony. The new party needed a policy platform and Chris Watson took a leading role in the discussions which produced it, especially as it related to a solidarity 'Pledge', something that potential League candidates were asked to sign before being considered.

In the lead-up to the election, Watson enhanced his reputation. He impressed as someone able to make deals and get things done, and was duly appointed secretary, main strategist and chief organiser of Labor's campaign for one of the first three branches to be established by the LEL, inner city West Sydney. Four seats were up for grabs, and thanks largely to Watson's innovative strategies, LEL candidates won all four seats.

After the final election count, 35 Labor candidates had been elected. The party had exceeded its wildest expectations. The Victorian Liberal Protectionist Alfred Deakin observed that 'The rise of the Labor Party in politics is more significant and more cosmic than the Crusades'. But it was Billy Hughes in one of his two autobiographical volumes, *Crusts and Crusades* written in the 1940s, who captured the shock of it all better than anyone else:

. . . although the [elected Labor men] did not put an end to the Old Order, they certainly gave its upholders the fright of their lives. The foundation of their being seemed to have crumbled under their feet; monstrous apparitions now stalked brazenly through their sacred corridors, from which the vulgar multitude had been hitherto rigidly excluded. A well brought up hen, who by some unhappy fate had hatched out a brood of pterodactyls, could not have been more overwhelmed than were the members of the old parties at the sight of these rude and uncouth figures who took their places on the cross benches.

Now solidly represented, Labor soon experienced its own set of problems, mainly concerned with the bitter clash between those of its elected MPs who refused to sign the solidarity 'Pledge', and those in the parliament and in the party, for whom the Pledge was non-negotiable, led by Watson.

Between the elections of 1891 and 1894, it was Watson who emerged as the most purposeful individual in the colony's labour movement, and he refused to countenance idealistic models for Labor's future that he considered to be unelectable. At a key conference in 1893 he lost his voice, and for a few isolated moments his temper, but he never lost sight of what he and the majority regarded as the primary aim: the adoption of a mandatory solidarity pledge and the expulsion of those who refused to sign it. Watson had to claw, cajole, debate and persuade to get his way, but he managed it. According to radical republican George Black, labour leaders at this time needed 'the wisdom of Solomon, the patience of Job, and, if possible, the hide of a hippopotamus'.

Watson knew what had to be done. The party faced extinction if it could not mould itself into a tightly organised 'fighting machine and a bargaining party', a consistently reliable block of votes on the floor of the colonial parliament. The rogues had to go, and in the 1894 election they basically did.

Watson was put forward by the party as a candidate in the election and, insisting on going into the regions, he stood in the south-western rural seat of Young, where he spent plenty of time campaigning, and won comfortably. The election's full set of results produced an overdue changing of the guard, with brilliant politician and internationally recognised Free Trader, George Reid, becoming NSW Premier for the first time, and Labor settling into the cross-benches.

For a short time Labor was rightly cautious of Reid, but a working relationship developed as both sides realised the potential for fast-tracking socially progressive legislation based on common goals. Labor retained the balance of power and, usually led at the bargaining table by the assured Watson, it guaranteed its 'support in return for concessions'. As the relationship evolved, Watson encouraged Reid's progressive instincts, resulting in what MH Ellis has called 'the most successful Labor-Liberal alliance ever consummated in Australian political history'. On one occasion later in life, George Reid observed that 'he would not be surprised if some [of his] non-Labor ministers were saying "Yes, Mr Watson" in their sleep'.

Watson's determination to bring about real improvements in the day-to-day lives of ordinary, working-class people made a difference. He took a lead-role in the introduction of measures addressing the plight of factory and shop workers, especially children; with Billy Hughes, he helped to embed the eight-hour day; he lobbied for a Public Health Act; and he worked tirelessly to enshrine first government legislation to clean up Sydney's filthy, rat-ridden slums.

Despite this—and after an unprecedented raft of social welfare legislation—life got more complicated for both Labor and Reid, for entirely different reasons. For the Premier, the sulking Legislative Council seized any opportunity that came its way to reassert its position of power and influence, while Watson knew that Labor's main fight was now taking place in its own ranks—with militant socialists up against those who, like himself, were convinced that the realisation of a socialist program could only happen well into the future. For the moment, as Watson said in one of his best-known remarks:

The Labor Party is the best, workers can get. . . You can't revolutionize society in four or five years.

Yet many Labor people were unwilling to accept limits on social progress in the colonial parliament. They were motivated by the abundance of inspirational working class literature at this time—be it socialist, communist, single tax or utopian—readily available in an array of novels, poems, tracts, broadsheets and primers. And the existing fault lines in the Labor Party were further exposed as it became clear, with the new century looming, that the idea of a federation was rapidly gaining more community support.

Labor's internal bickering, along with its consistent majority opposition to federation, made the year 1900 a unique challenge. Federation was not going away, and it was only appropriate that the colony where the Labor Party had progressed furthest, NSW, should host another historic first on 24 and 25 January 1900: the inaugural gathering of intercolonial Labor delegates, tasked with articulating the party's federal policies and, just as importantly, a national identity. The four Federation Convention meetings in the 1890s had all been held in venues commensurate with the middle-class status of virtually all of the attendees, many of them lawyers. Labor's delegates in 1900 met in the *Worker* newspaper's Sydney office – described, we are told, as 'a largish, barn-like hall, low-ceiled and not too well lighted; with bare floor and wooden benches and nothing of ornamentation'. The setting was grim, but this first inter-colonial labour conference did represent 'the formal beginnings of the Federal branch of the

Australian Labor Party'. And as Watson's *ADB* entry concludes, 'many had assisted in its birth, but none more than Watson'.

A new century, and an Australian Commonwealth, drew nearer.

At some point in a demanding year Watson made up his mind to stand for the newly created federal seat of Bland. It was a smart choice, the boundaries of the new electorate incorporating the Young district. Six years of hard graft as the sitting member had earned him a solid base of loyal support in the region and, once he had made up his mind to run, he must have viewed his chances in the historic first Commonwealth election with optimism. The first election of Australian federation's first decade, held in March 1901, necessarily shaped as a contest between the two 'parties of capital', Free Trade and Protection, but Labor again defied the experts with a performance far stronger than expected. Contesting a manageable 26 of 75 House of Representative seats, Labor won 14 of them, and gained 8 of 36 Senate vacancies. Watson was doubly validated by the results: his State produced six new MPS, four of them in country NSW, terrain he had massaged tirelessly for a decade to secure a party presence, and his freshly minted federal constituents in Bland gave him a ringing endorsement with almost 60% of the primary vote.

So when a handful of Labor's successful candidates met together for the first time in Melbourne, in hasty preparation for the opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament two days later, the exuberant mood of the group more than compensated for the location they were consigned in the splendid Victorian federal parliament building. Barton's Protectionists and Reid's Free Traders were allocated rooms with a view; not so the still leaderless, policy-free Labor contingent. They found themselves in a 'dungeon-like room', in a basement so dingy that it furnished George Reid with yet another one-liner when he wryly observed that Labor's lads were 'steering from the steerage'.

Those present at a landmark meeting on the 8 May 1901 voted to establish the 'Federal Labor Party' and the caucus minutes indicate that Chris Watson was elected unopposed as party leader. When historian JA La Nauze discussed the choice of Watson as Labor's first leader in his two-volume biography of Alfred Deakin, he noted that Watson 'was a leader for whom, at any time, any of the other members of his party might have been substituted without causing the slightest surprise to members, or the public'. The claim is nonsense. Watson's more than ten years of devoted service for the labour cause was widely known, and with it, his unmatched record for achieving tangible results for the underprivileged in Labor's most electorally successful colony.

Watson and his team readied to play the long game over the duration of the first parliament, 1901-3, a formative period during which a few areas of tactical concern clarified for them. NSW Labor's strategic model of support in return for concessions, Watson's well-tryed *modus operandi*, was successfully transplanted into the federal sphere. But perhaps the most notable of Labor's achievements in the inaugural parliament took a year or so to be recognised – its impact on parliamentary behaviour. Watson's demeanour had a salutary effect on those around him. Alfred Deakin has left us with an incisive, first-hand observation:

It was not until after the first two years' sessions ... that Mr Watson's unaffected manner and studious devotion to Parliamentary work created a new reputation for him At the outset he had commanded a hearing as the mouthpiece of the Caucus ...By degrees, however, his soundness of judgement, clearness in argument and fairness to opponents drew him ahead of them all --and finally left them out of sight.

Led with such intelligence and responsibility by Watson, it was no surprise when country-wide support for Labor expanded beyond its working-class base. No longer the political minnows, Labor had noticeably improved its electoral appeal by the time an exhausted and disillusioned Edmund Barton called a halt to his prime ministership in September 1903, with the next election scheduled for mid-December.

Labor's inclusive electioneering strategies received another stunning endorsement when the final votes were counted. In the House of Representatives the party secured 25 seats, against the Protectionists' 25 seats and Free Traders 24, with one independent.

No-one, including all the Labor hopefuls, was quite prepared for the sheer size of Labor's success. It was a game changer, again put best by Deakin. With an Ashes series in Australia occupying the month of January 1904, and Victor Trumper's majestic double century in Adelaide on everyone's lips, Deakin used

the madly popular summer game to draw attention to the obvious. With ‘three practically equal parties’ in the next federal parliament, he asked:

What kind of a game of cricket, could they play with three elevens instead of two—one team playing sometimes with one side, sometimes with the other, and sometimes for itself?

Through Chris Watson’s command of party organisation and parliamentary procedures, Labor had announced itself as the parliament’s third eleven.

The second Commonwealth parliament commenced on 2 March 1904 with a decorum in its first weeks that gave no indication of the turbulence to come. As prime minister, Deakin pieced together an unconvincing Protectionist government, well-aware of the need for the support of Watson’s Labor Party. But his liberal principles were compromised by the association with Labor, with its rigid Caucus mechanisms and solidarity pledge, and it did not take Deakin long to test the limits of an uneasy relationship. He wanted to wedge Labor if possible, then negotiate on his terms. The issue he chose was the endlessly debated Conciliation and Arbitration Bill. Labor wanted it to include all State government employees, and Deakin was having none of it. To everyone’s surprise, he abruptly resigned his commission! It was 22 April 1904.

Ah, but master strategist Deakin, poised to dominate Australian politics over the next six years, was already assessing how the parliamentary chess board—aka the cricket field with three elevens—could be artfully conjured to his advantage. He had embarked on a covert waiting game that would see him return to power in just over 14 months, with the captains of the rival teams, Watson and Reid, undermined and undone, the terms of their prime ministerships cut short by stealth. What Deakin failed to anticipate, however, were the long-term implications of his actions. The four-month tenure of Watson’s Labor government – 27 April 1904 to 21 August 1904 – etched itself into history as a harbinger of permanent change to the schematics of global politics. As the world’s first labour government, it lit a slow-burning fuse that eventually proved unstoppable.

In late April 1904, however, the situation was anything but clear. The Governor-General asked Chris Watson to form a government and he attempted to identify a credible pathway in precarious circumstances. His own side was disconcerted by its premature ascension, including the combative Billy Hughes, who vividly recalled many years later the reaction of a raw party: ‘To say we were astonished at finding ourselves in office describes our feelings very mildly. Nothing had been farther from our thoughts’. While aware of the abundant promise within his own ranks, Watson knew they lacked ministerial experience and qualifications.

But if Watson had doubts about his fledgling government, the conservative press had none at all. They were outraged at Labor’s precocity. How dare they form a government! Adelaide’s *Register* was furious with what it labelled an ‘unrestrained socialist government’, which portended ‘a greater disaster than half a dozen droughts’.

But of all the vitriol directed at Labor, the *Maitland Daily Mercury’s* outpouring surely exceeded the rest. Historian Ross McMullin, whose research on this part of Watson’s career was very helpful, found the title for his book on the Watson government located within the *Mercury’s* unbridled spleen. Contemplating what it referred to as ‘an unthinkable monstrosity of a Government’, the *Mercury* leader shrieked:

To call this preposterous production a Government is ridiculous, and would be laughable, were it not for the painful pitilessness of having so monstrous a travesty [in charge of this] great country.

In contrast to the mainstream press, the labour dailies were understandably delighted. The *Bulletin* dismissed the ‘imaginary picture’ painted by the ‘malicious liars and crude perjurers of the daily press’, while Melbourne’s *Punch* expressed its belief that Labor’s ‘surging tide’ was due to the fact that its MPs contained no one born into privilege. When Watson, decades on, recalled the quality and integrity of his Labor colleagues in federation’s early years, he took pride in their qualifications: ‘Practically every man had gone through the mill, and had been educated in the University of Experience’.

What Watson failed to mention was the confidence instilled into each member of the first federal Labor government by the aura of their leader. Hughes never forgot the moment when Watson entered the room for his first cabinet meeting:

All eyes were riveted on him; he was worth going miles to see. He had dressed for the part; his Van Dyke beard was exquisitely groomed, his abundant brown hair smoothly brushed. His raiment was a veritable poem – a superb morning coat and vest, set off by dark striped trousers, beautifully creased and shyly revealing the kind of socks that young men dream about; and shoes to match. He was the perfect picture of the statesman, the leader . . .

Two major speeches by Watson emphasised the point, the first of them his opening address in the parliament as prime minister when he submitted what he called ‘a practical program – a list of measures which we have a reasonable expectation of passing during the time at our disposal. . .’ Watson knew that his party was already being undermined, and was operating on borrowed time – but this only emphasised the need to stake out Labor’s social and political territory for the Australian people. He wanted to encourage, in his words, ‘a larger and broader national feeling than that which has hitherto existed in federal politics’.

One week later, in another pulsating speech, this time in the House of Representatives—a speech that deserves a place in the pantheon of Australia’s best—he challenged his opponents to cease their plotting, buckle up and give ‘some result to the country’ by finding solutions to issues of ‘larger importance’. It was ‘the sheerest hypocrisy’ for those on the other side to carp about the Labor Party’s discipline and the degree of loyalty expected of its representatives, for that is precisely what they were trying to instil in their own wayward members. Watson also exposed the character slurs being bandied about by his opponents, who recklessly portrayed Labor as sympathetic to ‘free love or the breaking down of the marriage institution’. For the very moral Labor leader this was a step too far, a deeply offensive political tactic that degraded those responsible. Concluding his speech, Watson demolished the hoary old claim that Labor policy was indebted to European socialism. Yes, he declared, his side of politics did embrace, ‘the general spirit of the May Day movement’, but what was that spirit, Watson asked? What an eloquent answer he supplied:

It is the spirit of humanity; the spirit of those who care for the poor and lowly; of those who are prepared to make an effort to interfere with the iron law of wages, and with the cold-blooded calculation of the ordinary political economist. That is the spirit which I recognise as being behind the May Day movement....it is the motive of those who will leave no stone unturned, and no experiment untried, in their efforts to benefit humanity. That is the spirit with which we are heartily in sympathy, and I challenge any honourable member to say he is against it.

The speech was Watson at his best, an emotional articulation of the main reason why he got into politics in the first place. Later the same day he retired to his Melbourne boarding house digs to write to Deakin seeking ‘an alliance’ of the Labor and Liberal Parties ‘to ensure a program of progressive legislation being put through Parliament in the immediate future’. Given their policy parallels it was a perfectly reasonable request. But as Norman Abjorensen, in his excellent recent book, *The Manner of Their Going*, trenchantly sums up: Deakin and George Reid ‘were already digging Labor’s grave before a single action of the Government had entered the statute books’. Arch-conservative newspaper, Melbourne’s *Argus*, basked in the opportunity to break the news to Watson only a few days into his prime ministership that his government had better get used to ‘accepting its life in daily instalments’. And that is exactly how it turned out. Daily instalments for four months, and then the axe fell.

As commentary boiled all around him, Watson left office with the same dignity he had brought to the parliament for years. He left recriminations to others, quietly tended his resignation, caught the train back to Sydney and went on a well-earned holiday to Wiseman’s Ferry with Ada. Watson badly needed a break. A series of stressful years at the head of a young and clamorous party, culminating in several intense months in power, had by his own admission left his nerves ‘in tatters’.

Watson stayed on as Labor leader until his resignation in October 1907, and he announced his retirement from the federal parliament shortly before the April 1910 election. During this last phase of his political

career, he concentrated on unfinished business – national, party and personal – with varying degrees of success.

One item of personal interest, even passion, that he kept returning to throughout Federation's first decade was the 'burning question' of the nation's capital city. Watson has not received the credit for Canberra's selection that he so richly deserves. As Greg Wood, former senior public servant and diplomat wrote during the Centenary of Canberra celebration in 2013: 'No individual can validly claim to be the 'Father of Canberra', but if anyone comes close, it is Watson. He was certainly the "godfather of Canberra"'.

It is long forgotten now, but the tortured process of locating a national capital site in the end involved no less than seven Commonwealth Governments, five NSW Governments, two Royal Commissions, nine Government Ministers for Home Affairs, four lapsed Bills and three acts of the Commonwealth Parliament. The Canberra story, and Watson's central place in it, beginning in 1902, is chock full of rattling train rides, eccentric treks, larger-than-life characters, dazzling Monaro days, and fish. In the Murrumbidgee River a century ago, big fish.

In fact, it was a fishing expedition that Watson organised for a few of his parliamentary colleagues in the autumn of 1907 that proved to be the turning point in Canberra's story. The group's host was leading Queanbeyan citizen, renowned newspaperman John Gale, and he could not believe his luck when presented with a golden opportunity to lobby federal politicians about the credentials of his region as they cast out their lines. He took the party along the Uriarra Road to the Goodradigbee River where a chat about rainbow trout seamlessly merged into discussion of the area's many fine qualities. Watson and Gale 'fished', and 'talked':

[They] had a good deal in common. Both were pressmen, both Protectionists, both concerned for the well-being of ordinary decent folk. John Gale shared his intimate knowledge of the country and his vision of the city ... How [he] must have blessed the beneficent Providence that brought them all together! ...After a few days Chris Watson and his friends were thoroughly convinced that there could be no better place for Australia's capital.

It was only fitting that, during the second reading of the *Seat of Government Bill* in April 1908, the definitive statement about Canberra's aesthetic qualities should be delivered by Watson. Never known as a wordsmith, his affection for the Canberra region is evident in the eloquent summary he gave for his federal colleagues:

There is a plain in the centre, and foothills all round ... and beyond that...the Murrumbidgee mountains, towering as a background and proving a most effective foil to the other scenery ... I do not say that picturesqueness alone should decide the question; but, other things being equal, I think that the beautiful ought to turn the scale.

And in the end it did, for on 8 October 1908 the option known then as 'Yass-Canberra' won the ballot that finally determined the capital site. Chris Watson, the 'Godfather of Canberra', was tickled pink with the result.

During his last years in the parliament, Watson had his hits and misses. He took heart from his party's ability to see off the first 'red scare' campaign directed against it, engineered by the Free Trade leader George Reid in the run-up to the 1906 election. The wily Reid correctly assessed that the emergence of the Labor Party federally threatened both his party and Deakin's Protectionists. Realising that the non-Labor parties would have to join together sometime in the immediate future, Reid attempted to temporarily halt Labor's march, with a campaign based on accusations that the Labor Party was a socialist party with direct links to radical European socialism. Watson combated Reid's transparent propaganda, never more successfully than when he maintained in one well-reported speech that:

The very people who objected to socialism were immersed in it. They rode in socialist railways, sent their children to socialist schools ..._washed in socialist baths, read in socialist libraries, and if through studying the advantages of individualism they became insane, they retired to a socialistic lunatic asylum.

Watson comfortably saw off Reid's strategic overreach, but he got little joy when forced to confront the increasingly vocal elements in his own party—and this became apparent in the first months of 1905. Watson pressed for ongoing endorsement of his commitment to Labor supporting Deakin's second government, in return for concessions, declaring in one speech that looking for 'a seventh heaven' for society's downtrodden was 'crying for the moon'. Labor had to lock in 'what was practical and immediate'. A growing, and influential number of party rank-and-file, and parliamentary colleagues, had a different opinion.

The July 1905 Labor conference in Melbourne was a watershed event for Watson and for the Labor Party. The party flagged its determination to form a national government on its merits, in its own right, while its leader—on the other hand—was sticking to a model that was getting closer to its 'use-by' date. Watson was rebuffed on key policy issues at the Conference and, after taking a few weeks to consider his own future, sent a long letter of resignation to all 'Members of the Federal Labor Party'.

He was talked into withdrawing it, but the tide had changed. Labor's organisational weaknesses, together with Watson's stature as leader, had secured him managerial independence in the Commonwealth parliament for the best part of five years, as the federal party found its feet. The honeymoon period was over, ironically at the very point when Labor had begun to exert more influence on government legislation than at any stage since 1901.

In the last months of 1906, close observers within the Labor Party detected signs of change in the priorities and preferences of their leader. Watson had not clocked off, but his keen interest in the functions of the federal treasury, and its relationship to private enterprise interests in Australia, was unmistakable. The few months he had as the nation's Treasurer had given him a taste for the mysteries of finance, and he became a student of annual federal budgets, and their application. Perhaps unconsciously, Watson had begun to explore a new career direction in life after politics.

Watson's foundation assumptions about the way Labor should do business in the national parliament were crumbling, so was his health, and he knew it. Finally, in October 1907 he resigned his leadership of the Labor Party—and this time he did not change his decision. He was still only 40 years of age, and those who knew him best understood that the stressful context for his brief prime ministership, political and personal, had taken its toll. The thought of another term in office horrified him; Ada wanted him back in Sydney; he had suffered severely from haemorrhoids for years; the years of keeping up with the escalating correspondence from the Labor faithful had worn him down; he was sick and tired of the interminable Sydney/Melbourne commute; and, as Bede Nairn notes in the *ADB* entry on Watson, 'he possessed little money and had concluded that his managerial skills might be put to some lucrative use'.

The public's response to Watson's resignation was overwhelming, typified by a letter he received from a Mr E O'Donohue, in the Blue Mountains. He began his letter by referring to the news as 'a grotesque tragedy' and pleaded with Watson to reconsider a 'momentous decision'. The thought of the venerated Labor leader shifting into the world of private enterprise was too painful for Mr O'Donohue to bear:

Good Lord, fancy Chris Watson as a linen importer or some such thing, if you can. If William Tell at a critical moment in Swiss history had resigned his position to take up market gardening; or Washington in 1778 had thrown up his commission and accepted the post of exciseman; or if Scipio on the eve of Zama had suddenly resolved to forthwith start a fish-curing factory and let the Roman legions 'muddle through somehow' next day without him; these instances would supply cases exactly analogous to you leaving us within sight of the Promised Land . . . From your most influential supporters to the humblest navvy such as myself in the great and growing army of Labor but one sentiment proceeds: don't leave us on the verge of your and our triumph. I am dear sir, Yours fraternally

It is hard to imagine what Mr O'Donohue and the Labor 'faithful' made of the new spheres of interest in Chris Watson's life after politics, over the next three decades until his death: whether it be his role in a speculative syndicate that saw him search unsuccessfully for gold in South Africa in 1910-11; his pro-Empire articles for the British *Round Table* journal in 1911-12; his part-time career as a parliamentary lobbyist representing private interests; his many years as a Trustee of the Sydney Cricket Ground Trust, rubbing shoulders with some of Sydney's most conservative businessmen and sporting entrepreneurs; his trip to England in 1915 when he was duchesed by the English establishment, as Edmund Barton, Alfred Deakin and George Reid had been before him, a visit that confirmed his unquestioning support of

Australia's participation in the Great War; his public support for Billy Hughes in the controversial formation of the Nationalist Party in 1916, and support for Hughes' aggressive advocacy of conscription in two divisive (and unsuccessful) referenda that split the Australian community, and the Labor Party, its effects lasting for decades; his active membership of the Nationalist Party from 1917 to 1922; his work for the Nationalists in two election campaigns as Labor's direct opponent; and his numerous roles on company boards, including being the first Chairman of Directors of Ampol.

In 1927, when Watson was asked by the *Sydney Sun* to write a piece on his historic first Labor government, in the newspaper's 'Men and Deeds from the Magical Past' series, he reflected that: 'We who love Australia must continue to be nerved and vitalised by the highest ideals'. While it is certain that humble navvy, railwayman Mr O'Donohue in the Blue Mountains, if he was still around, would have wholeheartedly agreed with these lofty sentiments, it is less certain that he would have applied them unequivocally to the man who voiced them, and what he had, over time, become.

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