

First in the World: Australia's Watson Labor Government*

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Last year the ALP commemorated a special anniversary. When Chris Watson and his ministers were sworn in on 27 April 1904, they were forming not just Australia's first national Labor government. It was the first national labour government in the world.

We were leading the world. It might be hard to imagine now, but the advent of the Watson government confirmed that a century ago Australia was leading the world in progressive government, in pioneering measures benefiting the working class.

Remarkable as it may seem today, curious visitors crossed the globe to scrutinise this advanced social laboratory for themselves.

The Labor Party's rise was astonishing. Labor had only been formed 13 years earlier. Let's focus on that with some comparative contemporary context. Think about parties formed relatively recently, like the Greens or the Democrats or even One Nation, and the struggle they have each had to become anything beyond a minor party in the Senate, where the proportional representation system enables them to pick up the odd seat, or at best a few seats here and there. None of them have ever looked remotely like becoming, in the national parliament, anything other than a minor upper house party.

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The contrast with Labor's first years is stark. Here you have a brand new party, with not just different policies but a different look and feel, a different way of *doing* politics with novel features like party control of MPs and policy, caucus control of the parliamentary party, a pledge to enforce solidarity.

And this new party rose so swiftly that merely 13 years after its formation it was not just picking up a Senate seat or two, but actually forming a national government. And not only that, but doing so before any equivalent party overseas had become remotely close to doing so. For example, in 1904 there were 670 MPs in the House of Commons, but the number representing the British Labour Party was the grand total of four. In 1904 a British Labour government was still decades away.

The novelty of this first national labour government in the world under Chris Watson inevitably influenced what people thought of it. At that time the gaining of power through the democratic process by representatives of the working class was unknown.

It just didn't happen. The working class got hold of political power rarely, and only when it grabbed it by force.

This prompted some alarmist observers in 1904 to start thinking anxiously about precedents like the French Revolution. Analogies between Watson and Danton or Robespierre might well seem grotesque and ludicrous to us now, but just as we look back a hundred years to the Watson government, when Australians in 1904 looked back an equivalent period, a hundred years or so earlier, what some of them saw in their historical rear vision mirror was the French Revolution.

This is confirmed by what W.A. Holman, a prominent Labor MP in the New South Wales parliament, wrote: 'Cultured critics, confronted with the portent of a working-class Cabinet, were unable to shake their imaginations free of the blood-curdling associations of the Committee of Public Safety, and looked forward with a groan, if not to bloodshed, at least to all-round confiscation and outrage.'

The famous Sydney weekly, the *Bulletin*, denounced this hysterical nonsense in characteristically forthright fashion as it hopped into 'those lying papers and persons that always explained to the public how the first Democratic government would take office with a flaming torch in one hand, and a gory dagger in the other, and a newly-severed head trailing behind it at the end of a bit of string.'

But the *Bulletin* was greatly outnumbered, in fact swamped, by the barrage of sledging the Watson government endured from the conservative press. This started even before the government started. Even before it was sworn in, the press hostility was virulent. Some examples:

'[The new government] will exist entirely on sufferance', sniffed the *Argus*, and 'has no claim on an extended life.'

The *Adelaide Register* asserted that 'a year of unrestrained socialist government would be to Australia—and particularly to the working classes—a greater disaster than half a dozen droughts.'

Melbourne *Punch*: ‘the extremists under Mr Watson ... would do the country a tremendous amount of harm abroad, and put a sudden stop to the awakening spirit of investment and enterprise at home. We cannot afford to monkey with the Labour Party in this way.’

There was a sentiment in some quarters that Watson and his ministry were entitled to fair play and time to show what they could do, but the *Sydney Morning Herald* was having none of that: ‘Why should he be given time?’ it thundered in an editorial, adamant that the new government should be removed as soon as possible. Later that paper described the Watson government in a memorable phrase as a ‘scratch team of untried extremists’.

The *Sydney Daily Telegraph* dismissed the Watson government as a ‘curious political freak’, and said a lot more:

The names of the new Federal Ministry will not be a matter of very great interest to the community. In the caucus one man is pretty much the same as another, and the fact that it is a caucus Government formed by a pledge-bound Prime Minister under caucus direction renders its personnel of little or no consequence. ... there is not one of them with any conspicuous fitness for the work of a Cabinet Minister. ... It is wholly and solely an apprentice Government, [and] to allow a Government of political apprentices under the tutelage of a secret caucus which avowedly holds the interests of one section of the people paramount over those of all other sections to reign for a single day ... goes too far beyond a joke.

But there was one newspaper that was in a class of its own, the *Maitland Daily Mercury*. Watson’s ministry was ‘such an unthinkable monstrosity of a Government’, it fumed:

To call the Ministry a Government is, of course, a flagrant misnomer, as in no respect can so grotesque and absolutely unique a body claim so distinguished a title. ... 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.

We ended up choosing that phrase *So Monstrous a Travesty*¹ as the title of my book on the Watson government, to reflect in the title a flavour of the remarkable press hostility the government had to put up with.

The new government was not totally bereft of press support. The *Bulletin* greeted it positively:

What it mostly wants is time to develop its policy, to show that a Labor Ministry isn’t anything like a shindy of the larrikin sons of the upper classes at a university function, and that it doesn’t drink or break things, or start

¹ Ross McMullin, *So Monstrous a Travesty: Chris Watson and the World’s First National Labour Government*, Melbourne, Scribe Publications, 2004. Quotations in this paper come from that book, which details source references in extensive notes.

revolutions, and that it has constructive ability; and to prove to the unthinking majority that the imaginary picture of it drawn by the malicious liars and crude perjurers of the daily press is just the lie that the thinking minority has always known it to be.

Some political context mightn't go astray here. In 1904, Labor was one of three parties of similar numerical strength in federal parliament. Besides Labor under Watson, there were the Protectionists under Alfred Deakin and the Free Traders under George Reid. Labor was closer to Deakin and his Protectionists, who were generally more progressive than Reid's Free Traders. Throughout the first decade of federal politics, no party had a majority in either the House of Representatives or the Senate. That significant fact underpins the whole historical context. From 1901 to 1910, no party had a majority in either chamber of federal parliament.

The Watson government of 1904 was a minority government. It had a dedicated band of Protectionist supporters, who could be relied on to support Labor rather than Reid's Free Traders in any significant parliamentary vote. This gave the Watson government almost a working majority in the House of Representatives, but it fell just a few votes short.

During the early days of the Watson government, newspapers hostile to it repeatedly urged the Protectionists and Free Traders to sink their differences over the tariff and respond cohesively to the greater need, which was, as far as these hostile newspapers were concerned, the removal of the new Watson government as soon as possible.

The *Bulletin* amused itself and its readers on this issue:

There was a dreadful fear lest the Watson Government might do what the Tory papers professed to want most of all, [that is,] restore majority rule by presenting a programme that would attract a majority, and Deakin and Reid were urged in the name of majority rule to make dead sure that Watson wouldn't have a chance to re-establish majority rule. All the Tory party and the Tory press professed to be certain that Watson's programme would prove his hopeless incapacity, and that his administration would cover him with ridicule and disgrace—and at the same time their anxiety that Watson shouldn't have a chance to show his incapacity and cover himself with disgrace was pathetic in its intensity. The whole attitude of the Tory party and the Tory press was a disgrace to every principle of political decency and ordinary fairplay.

The composition of Watson's cabinet was interesting. Watson firmly believed that a prime minister should be able to choose his own ministry, and that's what he did in 1904. The Labor principle that caucus should choose the ministry was not then accepted practice, though it soon would be. When the second Labor government was formed four years later, caucus chose that ministry. But in 1904 Watson had a free hand. He made some interesting choices.

Notable in itself is the fact that his ministry included two future prime ministers in Andrew Fisher and Billy Hughes.

There was also Labor's Senate leader, the remarkable Gregor McGregor, a beefy, rough and tough former labourer and wrestler who was virtually blind. McGregor could distinguish objects only in the best possible light, and had to have documents read to him. Caucus colleagues had to shepherd him around parliament, saying mind the step, look out for the swinging door, and so on. McGregor got by because he had an extraordinary memory. He was able to buttress his speeches with heaps of statistics, and frequently amazed onlookers with his capacity to memorise them.

The other senator in Watson's ministry was Andy Dawson. He had already acquired a measure of fame as leader of the brief Queensland Labor government of December 1899, which was very short-lived because the reality of Labor in office prompted the anti-Labor groups to hastily settle the differences between them that had enabled Dawson to become premier. So he was premier for only a week.

In 1904 Dawson was Watson's Minister for Defence. He too was a fascinating character. A hard-drinking radical who had been orphaned in the most tragic circumstances, Dawson was an associate of John Wren, and his stint as Defence minister was dominated by his bitter feud in office with the autocratic British commander of Australia's defence forces.

What was implicit in the rabid press hostility that the Watson government had to put up with—and sometimes explicit—was the notion that people from genuine working class backgrounds couldn't run the country. And they did have genuine working class backgrounds. Watson the compositor, McGregor the blind ex-labourer, Fisher and Dawson both formerly miners, Billy Hughes the umbrella mender and odd-job-man.

Also in Watson's cabinet were two ministers with unique attainments. Ever since 1901 only one person has been a minister in an Australian federal Labor government without being a member of the ALP.

It came about because Watson had to find someone to be Attorney-General, the government's chief law officer, a position customarily held, with good reason, by a well-credentialed lawyer, and there was only one person in caucus in 1904 with a law degree. That was Billy Hughes, who was not normally a shrinking violet, but he had only just qualified as a lawyer after studying hard in the little spare time he had, and not even he was willing to take on a role that presumed a level of legal expertise that he knew he did not possess.

So when Hughes ruled himself out, Watson had to look beyond caucus for his Attorney-General. He chose H.B. Higgins, a middle-class radical who had aligned himself with Labor consistently in parliament without formally joining the party, and was later to become best known as the judge who delivered the Harvester judgment that resulted in the establishment of the basic wage in Australia.

The other minister in Watson's cabinet with a unique political record was Hugh Mahon. He remains the only MP ever to have been expelled from our federal parliament. We're not talking here about just being put in the sin-bin for 24 hours. He was thrown right out of parliament in a controversy that occurred well after he was Postmaster-General in the Watson government in 1904.

Mahon was an ardent Irish patriot, who had been gaoled in London with Charles Parnell and other Irish nationalists before he came to Australia. It was in 1920, when the 'troubles' in Mahon's beloved Ireland had never been bloodier, that Mahon made a passionate speech at a meeting of Irish patriots in Melbourne. He said the British government was 'a gang of false hearted hypocrites' who ruled over 'a bloody and accursed empire'. They had sent 'spies, informers and bloody cut-throats' to Ireland, and he had 'read with delight that some of those thugs' had been killed. The Prime Minister who expelled Mahon from parliament for making this speech was none other than Billy Hughes, Mahon's colleague in Watson's 1904 cabinet, who had in the meantime left the ALP during the party's bitter split over conscription in 1916.

As for Watson himself, Hugh Mahon wrote this insightful appreciation of Prime Minister Watson while a minister in his cabinet in 1904:

He is taller than the average, athletic, full-bearded, good-looking, and under 40. Moreover, his tastes are largely those of the average man. He plays cricket and billiards, cycles when he gets a chance, enjoys a good story, and sings as well as appreciates a good song. He has neither the ostentation of a demagogue, nor the abstraction of a genius. ... [H]is infallible instinct [for recognising] opportunity is his most notable gift. ... With some men courage often merges into rashness. His party always confidently relied on the soundness of Mr Watson's judgment, for it was never formed hastily, nor on imperfect information. I have met many political leaders, some of them intimately, here and elsewhere. I remember none who excelled this self-taught Australian in the peculiar endowments essential to his task. ... Though not an orator, Mr Watson possesses the gift of lucid and forceful expression. He rapidly assimilates facts, and easily sifts from a mass of detail the really salient points of a question. On all the vital issues within the scope of the national Parliament he is undoubtedly one of the best-informed men in either House.

There was another knowledgeable profile of Watson, in the *Bulletin* as he came to office: Watson 'always gives an impression of personal unselfishness, of considering the cause first and himself afterwards. ... His ease of manner under all circumstances shows the man of self-reliance but of no vanity.'

While prime minister, Watson was also Treasurer, and a distinctly successful one. Contrary to the doom and gloom predictions in some quarters, the economy prospered while his government was in office. The values of Australian stocks in London actually rose while Watson was prime minister. He liked pointing this out.

When Watson was sworn in as prime minister, he had just turned 37. Australia has never had a younger prime minister. Watson was an accomplished party leader, and during his time in office he led the nation capably too. Yet he resigned the leadership three years later, and within a further three years he was out of parliament altogether. That is, one of Labor's finest national leaders relinquished the leadership when he was only 40.

This becomes more understandable when you consider Watson's routine as prime minister. Bear in mind that unlike other prime ministers, notably his immediate successor, George Reid, whose government spent months and months in parliamentary recess, there was no such let-up for Watson. Parliament kept sitting almost throughout the Watson government.

Malcolm Shepherd, who served a succession of prime ministers as their private secretary, was particularly impressed with Watson:

He was a most popular man with all sections of the House and the main reason why he was not more popular outside Parliament was because of his retiring disposition, which amounted to real shyness. It was with the utmost difficulty he could be persuaded to attend social functions of any kind. I spent a lot of time trying to convince him that it was advisable to go everywhere he could to meet people because wherever he went he made friends. It was difficult not to like him no matter what you thought of his politics.

However, Watson 'had little time for social engagements', Shepherd acknowledged, especially while he was prime minister, when he was nominally residing in Sydney with his wife but spending far more time in Melbourne, where the federal government was located before the move to Canberra.

Shepherd provided an outline of a typical week for Watson as prime minister:

Our week consisted of office all day Monday and sometimes nights as well; Tuesday morning office, afternoon and evening Parliament; Wednesday ditto; Thursday ditto; [on] Friday Parliament met in the morning and sat till 4 o'clock when there would be a rush for the Sydney train. ... On arrival Sydney, to the Commonwealth Office where numerous callers would be waiting for interviews, the Press, and friends, which kept him busy till everyone else wanted lunch. He would then go home and on to a football match. I generally had to spend the afternoon getting rid of correspondence. Sunday morn there would generally be several more interviews, but the afternoon was mostly free, till train time and back to Melbourne. This routine was followed during the whole of his Prime Ministership, with the addition of a few Caucus meetings thrown in.

And there were cabinet meetings as well, which Shepherd neglected to mention.

Considering this punishing routine, Watson's capacity to remain unruffled was remarkable. Shepherd again:

My association with Watson was very happy. To me he never uttered a cross word, notwithstanding sufficient provocation at times, and the occasions when he nearly lost his temper were very rare. He was an able leader and possessed real ability as an administrator. He was a good and lucid speaker with much resource in debate [and] he really was a great Australian.

I've included in my book some glowing assessments of Watson. In a discerning study of Australian prime ministers up to 1940, a top-level defence strategist named Alfred Buchanan wrote in that year that:

[t]hirty years ago people wondered [about Watson's resignation,] and they still wonder. There have been a number of Labor leaders since Watson, but not one of them has shown the combination of qualities that distinguished him. He had poise, tact, foresight, firmness, judgment, and self-control. He had along with everything else a natural unforced dignity, which everyone recognised and respected.

Monty Grover reported federal politics while Watson was leader. He later became a renowned newspaper editor. Grover was looking back on decades of federal politics when he wrote in his memoirs that 'Watson was possibly the man with more qualities of leadership than we have ever had in the Federal arena. [His] battle tactics were sublime.'

Watson's leadership attributes were particularly suited to the first decade of federal politics, when there were three major parties and no outright parliamentary majorities. In this era of minority governments, when Labor had to pursue its objectives in concert with non-Labor MPs, Watson's amiable personality, his unflagging affability, his capacity to get on harmoniously with practically everyone, was an important factor in Labor's ability to negotiate desirable outcomes.

Despite Chris Watson's proficiency as a leader, his significance in his time, and his special place in history as Labor's first national leader and first prime minister, and as Australia's youngest prime minister, he is little known today. He long ago slipped into obscurity, and has remained there for decades. So much so that when he is mentioned these days, people sometimes refer to him inappropriately.

He *was* J.C. Watson, but *Chris* was his preferred first name, and he was known far and wide, universally, as Chris Watson. Yet these days you sometimes find him referred to as John Watson. One book purporting to be about him even names him as John Watson on the front cover. That is as incongruous as it would be to refer to one of his successors whose initials are E.G.W. as Prime Minister *Edward* Whitlam. We don't do that to Gough, and we shouldn't do it to Chris Watson either.

Since the book was published I've been asked a few times about parallels or lessons that might connect the Watson government's experience with present-day Labor. And I've had to say that not many spring to mind. The political circumstances in 1904 were so different, with three major parties and minority governments. And only one lawyer in caucus—fair bit of change there.

It's easier to find parallels on the other side of politics. In 1904 the main opponent of Chris Watson and the Labor Party was George Reid. Now I think a certain present-day equivalent to Reid does spring to mind, considering that Reid was a lawyer, from Sydney, of conservative views, an advocate of free trade but pretty flexible about nearly everything if it brought him closer to office, cunning, fond of cynical scare campaigns, a leader who played to and brought out the worst in Australians rather than their best.

On the Labor side there is a comparative snippet that has recently emerged. Watson remains the youngest federal leader Labor has ever had. The second youngest leader Labor has ever had is Mark Latham. Watson resigned from parliament at the age of 43. When Mark Latham resigned last month [January 2005] he too was 43.

But there is one parallel between present-day Labor and Watson in 1904 that has more substance.

In Watson's first speech in parliament as prime minister, he challenged the false 'impression [that] has got abroad in the past that the Labour Party are opposed to any adequate provision being made for defence.' In other words, the notion that Labor was soft on defence and national security was simply not true, as Watson himself proved by actions he took as prime minister.

So that furphy is over a century old. As long ago as 1904, it was already hackneyed and trite.

A decade later, when the First World War began in 1914, Australia was in the middle of a federal election campaign. Labor won that election, and a significant factor in that victory—and this is not understood today—was that Labor under Chris Watson and Andrew Fisher had a clearly better record on defence and national security than the conservatives.

In both Vietnam and the current fiasco in Iraq, Australia's national security has been betrayed by deceitful Liberal governments.

And in the Second World War, when our national security was imperilled as neither before nor since, Menzies was a failure as a war leader, Curtin rose to the occasion superbly, and after comparing their respective records the Australian people delivered what still remains the greatest triumph the ALP has ever enjoyed at a federal election in the proportion of seats won.

Moreover, when Curtin steeled himself to stand up to Churchill and insisted that Australia's soldiers had to be brought home to defend Australia, and Churchill wanted to divert them on a wild goose chase to Burma where they would have been slaughtered, Curtin's task was made much harder when Churchill's proposal was supported by no fewer than six men who at some stage held the office of prime minister of Australia on the conservative side of politics. There has been no greater dereliction of Australia's national security since Federation.

So it's no wonder that Labor partisans who know their history can get irritated by this furphy that the conservatives are fond of propagating, that only they can be trusted on national security. It's a furphy that Chris Watson was repudiating as long ago as 1904.

Also, while it's appropriate to emphasise the remarkable sledging the government had to put up with from conservative broadsheets, I did come across a different attitude from one newspaper that I thought retains resonance today. That newspaper was

Melbourne *Truth*. With Watson and his ministers about to be sworn in, *Truth* wrote this in April 1904:

The political fight in Australia [is between] those who desire the welfare of the many, the enlightened progress of the Commonwealth, and the triumph of humanity, against those who only concern themselves with the interests of the wealthy, who regard the Commonwealth as a mere market-place for wholesale hucksters, and who consider human beings as mere pawns in a merciless war of commerce.

That seems a pretty useful analysis a century later.

So much for the search for parallels between the Watson government and the present day. What did the Watson government achieve?

The government remained under exacting pressure throughout its existence. Its opponents in parliament and the press were relentless. Parliament kept sitting, challenges kept coming, and crises kept recurring. But the government survived. Watson and Hughes had to scramble desperately at times and make unpalatable concessions, but the government stayed in office.

As days turned to weeks and then months, Australians realised that contrary to some predictions the sky had not fallen in. Riot, revolution and ruin had not eventuated. The government's administration, in fact, was distinctly impressive. This was an important achievement. By governing so competently, Watson and his ministers paved the way for future Labor governments, majority Labor governments with the parliamentary numbers to introduce substantial reforms.

Moreover, the Watson government was like a breath of fresh air in some respects. A hundred years ago there was a public servant, a very senior public servant, who was delighted by the advent of the Watson government. This was because he found that when he was in discussions with his new minister he was allowed to sit down. Remarkably, the previous minister, in the Deakin government that Watson and his ministers replaced, had such breathtaking self-importance that he required this senior public servant to stand respectfully beside the minister's table, even for hours at a time, until this pretentious Protectionist deigned to indicate that he had no further use for him. The incoming Labor minister ended this nonsense.

Eventually, with the Watson government approaching four harrowing months in office, a dodgy parliamentary stunt was used to remove it. The government, Watson and Hughes in particular, had tried valiantly to get pioneering national arbitration legislation enacted. Their opponents managed to whittle down the provisions in the bill relating to preference to unionists. In the end, when they proposed an amendment seeking to restrict preference further still, Watson said enough is enough and if this amendment is passed the government will resign.

The way it was done was highly unusual. Watson had moved in the normal way for the recommittal of a number of clauses of the contentious arbitration bill. The surprise tactic unveiled by Labor's opponents was to move the deletion of one of those clauses from Watson's motion. This manoeuvre in effect sought to deprive the government of

control of the House of Representatives, which was tantamount to a vote of no confidence, while preventing the kind of wide-ranging debate normally associated with a no-confidence motion. It also cunningly enabled the chairman of committees, a conservative known to be hostile to the concept of preference, to vote on the issue, whereas in the more orthodox procedure Watson had initiated he would have only had a casting vote in the event of a deadlock.

A Labor supporter described this unusual tactic as a ‘despicable trick’ and a ‘strike below the belt’. Billy Hughes felt intensely aggrieved that this devious device prevented the government from defending itself properly. Newspapers in 1904 routinely reported parliamentary exchanges in column after column of verbatim detail, which many readers scrutinised to familiarise themselves with political developments. But parliament’s procedural rules ensured that this debate would be necessarily narrow. Hughes protested angrily:

so far as I know, and, apparently, so far as can be gathered from honourable members, [this manoeuvre is] unique in the history of parliamentary government—unique, at any rate, in this country and in Great Britain. ... [It] amounts to an attempt to prevent the Government, whose administration, whose policy, and whose very existence are challenged, from saying one word in their own defence.

It was a spirited debate. Even usually measured speakers like H.B. Higgins, Watson’s non-Labor minister, were up in arms. Never before had Higgins identified himself with the Labor cause so wholeheartedly:

We came into office without seeking it, and we shall go out without having disgraced ourselves. We came into office without cadging, and we shall go out without cringing. All that I can say is that our occupancy of office has provided a beneficial lesson for the country, which will see that a Labour Ministry has been displaced before it has committed any fault of administration, before it has proposed anything contrary to the programme put forward by its leaders at the outset. ... [The truth is] that this Ministry, whatever its faults may have been, has acted honorably and above board, and has not been guilty of any underground engineering; that it has fought for its principles, that it has not sought office, and that it will leave it with a good record and an unstained flag.

The government lost the vital vote, 36 to 34. Watson advised the Governor-General that an election should be held, but the Governor-General rejected this advice. Watson then resigned. Many Labor supporters approved of Watson’s willingness to relinquish office on a policy principle.

What especially annoyed Labor activists was Deakin’s acquiescence in the shabby procedure that removed the government after he had promised it a fair trial. This prompted some vivid exchanges that have passed into Australian political folklore.

In parliament Hughes accused Deakin of an ‘amazing’ and ‘treacherous change of front’, and there was plenty more in similar vein. Moreover, on the day that the

Governor-General rejected Watson's request for an election, Hughes made a notable speech at Ballarat, in Deakin's electorate. He had a big audience. It was at Her Majesty's Theatre, and 2 000 turned up to hear him. In this speech Hughes reiterated the contrast between Deakin's assurance of fair play back in April and the 'dirty underhand trick' that had dislodged the Watson government. Hughes also ridiculed Deakin's denial that he had voted against preference to unionists in the crucial vote on 12 August (Deakin had asserted that he had voted in favour of preference, but against the way the government was proposing to implement it). According to Hughes, it was as if Deakin owed a debt of five pounds and repaid it, 'and then engaged a man with a knuckle-duster to get it back.' The capacity audience roared with laughter.

These barbs nettled Deakin. He had high personal standards about political behaviour. When the fray grew bitter, he prided himself on staying above it; he did not stoop to parliamentary sledging. But he made an exception in response to these stinging attacks from Hughes. His contribution to the climactic debate in the House of Representatives on 12 August had immediately followed Hughes's notorious attack:

To the speech of the Minister of External Affairs I do not propose to make any more than an indirect reply. It happens sometimes to all of us, that as we pass along the streets of the city, we meet men engaged filling drays with dirt and garbage, and unless one is discreet some of that dust and refuse may drift upon him.

Later in that speech Deakin expressed 'regret' for replying 'too much in kind' and departing from his 'rule' that the 'best way to meet angry attacks is to answer in another manner'. But when Hughes followed up by venturing into Deakin's electorate to fire more salvos of personal invective, Deakin retaliated with a rapier thrust that passed into folklore. At the end of a routine speech he referred briefly to Hughes, and smiled to onlooking journalists as if anticipating their stunned reaction to the uncharacteristic remark he was about to make:

I do not propose to reply to him except by saying he presents to you as undignified a spectacle as does the ill-bred urchin whom one sees dragged from a tart-shop kicking and screaming as he goes.

In conclusion, Watson and his pioneering government did well. Their administration was creditable, and so was the way they left office. Their performance ensured that Australia's Labor Party continued to progress much more rapidly than any equivalent overseas party.

We should remember Chris Watson, rescue him from obscurity, and it is appropriate that we have commemorated the recent centenary of his government, the first national labour government in the world.



Question — I was puzzled at your comments about Chris Watson going from Melbourne to Sydney by train for weekends. I would have thought he would have stayed in Melbourne, but am I not correct to say that he represented a rural seat that was actually on the railway line? The railway line passed through the rural seat. So why did he live in Sydney?

Ross McMullin — He and his wife lived in Sydney. I talked about Watson's early departure from politics as a relatively young man and it's been said that his wife's displeasure at the extent of his absences from the matrimonial home while parliament was in Melbourne contributed heavily to that early departure from politics. She wasn't happy.

Question — Can you enlighten us on the history of why the Labor Party when it came to choosing its name, elected to choose the American spelling of 'or' and not the British spelling of 'our'. I always thought it must have been some precedent, but if they were the first labour party in the world and the labour party tends to be tagged as being anti-American compared to other parties, I was a bit surprised as to that being the case.

Ross McMullin — I happen to have written the official centenary history of the ALP, which came out in 1991, and this was something I had to grapple with for that project. I ended up putting in the preface that in my view it was a pretty haphazard sort of an outcome in that 'labor' and 'labour' were both used freely for at least the first decade. The main supreme decision-making body, now called National Conference, then was called Federal Conference. I ended up coming to the view that the way the spelling of 'Labor Party' was consolidated had more to do with the chap who ended up being in charge of printing the federal conference report than any other reason. I think in 02 it was 'or' in the federal conference report, in 05 it was 'our', in 08 it was 'our', in 1912 it was 'or', and from then on it was 'or', so the person who did the 1912 booklet won the day. That's all I've been able to come up with.

Question — Do you think the present ALP will ever change its name? You said that Watson was the first labour, or ALP, leader, but we were talking then about working-class people. When you consider that an ex-Labor prime minister is a multi-millionaire, do you feel that consensus is that the political ground has shifted?

Ross McMullin — Well clearly since 1996 there has been a big shift in relation to where consensus is and what is the middle ground, but as to the Labor Party, the marketing of politics has become more and more ubiquitous. We hear reference to 'the brand', and I would have thought there was a great deal of benefit to the brand of the party that is represented by the people we are talking about for them to retain the name 'labor'. So I don't think it's likely that it will change in the short term, no.

Just an elaboration on the first question. I agree that it's true Watson had a country seat in the NSW parliament before federation, but I think all the time when he was an MP, even when his electorate was outside Sydney, he lived in Sydney. Might not get away with it today!

Question — Would you like to comment on why Australian labour had achievement and prominence in the 1900s ahead of comparable societies, both federally and in the states?

Ross McMullin — Concerning the origins of the party, 1891 was a dramatic year. Earlier than that there had been some MPs elected to colonial parliaments with some sort of working class affiliation, but in 1891 there was a dramatic strike in Queensland involving bush workers and bush labourers, and the response to that by the Queensland government that represented the pastoral employers was so repressive and brutal that representatives of the labour movement decided that setting up in unions wasn't enough and that they had to have people in parliament. Other things were happening in other colonies, but that generated a lot of impetus to get Labor into the parliament. Compared to say England, which is the logical comparison, there's often a focus on the different class structure in England compared to here. Here it is more a case that Jack is as good as his master and I think that sort of sentiment came into it as well.

Question — You talk a lot about what has been the first Labor government in the world, but of course there were radical Liberal governments in countries such as New Zealand before that time. My question is, is there anything noticeably different about a Labor government being a party with a strong connection to organised labour, and the activities of the radical Liberal government, such as the government in New Zealand?

Ross McMullin — I think that once Australian labour had the numbers in parliament there was a difference. In 1910–13 the Fisher government did a lot. Watson by then was out of parliament. The ability of Watson in 1904 to do things legislatively was obviously limited by not having the parliamentary numbers. As for New Zealand, while there were some progressive initiatives introduced in New Zealand in the governments you are alluding to, I think that the Fisher government in 1910–13 had more radical credentials and achievements.