

Policy Launch Speech: Alfred Deakin, Prime Minister (PROT)

Alfred Hall, Ballarat, 17 October 1906

“I appear before you as a liberal protectionist (applause) — a party which has had an honourable record in this and other States, which is now establishing an Australian authority and influence; a party which has never lost its identity, although, during the recent Parliament, it has been subjected to a severe strain.

When, owing to the existence of the three independent parties, a time for choice came, there were some who with me consented, under the faith of a written pledge, to assist Mr. Reid; and when he deserted and betrayed us we joined with those who supported us in undertaking a task that was not of our seeking, and which cast upon us the most serious responsibility.

Since then we have had the support, in a general sense, of the Labour party, and that has enabled us to accomplish the work which I shall detail to you. Our arrangement with them lasted for the Parliament, and ends with the Parliament, and we now resume our original position as an absolute independent party, without engagement, public or private, expressed or implied, to anything else except the policy which I shall announce.

The position of the Liberal protectionists is not to be gathered, except by way of contradiction, from the criticism of our adversaries. You have recently been told in this hall that I am a great socialist. You have also been told by an equally eminent critic that I am the greatest enemy of socialism to be found in the State. I was not alluding to this particularly to this eminent person. Both gentlemen are hopelessly and absolutely in error, although there is some justification for the misconception upon this point.

What you call sitting on a fence is more politely called, in the language of the Continent, the party of the centre, for we stand between the freetrade reactionaries, on the one hand, and the socialistic extremists on the other. The freetrade reactionaries endeavour to deprive us of our moderate supporters by terrifying them with the imminent danger of socialism.

The socialist extremists try to capture our radical members by terrifying them with the extreme toryism of our supporters. And we occupy the position of standing between these parties, and keep our hold upon the practical section of this community. We shall be judged, not by our professions, but by our performances.

The work we have done in the past two sessions establishes a marvellous record. One which we will contrast either in quantity or quality with the best that has been done since the Commonwealth was constituted. When we took the reins of power it was in the face of the solemn declaration tabled in Parliament that this Legislature was capable of no more useful work. That has remained as a confession of failure.

There is no one as willing to see our achievements buried or forgotten, and no one has a greater interest in that than my friend Mr. Reid, who has talked more and promised more and performed less than any man in Australia. Quite recently he accuse me of a

waste of time. I have been where my duty calls me – in my place at Parliament – and during the last two sessions have passed two score Acts of Parliament, and during the session just closed I have never missed a single sitting. It was my duty. In the session there were 84 divisions, and Mr. Reid voted in four. He had the luck to get three in one day, and the fourth on the next. (Laughter.)

He has perorated in Queensland, in New South Wales, and South Australia, and now he is perorating in Victoria; but work he did not and vote he did not. If I wanted a certificate to the fact that the work we have been doing has been beyond successful challenge I would point to the fact that the leader of the Opposition never appeared to challenge it.

I can assure you that even Mr. Reid's presence could not have added anything to the systematic method in which his party carried out their orders, "Obstruct all you can and mutilate at every opportunity." Mr. Reid's record in 1904, when he was in power, was one bill, to which he contributed four clauses, which we were able to adopt. Judge him by his works – judge us by ours.

Before I commence this tale, allow me to admit once more that the Liberal protectionists did not accomplish it alone. We had, in accordance with a public undertaking by resolution, not only the general but generous support from the Labour party. Individually, their members voted against us constantly, and at times the whole body of them voted against us – and they always found the Opposition anxious to enter into an alliance with them for that purpose.

They defeated several measures upon which we set great store, but they did nothing they were not entitled to. They treated us well, and no man could have treated us better than the Honorable Mr. Watson.

How is it that after working with the Labour party in the House you find us not only separated, but absolutely at daggers drawn? Here is the situation which I described to you when I addressed you before. With the men of experience, training, and knowledge, who represent Labour interests in Parliament, we have been able to work, but with the machine outside which dictates to them, we have not, and could not find it possible to work.

The difficulty arises not with the men who are handling public affairs, but with the men who want to handle our existence as liberal protectionists, we are bound to protest against this method of controlling votes in our Parliament, and this method of forcing on programmes of remote and undecipherable aim. The battle begins with Labour leagues on one flank, and the Sydney league on the other flank.

Sydney's assistance, guidance, direction, and doctrines are to be found in every corner of Victoria to-day, and in every State of the union. There is the most lavish expenditure of money upon hired agents, printing, publishing and every form of electioneering machinery. We have to free the money power on the one hand the sorried ranks of our labour friends on the other. Without organisation, and without funds, we are appealing to the judgment of the community to prevent us being crushed between these two conflicting powers.

He tells me that his coffers had very little in them at the beginning, and they have now run dry. We therefore appeal to the section of the community which puts Australia first and theories and the doctrines next, and which finds its guidance in the answer to

the question, What does Australia need to-day? Taxation we must have, but it must be applied with the greatest caution for the necessities of the Government.

The Liberal Protectionist placed before the country a practical policy of progress not governed by shibboleths, party cries, or faction interests. Unfortunately, the Commonwealth has not reached the stage when, industrially or politically, the community is stable. To endeavour to obscure these real, vital interests, and substitute vague, immeasuring cries, is to endeavour to mislead the people, which can never succeed if they are the men who make the Liberal party of Victoria and other States. We ask for the meaning under these catch-words.

Turning to the programme of the Reid party, I ask what substance has it, and say it is a mere vague, empty, illusory series of negatives, without proper advantage to the country. That party seeks to cover intentions it dare not disclose. It is not a programme that Mr. Reid discloses – it is a panic; and such a state of panic has he reached that if a cow chased him out of a paddock he would accuse her of socialism.

We may look at the moderate working and humanitarian sentiment of the Labour manifesto. Contrast the attractions offered you with the practical work that has to be done. We ask you not to pursue these often admirable, but utterly unattainable ideas of the Labour party, and sacrifice the work of to-day, and thus risk the prosperity of the country at a time when it is trembling in the balance. I sympathise with their generous Ideals, but public business has to be conducted on business lines.

Now, coming to our record, I regret you will find yourselves represented by candidates elected by a minority of those going to the poll. The measure we drafted last session, which would have given you a second vote to enable the man who took a seat to hold it by the consent of the majority. We had to fight the anti-socialists on one side, and our Labour friends on the other.

In five years 186,000 persons had entered the Commonwealth, and only 1000 were submitted to any test. We have passed an Act for returning kanakas from Queensland and making provisions for their return to the land of their birth. In this matter the Commonwealth has discharged its duty to the electors who gave their mandate of a white Australia, and also those kanakas who came in under agreement to the northern state.

We have pushed on with the question of the acquisition of the northern territory. We have made New Guinea a territory of the Commonwealth, and established a Government there on progressive lines.

We shall take over Norfolk island as soon as certain small legal difficulties can be settled. We have taken every step in our power to reasonably extend the influence of Australia throughout the Pacific, and to prepare for that time, when, by the splendid enterprise of the United States, the Panama Canal will be completed. When the commerce of the world goes straight across, the Union Jack will be represented, and, if possible assisted by us in the southern seas.

We have called for tenders and entered into a mail contract admitted to be the most advantageous of any entered into by any part of Australasia.

The year 1905-6 marked the most prosperous year of the Commonwealth and perhaps the most prosperous year Australasia ever saw. The records of this year are of the same character, and promise to go as high or higher.

A Liberal protectionist Government has not struck terror into the capitalists of Europe. It has not impeded the progress of this country. On the contrary, the Commonwealth has revenue of 12 million. The Federation last year paid back in the State Treasuries £330,000. Up to June 30 next it is estimated that it will have returned to them moneys which the Commonwealth had a legal right to append on its own purposes amounting to £5,500,000.

Our figures of population earnings and savings, wealth and industry surpass those of both Canada and South Africa, though they are trumpeted all over the world.

One of the principles laid down in 1903 by us was that we would endeavour to act in all matters in conjunction with the States. Particularly have we endeavoured to accomplish this in matters of finance. The States owe to-day £235,000,000, and compete against each other on the London market. This, of course, is a time of magnificent prosperity, in which the States will find it easy, perhaps, to borrow. These times cannot be expected to be absolutely permanent, and the competition against each other becomes a serious factor.

We have endeavoured to bring about such an adjustment of Commonwealth and State finances as would enable us to assume the whole burden of these loans, because we have it on the best authority in London that by redeeming those loans and having a single Commonwealth stock we would save the people of Victoria £6000, and we would save the States as a whole £26,000,000.

That can only be done by a limitation of borrowing, which would be good for Australia, as well as for Australian stocks. Although loans may be necessary from time to time, we are reaching a stage when we can find a large share, if not the major share, of the capital needed in our undertakings. We introduced two bills last session, which would have involved two alterations of the Constitution. One was to enable us to take over all the debts of the States, and the other was to enable us to impose special duties of customs and exercise with the intention of applying them to the beginning of Federal old-age pensions.

Unfortunately these bills failed – in one case by a single vote – because of the resistance of the Opposition, which in both Houses fought the proposal, without which the Commonwealth cannot expect, during the next Parliament, to be in sufficient funds to face the question of old age pensions unless some agreement with the States of an exceptional character can be entered into. In the meantime what is there of socialism or anti-socialism in this? Why should these measures be blocked when before they could be assented to by the Governor-General they would have to be given the approval of yourselves, the people of Australia?

There was no justification for intervening between Parliament and the people, or preventing the questions being put to you.

This is the key to the whole of the methods of the Opposition during the whole of the session. If the recent interstate conference in Melbourne had been held three months earlier I believe we would have forced our bill through. They are to meet again in February next, and I propose again to ask them to join us in devising a scheme to get these special duties by State action since the Opposition shut the door upon Federal action. It is, perhaps, in a slender hope, a difficult task, but we mean to attempt it.

At this stage the fire alarm rang, and a number of people left the hall.

There are at present proceeding important negotiations regarding the use of the Murray waters which the Commonwealth is watching with interest and hopefulness. We hope to be able to act with the States in this great prospect. We have worked with New South Wales in regard to the capital site, and we are working with the States regarding the electoral laws.

We have made a proposal regarding the Northern Territory to South Australia. We are ambitious to people the unpeopled shores which are a great danger topographically, and we are desirous of connecting them with the south and ourselves with the west by two trunk lines which will bind us together as one great whole. Can you expect the people to hold Australia unless we bring together all those parties in which white settlement is possible, and link them together with that body of men who will give us the citizen soldiers which we have to depend upon for our very existence in time of trial?

We are working cordially with Queensland with regard to the deportation of kanakas, and have put Tasmania upon the same footing in telegraphic matters as the other States. It is for the liberal protectionist Government to bring the States and producers together to act for the common benefit and development.

Coming to the subject which is the very heart and kernel of the principles of our party. In 1903, in regard to the fiscal situation, I said of the present tariff: "This is not a protectionist tariff, to which we have been accustomed in Victoria, and for which we hoped. Some industries have been destroyed by this tariff, others have been injured, and many have not been assisted.

I pleaded for fiscal peace as against a declaration of fiscal war then made by the leader of the Opposition, but went on to add those significant words, which Mr. Reid has never yet quoted, although he had quoted scores of times the words all round them:- "If the tariff is torn open we shall, of course, employ every means we possess to repair the omissions and mistakes in the present schedule."

Mr. Reid said that when he appointed the Tariff Commissions he tore open the fiscal question: that he was at liberty to do it, and that our hands were tied by our declaration of fiscal peace. That declaration was strictly limited to the time necessary to discover the defects in the tariff to begin with, and in the next place conditioned by the words I have just read. Mr. Reid appointed the Tariff Commission, and we have taken some advantage of it to repair the omissions and mistakes. Only three reports of that commission were received in sufficient time in he dealt with.

Two others, which were not unanimous and dealt with contentious subjects, reached the Government only last month. There was no prospect of dealing with them : but even if all other business had been sacrificed to them there were some 35 more. This question brings us from the present to the immediate future.

The leader of the Opposition created the Tariff Commission, which has presented five out of thirty-five or forty reports. A great many of them are understood to be in draft by the chairman, but not yet approved by the commission. They must be ready for presentation early next year. It is said the Government is so devoted to protection that it is going out of its way in order to force the question on – but the question was started before we came into office.

Now the bill has become due Mr. Reid will have to meet his share of that bill, which he drew on futurity, little thinking that the question which he raised by the appointment of the commission would be ripe for settlement, so ripe that it could not be set aside. It would be criminal to set it aside. You must never forget the cardinal fact that the Tariff Commission will be knocking at the door of the future Parliament as soon as it assembles. Australia is faced with the fiscal issue in its most practical shape through the action of the leader of the Opposition.

The question arises then, who is to deal with the questions involved? Are they to be in the hands of timid protectionists or free-trade reactionaries or in the hands of men who place Australia and Australian industries first? When I entered into an agreement with Mr. Reid it contained the condition that he with his half – and – half Government was to announce its fiscal policy before May last. It was because of his attempt to trap the protectionists by breaking that pledge and obtaining a dissolution of Parliament that would have thrown his pledge three years beyond that date : It was because of that we said he was breaking his bond, and we washed our hands of him and his tactics.

At various places around here Mr. Reid has said that his policy is to sink the fiscal issue altogether; but why has he not come here?

I think he will be a long way after me. What has Mr. Reid got heavy enough to sink the fiscal issue? He has said that if there are anomalies and hardships they will be removed, provided they do not conflict with his principles. But his principle is to set every industry before Australian industries. You can understand why the timid protectionists do not like to recognize Mr. Reid as their leader; they follow someone else, or they follow Mr. M'Lean, and Mr. M'Lean follows Mr. Reid.

It is a case of follow-your-leader, and the end of the chain is Mr. Reid. Mr. Reid is going to hold the New South Wales free-trade majority and the dummy protectionists that lock themselves in and hand the him the key. This Commonwealth has to decide what we shall do with this fiscal issue. That cannot be sunk, but will float very high next session.

We propose to deal with the fiscal issue on lines of scientific national protection . Scientific because it will be a careful adjustment to meet the needs of each industry. A national policy because it will take into account all classes of the community. We have introduced on to the Statute Book the new protection. We have not simply protected the maker, but have provided that the wages must be paid. We have fixed the price to the protect the buyer. This I call scientific national protection. It is not protection for a class or section, but a protection with benefits assured to the whole community.

We hope to see Australian labour and capital united in building up Australian industries, to supply the Australian markets, to protect ourselves against the tyrannies of American trusts. There are not many combinations in Australia, but they are growing.

We have taken steps to enable us to free ourselves of trusts and fight combines, and beat off such foreign invaders. A leading man of the other side of the world, writing to me, says that in that Australia has taken a step in legislation that all the world must follow. That is neither socialism nor anti-socialism: but the bill was carried clause by clause against the opposition of the anti-socialists.

We had more fighting to do with them at every step on the preferential trade proposals with New Zealand. The Opposition did not oppose the treaty with South Africa, because it was made on the South African principle of reduction of duties, but we got it through remember, not because it was a good treaty or because it was a splendid business bargain, or because it was another hand across the sea to South Africa, as well as New Zealand, but because it reduced duties. To reduce duties they would vote themselves black in the face.

We gave an unconditional preference to the mother country, and linked it with preference to British ships. It might have been thought that we would have got some consideration from the Opposition. Not so: we fought again at every turn. That is the sentiment of the Opposition in regard to the endeavour to multiply the commercial relations between the different parts of the Empire and the mother country. Preferential trade was one of the greatest features of our programme in 1903. Who blocked us? The Opposition.

The Labour party introduced a qualification in the bill, requiring ships to be manned by white seamen. We pointed out that this would have to be dealt with in the Navigation Bill next session, and could be discussed at the Navigation Conference next year. It made it impossible of administration by the Customs.

However, they put it in. The only significance of it is this, that when it got to the senate the Opposition rose as one man against this proposal. Subsequently we received a cable message from the Board of Trade, stating that the treaty obligations forbade any advantage to British ships. We proposed to take out the preference to British ships, which would have taken with it any proposal as to seamen. The Opposition saw a chance of hanging up the bill and voted for the retention not only of the British ships, but the white seamen clauses, against which they had fought tooth and nail.

Am I wrong when I say that their proper title is not anti-socialist, but anti-New Zealand, anti-British, anti-Australian?

The Commerce Act is a most necessary and useful measure, and yet the Opposition fought it clause by clause, and line by line. The Bounties Bill was finally killed by the Opposition in the Senate. That is the record the Opposition wishes to hide. In seeking to develop the iron industry, one party against two, we have been thrice defeated.

The iron industry must be developed by bounties, by duties, or by other means. We have a natural store of iron in every State of the Commonwealth. We shall ask your authority by a determined and this time successful effort to give the iron industry its first start, which among our measures is a socialistic proposal for which this Government is responsible.

I thought perhaps someone would mention the union label. We drafted the Trade Marks Bill, and there was no union label in it. The union label was added in the Senate, when Mr. Reid was in power, in the American form. Mr. Reid did not resign or abandon the bill. He was questioned about it. He did not denounce it, but said that it was foreign to the character of the bill.

When we came into office the bill came to us from Mr. Reid's Attorney-General, with the American union label in it. Now he states that we are responsible for putting it in. We took the American label and reshaped it to accord with English and Australian laws – we made the American label into an Australian label, and then Mr. Reid began to denounce it, and he has denounced it ever since, though it is a milder union label

than he ventured to adopt. If he comes to Ballarat., and endeavours to make you believe that the future of society hung upon the defeat of the label, ask him : “If you thought Australia’s destiny imperilled by this horrible proposal, why did you not lay our bill aside when it was much worse, or else why did you not spend eight or ten hours in the train to come and vote against it in Parliament?”

It may seem a professional matter, but I may mention that we have added two Judges to the High Court.

A voice: You have given billets to your pals!

I have parted with two of the very ablest supporters any Minister ever had and that in a time when I am necessarily compelled to risk both constituents, which they could have won with lifting a hand with new and untried candidates. This measure relieves the pressure of work upon the Judges, and is a measure of economy.

We have also passed three measures enabling inventors, designers, and owners of trade marks to register throughout Australia, and the registration holds throughout the civilized world.

Next year, after the navigation conference in England, we shall be passing a Navigation Act which will enable us to take control of our costal trade and shipping and providing for those engaged in it. This bill has been the subject of a commission and when approved, as I trust it will be we hope to see throughout the Empire the merchant shipping law brought into line. Then we have taken immigration from being an academic subject, and made it an actuality. Parliament has granted a sum with which we will make a start in Great Britain.

A voice: And what about our people here?

I asked the States that so much land should be available first of all for Australians, and then, after the Australians demand was supplied, for immigrants. Look at the millions of acres of land.

A voice: With no water.

I recommend water. Few people have spent more of their lives in trying to extend the water supply.

A voice: And you cost Victoria a nice penny!

I speak of land well supplied with water in a healthy climate for a white population. There are tens of thousands of acres locked up, and put to inferior uses which should be the home of settlers.

A voice: What about a land tax?

Every State has its land tax., and if there is a land tax which is a mockery it is that of Victoria; but I understand that it is about to be amended. I am a State land taxer from head to heel, but this Government makes no proposal for the addition of a Federal land tax. We are waiting on the States for the land, and responsibility rests with them.

At this stage I have little time to deal with questions of defence. We have been in power a little more than 13months, and we can point to an increase in every branch of the land force. We feel that the time has come when in addition to our land forces we must have floating defences. I have recently spoken on the subject of naval defence.

Our plan will be submitted to you in more detail when I speak again, or when the Minister of Defence addresses his constituents. We hope to see our land and naval

forces brought to such a stage of equipment that Australia will be able to hold her own if the day of trouble should come. This is not a light matter. Regarded from the standpoint of finance it would mean an expenditure of from one and a quarter to one and a half million pounds sterling a year, and my colleague will be engaged for some time in revising the defence expenditure in order to make as many economies as possible.

The question of old-age pensions is also complicated by financial relations. It will mean an expenditure of from one and a quarter to one and a half millions a year, and through we show a surplus of half a million this year that will not go far for old-age pensions and naval defence. In the next Parliament we hope to introduce measures for uniformity of laws in Australia dealing with companies, banking and insurance.

We will protect our people from being exploited by foreign companies. We also desire that we shall not continue to have six laws of marriage and divorce in Australia, but one law to have effect throughout the Commonwealth, to be more equitable to the weaker sex. These are great social questions.

We have power with respect to old-age pensions, and marriage and divorce, and trust we will exercise it without unnecessary delay. I think I have disposed of the charges that we have been idle during the past two sessions.

One important thing we did was to pass Standing Orders to restrain the abuse of wasting time. But for this, obstructionists would not have allowed us to do so much business. We are continuing the programme of 1903, repeated in 1905. We see the multiplication of population, creation of fair conditions of labour, and the establishment of all possible Australian industries.

We will give encouragement by legitimate duties and fair bounties and protection against trust invasion and by any other measure necessary in order to hold the scales between the great mass who cannot protect themselves and the wealthy trusts likely to exploit us unless held back by the strong arm of the law. We will propose to be the liberal protectionists we have also ways been, and we say to you that this is practical legislation we put before you as a policy, and no mere figure of speech.

We look forward with anxiety to see the action of those liberal protectionists now associated with their absolute enemy, the free-trade reactionary Opposition leader. Those who sink the fiscal issue sink the policy of bounties of preference, and closer relations with the mother country, and of other measures for the benefit of Australia.

To-night I deal with the record of work by which we ought to be judged, by which we shall be judged in the future, and by which we have the right to appeal to the electors to judge us now. Perorations I have nothing to do with to-night – only records. What the Opposition is going to do one knows beyond a few trumpety repeals of a few minor provisions of a few Acts.

To the electors I say, analyse the programmes before you; ask what are the records of the men who put them forward, what have they done, what are they doing, and what are they going to do? On none of those questions will you, after full consideration in respect of the liberal protectionists, be in any doubt as to what the answer must be.

A voice: What is to prevent you entering into an alliance with the Labour Party?

The Labour party has put forward a programme which, however humanitarian, is impracticable at the present time. I put forward side by side a practical programme.

How is it possible to act with a party which opposes us to-day practically in every constituency of Victoria, and practically in every constituency in Australia, and puts its members under the control of leagues which are injurious to the Labour party and also to the community. There are men in the Labour party capable not only of taking but of maintaining a high place in political life, were it not for this control.

Fully one-half and more of the Labour party are practically liberal protectionists down to the ground. It is not our fault that they are separated from us. They belong to an organisation that separates them from us.

They fight us, and we are bound to fight them when they fight us.”

Source: Compiled from The Sydney Morning Herald, 18 October 1906, page 7/8 and The Age.