

Post-election speech: George Reid, Opposition Leader (FT)

December 18, 1903

“It is impossible to speak of the general results of the election in some of the other States with any precision, but the result of my appeal to New South Wales has abundantly justified the attitude which I took up upon the fiscal question.

Our people have not yet become accustomed to the policy of heavy customs duties, and are, therefore, keenly alive to the injurious results of the protective tariff.

They have shown their feelings in an overwhelming and most convincing way.

When it is possible to go into the question of the exact numbers it will be seen that the traditional policy of the mother State was never as near the hearts of the people as on the present occasion.

The predominance of freetrade conviction in New South Wales is shown most strikingly by the figures, which are still incomplete, for the Senate election.

The three freetrade candidates, Messrs Neild, Pulsford, and Gray, have approached each their 100,000 votes, and the vote for the protectionist candidates, Messrs Collins and Cuneen, shows a wonderful gap of about 70,000.

Mr Griffith is, of course, closer to the three successful candidates, but then he represents the combined forces of protection and labour, because he was the nominee of the Protectionist Association and the labour bodies.

The fact that the freetrade voters have already cast a vote of about 25,000 more than the combined forces of protection and labour is another striking commentary upon the feelings of the people in our favour.

Some of our victories are really wonderful.

For instance, take the electorate of Cowper, which has, speaking generally, been the stronghold of protection and of the See influence.

Mr Francis Clarke is the strongest possible candidate that could be put up by the Deakin Government.

He was Ministerial Whip, and yet a gentleman, almost a stranger to the electorate, who didn't begin his canvass until a short few days before polling day, has come out on top of the poll by thousands of votes.

This is a truly remarkable performance.

Then take the candidature of Mr Longmuir against Mr Watson.

Mr Longmuir went up late in the day, and had very little assistance from headquarters, and yet he has fought a battle against the leader of the Labour party which I consider amounts to a revelation in what we can do in the electorate given a fair time for canvass.

I heartily congratulate Mr Longmuir upon his brilliant efforts.

I cannot sufficiently express my satisfaction at what seems to be the assured return of Mr Lonsdale for New England.

I received a telegram from him this morning to the effect that the seat might almost be said to be secure then, and I know Mr Lonsdale is a very cautious man, and feel convinced it will be found he has beaten Mr Sawers.

I do not know a case of greater self-sacrifice than that of Mr Lonsdale.

He is a man of very limited means.

He gave up a certain income and a certain seat in the State Parliament, and faced an expensive campaign over an enormous area, with many influences against him.

Mr Lonsdale is a man of real good qualities, one of the best types of the real working man, and I shall be delighted to welcome him as a member of the party in the Federal Parliament.

The great triumph of my friend Mr Wilks in Dalley was only what I expected from his immense popularity and most creditable political record.

In the Darling Mr Acton, late in the field, is fighting another stanch battle for the party.

He is a speaker of great ability and has a political future before him.

Colonel Onslow is another of those men of whom we may well be proud.

He acted in the most chivalrous way when Mr Kelly was selected over his head for Wentworth electorate, and took on a very hard battle for the Gwydir, with a very limited opportunity of canvassing the electorate.

Although he is apparently defeated, the fact that he has polled over 3000 votes shows the rapid progress which he must have made.

Coming to the Hunter electorate, I am very pleased that Dr Liddell, the Mayor of West Maitland, whom I persuaded to come out on our behalf, has won such a decisive victory, securing nearly twice as many votes as his opponent, the Mayor of East Maitland.

In the case of Lang again we have every cause for satisfaction.

Mr Johnson, the selected candidate, who greatly impressed me by his fair-minded conduct throughout, has won a splendid victory for the party against great obstacles.

I trust he will long remain the representative of that great Liberal stronghold.

The victory of my old friend Mr Sydney Smith for Macquarie is another of the brilliant features of the campaign.

Mr Sandford and his friends must have spent an enormous amount of money.

The Federal electorate is composed of four State electorates, each of which returns a protectionist member.

It is a great mining and farming constituency, and they have had the good sense to prefer their invaluable representative, Mr Sydney Smith, to the gentleman from Lithgow, who has so keen an appetite for prosecuting his business at the public expense.

I allude, of course, to Mr Sandford.

The position of Mr Bowles in the poll at Newcastle is another revelation.

Mr Watkins is a gentleman for whom I have very great personal respect.

In fact, I do not think there is very much difference between us except on the fiscal question, but he has always been a staunch protectionist, and therefore I have always been a staunch opponent of his.

I am consequently glad that our cause has made such striking headway in the electorate, giving us as it does every prospect of a victory on the next occasion.

Mr Bruce Smith's victory in the Parkes electorate is also very gratifying to the party, for he has come out of the contest with many thousands of votes to spare.

Mr Cook's great victory in Parramatta was, of course, what everyone expected.

The contest which is going on in Riverina between Messrs Chanter and Blackwood is one of the very significant features of the present state of affairs.

Mr Blackwood is a squatter in a very large way in the district, and under ordinary circumstances would have had very little chance against Mr Chanter, who has been a power amongst the selectors of Riverina and the working classes for many years past.

Mr Blackwood has won golden opinions among the selectors and farmers of Riverina, so much so that he was their representative at the conference of farmers and settlers of New South Wales, held a few months ago at Narrandera.

Mr Blackwood has made a splendid fight, and it really seems as if, when all the returns are in, he will be found to be the member for Riverina.

I would rejoice at any such result, because Mr Chanter has been one of our most bigoted opponents.

Mr Willis's victory for the Robertson was a most satisfactory and decisive one.

He is a gentleman who has made rapid progress in the estimation of his fellow members.

The victory of Mr Edwards for South Sydney is certainly the most striking and hardest-fought victory in the metropolitan area.

There is no doubt that South Sydney is strongly a labour constituency, and the fact that Mr Edwards polled a majority of something like 2000 votes over Mr Riley is one of the most impressive of all the results.

Very much the same may be said for my friend Mr Conroy, who is such a staunch fighter, and who has won another magnificent victory.

His victory at the previous election was against tremendous odds and I did not feel very anxious about him: indeed, he did not, so far as I know, ask a single member of the party to help him, but fought his own battle, and with a result which I must confess is even more decisive than I could have expected.

I was very pleased also with the victory of Mr Hughes over Dr Warren by 4000 votes in West Sydney.

Dr Warren is one of my most bitter opponents, and is a very hot protectionist, while Mr Hughes is one of the most able of the freetrade party in Australia.

Mr Kelly, the successful candidate for Wentworth, has far exceeded even the high expectations which I had formed concerning him.

His victory, by a majority of 8000 votes, over the son of one of our best-loved and most distinguished statesmen, is another of the grand triumphs of the campaign.

As for my own electorate, I am sure my friend, Mr Austin Chapman, must be very grieved that his prediction expressed in the Melbourne "Age", that he was afraid Mr Reid would "slip in" between Mr Thrower and Mr Peel, has been abundantly justified.

My majority has, in fact, enabled me to "slip in" very comfortably with a vote of 8000 odd against the 700 of Mr Peel and the 4000 of Mr Thrower.

The same sapient Minister expressed his opinion in Melbourne that Mr Deakin's visit to Sydney had worked a wonderful change in the opinions of the people, and if he could only come back and give one more speech the Government would sweep every electorate in the State.

Mr Chapman may prove a distinguished soldier in the course of time in his new sphere, but as a prophet he has been a somewhat amusing failure.

There is not a place in which Mr Deakin has spoken where the freetrade candidate has not been returned by an overwhelming majority.

In addition to that, although Mr Deakin spoke in three different places in New England, he has succeeded in losing that seat for his party.

That noble chameleon, the State Attorney-General, Mr B. R. Wise, was also rather amusing on the night before the poll.

I understand that he declared that 'the reign of Reidism' was over, and that a glorious sunshine – wise or otherwise – was about to glow on the political atmosphere.

The results show that there never was a period in my political career when I commanded a more magnificent and more general degree of support from the electors of the mother State.

As I told many of my friends when they were referring to Mr Wise and his appeals on behalf of the protectionist candidates, he has really been by his opposition to our candidates one of the elements which have secured their return.

He is so generally and so thoroughly disliked, not personally, but for his extraordinary hardihood in playing fast and loose with great principles under the spur of personal ambition, which seems to have a range reaching even as far as services to the Commonwealth in the mother country, that his advocacy of a cause must have injured it.

It would be a sinister event in our political history if Mr Wise's services on the party platform, I was going to say, should be rewarded by the Federal Government: but if the Federal Government knows as much about the effect of his appearance upon their chances of success as I do the word 'reward' would certainly be a misnomer.

But be that as it may, it is inconceivable that Mr Wise should be a candidate for the position of High Commissioner, because it is inconceivable that if he has any such ambition he would so openly seek to win an office which should be filled by a man representing the whole of the community. To win by hanging on the coattails of the Federal Government an office which should certainly not be filled by anyone who does not command the goodwill and confidence of the whole community, which Mr Wise clearly does not, is, I say, inconceivable.

Since the State Government have entered so actively, especially in the person of Mr Wise, into federal politics, I hope to be able to make a return visit when the next State general election comes on, when I shall endeavour to repay all the compliments in the area of State politics which have been bestowed upon me by the Government in the federal arena.

With reference to the position of affairs in Victoria, we have evidently made great advances.

One of our great drawbacks was the dearth of suitable candidates, but we have returned one stronger to the Federal Parliament, and two stronger if Mr Hirsch wins Wimmera, for which he is making a wonderful fight.

Of course, in Victoria, where they have had protection so long, the protective tariff of the Federal Government did not produce any obvious effect on the people.

They have been accustomed to the heavy burden for so many years.

But we can see, I think, the beginning of a movement – which is certainly slow in its pace – which at the next election will pretty well make us sure of a better advance than we have made there for the past few years.

In Tasmania it was a stroke of bad luck for us that Mr Cameron was beaten by Sir Philip Fysh by 21 votes in 8000 polled.

Considering the prestige which Sir Philip enjoyed as Federal Minister, Mr Cameron's position on the poll is infinitely more creditable to him than is that of Sir Philip Fysh to that gentleman.

I am extremely pleased that the grand old veteran, Sir Edward Braddon, has been returned again, and that Mr McWilliams has been returned for the Franklin.

In Queensland the fiscal question has not played any part in the general election worthy of mention, but I am happy to say that we have three staunch freetraders in the labour members returned; and I am glad to see also that Mr Edwards has been returned for the Oxley by a large majority.

In Queensland it was a great blow to us to find that the old member for Capricornia, Mr Paterson, who was as good and loyal a supporter of mine as any man, would have been compelled through a serious illness to withdraw from the contest.

There is no doubt that we lost the seat through his retirement.

Although it must be admitted that Mr Curtis stepped into the breach with great courage and made a great fight, and I am very sorry that we were unable to assist him during this campaign.

I regret that in South Australia, Mr Charleston for the Senate and Mr V. L. Solomon for the House of Representatives have failed to secure election.

In Western Australia the Labour party seems to have made tremendous headway.

Two of the five members returned are revenue tariffists, though unfortunately we have lost Mr W. E. Solomon, the old member for Fremantle, a most estimable gentleman, and Mr Kirwan, who was member for Kalgoorlie in the last Parliament, and who earned the highest esteem from the whole of the members of the Federal Parliament as a promising politician.

So far as one can judge from the results, the Opposition will be stronger than the Government in the House of Representatives, and also in the Senate, but the Labour party have undoubtedly made a number of very striking gains in the States other than New South Wales.

This will make the Government even more abjectly dependent that ever upon the Labour party for their existence.

I fancy the one man in Australia who will feel best pleased with the course he took will be Sir Edmund Barton – firstly because the vote in the Hunter points very clearly to his defeat there, and, further, because if he had remained in the Federal Parliament his prospects would, I am sure, have been anything but pleasant to him.

It has, of course, been necessary for me to refer to Sir Edmund in the course of this political campaign, but now that the fight is over he may well be left to the serenity and seclusion of the high and honourable position in which he finds himself.

I would like, in conclusion, to thank the electors of East Sydney for their further and crowning proof of their continued confidence and support.

I had a small band of unselfish and splendid men working for me, for whose kindness I feel the utmost gratitude.”

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