

# Mediaportal Report

01/02/2009

---

▶ **100 years of opposition to Labor**  
Sunday Canberra Times, 01/02/09, Sunday Focus, Page 25  
By: Norman Arbjorensen

Clip Ref: **00046711457**  
681 words



# 100 years of opposition to Labor

The year 1909 saw a sea change in Australian politics. **NORMAN ABJORENSEN** writes on the anniversary of the fusion of the non-Labor parties

**T**HERE was a time, hard as it might be to imagine, when the Australian Labor Party struck fear into the hearts of the establishment, and it is this very fear that has shaped the Australian political landscape to this day. This year marks the centenary of one of the truly seminal political events, and one of the least understood, when those sworn enemies, the Protectionists and the Free Traders, finally buried their bloodied hatchets to unite in common cause against the feared and rising Labor Party.

For much of the first decade of Australian federation, instability was the political norm; it was, as Alfred Deakin memorably described it, as though three cricket elevens had taken the field at the same time, with one of the three (Labor) playing sometimes with one side, sometimes with the other, and sometimes for itself.

It was thus little wonder that in the first nine years of the Commonwealth, seven ministries rose and fell along with five prime ministers: Edmund Barton, Alfred Deakin, Chris Watson, George Reid and Andrew Fisher.

For much of this period, the Protectionists, Free Traders and Labor attracted roughly equal support, and it was not until 1909 that the Protectionist Deakin achieved majority government after forging a reluctant alliance with Reid's Free Traders.

Thus the so-called Fusion, soon to be renamed the Liberal Party, came into being. Its genesis was clearly the rise of Labor, almost entirely at the expense of Deakin's

Protectionists, whom Labor had supported in exchange for concessions.

Deakin was more in sympathy with Labor than he was with the Free Traders, and he saw a natural alliance with the ALP, although he disdained the party discipline of Labor, especially the pledge that all Labor MPs signed committing them to support both the Labor platform and the decisions of caucus, whatever their personal inclinations. (Deakin conveniently overlooked the reason for the pledge: it was designed to stop people on his side of politics

offering inducements to Labor members to vote a certain way, as had happened in the colonial parliaments of the 1890s.)

The 1906 election had seen the first anti-Labor scare campaign at the national level, with Reid campaigning as an anti-socialist rather than a free trader. Within Deakin's own Protectionist ranks there was growing disquiet at the on-again, off-again alliance with Labor.

The political skids were already under Deakin and his Protectionists as a result of Labor's growing strength and the end of the fiscal

issue as a political hot spot. It was always a loose and fragile alliance, and hostility to the free trade doctrine was its only real common denominator. It had already started to fray towards the end of 1903 when the popular radical, Charles Kingston, left the government over its handling of an arbitration bill.

The great irony of Deakin's

making common cause with his erstwhile enemies was not lost on the man himself, and the marriage was by no means a joyous occasion. In Parliament Deakin's one-time ally, William Lyne,

angrily denounced Deakin as a Judas, prompting Labor's Billy Hughes to complain that the comparison slandered the disciple Lyne, along with three other Protectionists, declined to follow Deakin into the new party.

These events marked the beginning of the two-party system (or with the Country Party/Nationals a two-and-a-half party system that has endured for a century. While protectionism, a Deakin legacy, endured until the 1980s, the Fusion was the end of Deakin's early third-way experiment in social liberalism.

The early Liberal Party, which retained its name until 1917, and its successors – the Nationalists, the United Australia Party and the modern-day Liberal Party – all became essentially conservative parties. Just as the Protectionists were united by opposition to free trade, the conservatives for a century now have been united in opposition to Labor.

The Fusion certainly brought stability; it might also be argued that it also brought sterility, and with it a sharp reduction in the political possibilities for Australia.

**Norman Abjorensen teaches politics at the Australian National University. This article first appeared on *Inside Story* ([inside.org.au](http://inside.org.au)).**



  
back



Edmund Barton, Australia's first prime minister, with Protectionist Alfred Deakin.