

OF MEASURES AND MEN
The Victorian Country Party, 1917 to 1945

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with how the Country Party in Victoria from its formation in 1917 until 1945 differed from its counterparts in the other states and federally and formed alliances with the Labor Party to restrict the conservative parties (variously named) to the opposition benches. The often close cooperation of the non-Labor parties federally and in other states was rarely replicated in Victoria. The central argument of the thesis is that the ‘difference’ in the political behaviour of the agrarian party in Victoria was the product of five related factors. First, the harsh farming conditions in the Mallee and Wimmera regions often led farmers to adopt more political ‘radical’ stances (especially over wheat marketing) than elsewhere in Australia. Second, Victoria manifested a very high level of anti-Melbourne electoral malapportionment during the period under review, which aided the Country Party. Third, the local Labor Party had a prolonged gestation and was particularly weak, being unable to form a majority government until 1952. Fourth, the Liberal/Nationalist/United Australia Party in Victoria was notably conservative and was heavily influenced by Melbourne financial and Western District pastoral interests. Fifth, all the Victorian parties (including the Country Party) were highly schismatic which helped produce an unstable political environment in which minority parties could exercise influence beyond their parliamentary numbers or their voter support. Given these factors, it is not surprising that there was no majority government in Victoria between 1917 and 1952.

The central argument is expanded upon in the **Introduction** which analyses the theory and practice of minoritarianism and coalitionism.

Chapter 1 provides the history of the early development of the Country Party and deals with the interaction between achieving the objectives of the new party and the accommodation of the personalities and beliefs of those appointed and elected to achieve those objectives.

Chapter 2 deals with the early maturation phase of the Country Party and the consequent complications of the newly emerged three-party political system and the reactions by the established Labor and conservative parties to the infant Country Party.

The chapter also highlights the strains between the parliamentary party, the general party membership and the Central Council (the party's 'executive').

Chapter 3 concentrates on the division within the Country Party on whether to employ alliances to keep Labor or the Nationalists out of government. The reasons for the 1926 split and the creation of two Country Parties are analysed.

Chapter 4 examines the dependence of the Country Parties on electoral malapportionment for their existence and expansion.

Chapter 5 covers the lead-up to the Great Depression and the interaction between the federal and state governments' reactions to implementation of the Premiers' Plan. The new bonds between the non-Labor parties and the splits within Labor are examined.

Chapter 6 introduces a new major player, businessman A E Hocking, into Country Party politics and studies his influence on the party and his conflicts with Premier Albert Dunstan.

Chapter 7 deals with the 1935 Victorian election campaign and the installation of the first Country Party minority government supported by Labor and its subsequent performance.

Chapter 8 uses the early days of the UCP-Labor alliance to answer the question whether such arrangements can deliver much of the platforms of the two parties in the face of a hostile upper house of parliament and an antagonistic federal coalition government which included members of the UCP.

Chapter 9 addresses the continuing debate within the UCP regarding the relative benefits of minority and coalition governments and the clash between the federal and state parliamentary bodies which led to a split in the Victorian branch of the party. One issue explored is why the UCP was the only state branch so hostile to coalitions.

Chapter 10 reveals the importance of competing leadership and personalities in political arrangements, regardless of unity on policies, and how and why Premier

Dunstan campaigned for his preferred supporters against members of his own caucus, seemingly impervious to the consequences.

Chapter 11 analyses the impact of the Second World War on party relations in Victoria and the influence of federal alliances.

Chapter 12 considers the reunion of the two country parties and the political controversy over electoral malapportionment.

The **Conclusion** summarises the findings of the thesis and briefly discusses the political legacy of this period of Country Party dominance.

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Acknowledgements need to be extended to those who have assisted me directly and indirectly with this thesis.

Indirectly my family provided me with the inspiration and development on which the thesis topic rests. My widowed aunt, Florence Rodan, who raised me after I was orphaned at an early age, was active in the Victorian Country Party in the mid-1940s then the Labor Party through the 1950s after a short period as an independent. She encouraged me to be interested in politics and be active in the Labor Party. She was the twin sister of my father, Hamilton Lamb, MLA, and left me much of his writings and records. Also I was encouraged to study history by my late brother, Winston Lamb, BA (Hons) BEd (Melbourne), a secondary school history teacher with the Victorian Education Department. He was later senior examiner of history with the department and compiled and published several resource books for history students.¹ My sister, Professor Ainslie Lamb, AM, of Wollongong University, who also published,² was another immediate example to follow academically and practically.

Experience and contacts during my time in federal parliament also must be acknowledged as they contributed to my continuing interest and intimate knowledge of parliament and the relationship between the Labor Party and rural representatives of other parties. These periods emphasised the importance of the written media and party publications as a source of relevant information and opinion.

Since my decision in 2003 to undertake further university study, many academics have been central to my PhD candidature. Dr Dennis Woodward of Monash University advised me when I undertook my preparation for a MA Prelim. He taught me the importance of analysis and documentation while encouraging my narrative style. On his return from overseas, Dr Brian Costar assumed the role of my supervisor. He recommended, in light of my political experience, that I be examined as a possible PhD candidate. Before the panel could meet to determine this he moved to Swinburne University of Technology to become Professor of Victorian State Parliamentary

¹ *The Observers* and *The Vanguard*, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1969 and 1972

² Lamb, A and Littrich, J, *Lawyers in Australia*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2007

Democracy. I thank Dr Paul Strangio, Senior Lecturer in the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University, and others at Monash for persuading me to transfer to Swinburne to be with Professor Costar. Professor Costar supported my application to enrol as a PhD student and agreed with Dr Woodward that the original focus of my thesis be narrowed (see Preface) to an examination of the Victorian political parties between the two World Wars. Professor Costar's guidance and advice, his regular and painstaking comments and suggestions by telephone and email were greatly appreciated. As I was a distance student, he made time available to me on his visits to Canberra and when I attended Swinburne in Melbourne.

During the writing of this thesis I was indebted to the cooperation and generosity of the staff at the State Library of Victoria, the Victorian Parliamentary Library, the National Library and the Federal Parliamentary Library who directed and advised me on access to relevant periodicals, newspapers, books and other references. The University of Melbourne Library provided me with a copy of J B Paul's MA thesis, 'The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan,' which had restricted access. It proved to be one of the few publications on Dunstan until the timely publication of *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*.³

Thanks go to the head office of the National Party in Melbourne who forwarded their collection of bound issues of the *Farmers' Advocate* and the *Countryman* to the National Library, enabling me to have ready access to those publications in the newspaper public reading room.

Finally, a note of thanks to David Hudson at Swinburne who fulfilled the onerous task of editing the final manuscript.

Antony Lamb
Canberra
July 2009

³ Strangio, P and Costar, B (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by any other person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

David Hudson (Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology) edited this thesis. The editing addressed only style and/or grammar and not its substantive content.

Signed.....

Antony Lamb

Dated.....

ABBREVIATIONS

ACP	Australian Country Party
ACPA	Australian Country Party Association
AFFO	Australian Federal Farmers' Organization
ALP	Australian Labor Party
BEM	British Economic Mission
CP	Country Party
CPP	Country Progressive Party
FSA	Farmers' and Settlers' Association
KC	King's Counsel
LCP	Liberal Country Party
MHR	Member of the House of Representatives
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
MLC	Member of the Legislative Council
MP	Member of Parliament
POW	prisoner of war
PPA	Primary Producers' Association
PPU	Primary Producers' Union
SSB	State Savings Bank of Victoria
UAP	United Australia Party
UCP	United Country Party
VCP	Victorian Country Party
VFU	Victorian Farmers' Union

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PREFACE

This thesis was inspired by two things: first by Professor Geoffrey Blainey's 2001 Boyer Lecture *The Great Divide*¹ and second by the desire to learn more of the role of my father, Hamilton Lamb, MLA, in the Victorian Country Party during the premiership of Albert Dunstan 1935-45. In his lecture Blainey stated that 'country grievances are not simply economic: the grievances are also social and cultural ... more normal than abnormal over the last hundred years.' In his view, not enough had been written about the Country Party: 'It rarely appears in the history books. For that reason there is now a profound ignorance of the earlier periods of rural distress and rural protests.' Blainey also pointed out that 'the heartland of conservative rural Australia had at one time elected Labor candidates.' He may have been indirectly stressing that more has been written about Labor and the Liberal Party and its predecessors or thinking more of Victoria than other jurisdictions, as several histories of the Country Party have been written including B D Graham's *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, Don Aitkin's *The Country Party in New South Wales: A Study of Organisation and Survival*, Ulrich Ellis' *A History of the Australian Country Party* and Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward's *Country to National*. Recently published was another study of the party in New South Wales, *The Nationals* by Paul Davey.² As it approaches its centenary, an official history of the Victorian Country Party is yet to be written, but we do have access to J B Paul's Master's thesis 'The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan,' written nearly a half-century ago, and relevant chapters in *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*.³

The second motivation for this thesis was that originally I intended to combine the life and role of my father with the general relationship between Labor and the Country Party because of the parallels between his life and the emergence and development of the Country Party. Hamilton Lamb was elected to the Legislative Assembly for the seat of Lowan in the Wimmera in 1935, defeating a conservative United Country Party MP,

¹ G Blainey, *The Great Divide*, Boyer Lecture, Radio National, 25 November 2001, <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyers/stories/s420929.htm>>

² P Davey, *The Nationals: The Progressive, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919 to 2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006

³ P Strangio and B Costar (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006

and was instrumental in the formation of the Dunstan government. He was an agrarian radical and thereby found much in common with Labor, providing a bridge with that party, and accordingly was dubbed one of the ‘Mallee Hens.’ He later fell out with Dunstan on matters of principle involving the president of the Country Party, A E Hocking. He survived electoral retaliation by the Premier and then enlisted in the armed forces. He died on the Burma Railway in 1943, the only serving Australian parliamentarian to die in the Second World War. Two years later the Dunstan government collapsed. The thesis became too long and I have limited my father’s life story in it to his role in the Dunstan government. The biography will have to wait.

Politics is not confined to the houses of parliament nor elections; it is an ongoing and wider process. As John Tosh puts it:

as soon as it is conceded that politics is not only about personalities, but also about the clash of competing economic interests and rival ideologies, then the wider society outside the rarified atmosphere of parliament become critically important.⁴

Politics is about people, and any analysis of the working relationships between and within political parties must involve the ideals, motivations and ambitions of them in the context of the organisations to which they belong. Few people from the period are alive today and I have relied on historical sources, in particular, statements by the players concerned. Their own words speak better than an interpretation of their deeds. As Judith Brett says, ‘you cannot psycho-analyse the dead.’⁵

Conjecture can be displaced, however, by primary source material, including parliamentary debates and the metropolitan newspapers of the day, and particularly by party journals and publications. Brett warns us too that if we cannot interview the subjects we must remain alert that publicly available material may not be totally accurate nor are quotes always precise, especially books written in later years by non-participants. All must be taken and seen in context. This danger is mitigated by relying extensively on primary source material such as quotations and reports from *Labor Call*, *Liberal and Country Times*, *Farmers’ Advocate* and the *Countryman*. Minutes and records of the Victorian Farmers’ Union and the Victorian Country Party (Executive,

⁴ J Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, Longman, London, 1999, p. 74

⁵ J Brett (ed.), *Political Lives*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2002, p. iv

Central Council and Conferences) are crucial in the understanding of the party's reasoning, debate and development of the Victorian Country Party, so different politically from its counterparts in other states. Another advantage of drawing upon the party publications is the sense of immediacy it provides. I have tried to reinforce that immediacy through an appropriate narrative style. Due credibility must also be given to books written by those active during the period studied, such as Sir Earle Page's autobiography *Truant Surgeon*⁶ and F W Eggleston's *Reflections of an Australian Liberal*.⁷

It is inevitable that leading personalities such as Albert Dunstan, Earle Page, Robert Gordon Menzies, John McEwen, John Cain, Snr and John Curtin are a major focus of analysis. Brett tells us in 'The tasks of political biography'⁸ that in popularly-based politics, ambition must be linked to group goals, for it is only by advancing such goals that the political type has any chance of reaching high office.⁹ She says that both ambition and ideals are of central interest and throughout life there is an interaction between those two aspects of self: one is driven by ambition to reach one's rightful place, to receive one's true rewards and recognition, but one strives for ideals, to put one's life and talents at the service of something beyond the self but with which the self is deeply identified.¹⁰ Thus the importance of employing primary source material, rather than relying solely on other scholars' works, is underlined. One needs to make the connection between the individual and the public event.

⁶ E Page, *Truant Surgeon: The Inside Story of Forty Years of Australian Political Life*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1963

⁷ F W Eggleston, *Reflections of an Australian Liberal*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1952

⁸ Brett, op. cit., p. 4

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 4

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 7

NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different pagination from the paper copy held in the Swinburne Library.

INTRODUCTION

‘In every alliance one party wears the boots and spurs while
the other wears the saddle.’

(Duke of Marlborough)

This thesis is concerned with how the Country Party in Victoria from its formation in 1917 until 1945 differed from its counterparts in the other states and federally and formed alliances with the Labor Party to restrict the conservative parties (variously named) to the opposition benches. The often close cooperation of the non-Labor parties federally and in other states was rarely replicated in Victoria. The central argument of the thesis is that the ‘difference’ in the political behaviour of the agrarian party in Victoria was the product of five related factors. First, the harsh farming conditions in the Mallee and Wimmera regions often led farmers to adopt more ‘radical’ political stances (especially over wheat marketing) than elsewhere in Australia. Second, Victoria manifested a very high level of anti-Melbourne electoral malapportionment during the period under review, which aided the Country Party. Third, the local Labor Party had a prolonged gestation and was comparatively weak, being unable to form a majority government until 1952. Fourth, the Liberal/Nationalist/United Australia Party in Victoria was notably conservative and was heavily influenced by Melbourne financial and Western District pastoral interests. Fifth, all the Victorian parties were highly schismatic (including the Country Party) which helped produce an unstable political environment in which minority parties could exercise influence beyond their parliamentary numbers or their voter support. Given these factors, it is not surprising that there was no majority government in Victoria between 1917 and 1952.

In other states any political alliances between Labor and the Country Parties were rare and short-lived. Essentially, elsewhere the Country Party’s influence was in coalition with the urban-based conservatives,¹ or in supporting minority anti-Labor administrations in exchange for policy concessions. Whenever the conservatives won

¹ The use of the term ‘conservative’ in regard to a political party, while imprecise, is justified in this thesis on two counts: the relevant Victorian party was variously named the Nationalist Party, the United Australia Party, the Liberal Party and the Liberal and Country Party; also the party was economically more conservative in its commitment to private enterprise than the Country and Labor parties which it viewed as ‘socialistic’.

majority government the question then arose as to whether the coalition would continue. Sometimes it did or did not depending on local political factors. The downside of the latter was that should the conservatives later lose their majority they may have offended the Country Party through earlier rejection. Outside Victoria the Country Parties were themselves 'conservative' which produced an ideological affinity for coalitions. In Victoria, in contrast, the party from its outset was far more 'radical' (though the precise meaning of this was not always clear) than elsewhere in Australia. With the rich Western District graziers long ensconced in the predecessors to the Liberal Party, the Country Party comprised small to medium sized wheat, dairy and mixed farmers, predisposed to agrarian-socialist populism of a type common in some farming districts of the United States and Canada.² These farmers' antipathy towards the middle-men in their markets, the buyer-seller merchants, exporters and transporters as well as the financiers and mortgagors to whom they had to meet their payments in good seasons and bad, alienated them from the larger conservative party. Furthermore the Australian Workers' Union covering agricultural labourers was weaker in the wheat and dairy regions of Victoria compared to other states or the wool growing areas represented by the conservatives in the Victorian parliament. In short, there were fewer reasons for the farmers' party to be anti-Labor and even some reasons to be in sympathy with it. If Labor could be used to gain a better deal for the Country Party, then so be it.

The Victorian Labor and conservative parties, as elsewhere, were ideological enemies. The farmer, brought up on self-sufficiency and local cooperation, was less motivated by ideology and more by practical rural policy. In Victoria, given that Labor was more moderate than in some other states and was rarely in government, it was not seen as such a threat to the Country Party as elsewhere. John Paul argues that Albert Dunstan (Country Party Premier 1935-45) enjoyed a degree of freedom from responsibility to the electorate at large (a product of malapportionment) and relative immunity from the pressure groups usually active in state politics. Power, normally based in parliament, in the executive and the party organisation, gravitated to this one man.³

² B D Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1966, pp. 10, 28; *Farmers' Advocate*, 30 November 1917

³ J B Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1960, p. viii

Minority governments supported by one or more other parties or individuals are, according to Jeremy Moon,⁴ a particular form of de facto or ersatz coalition and exhibit some unique features separating them from cabinet-sharing coalitions. A minority government does not share ministerial responsibilities and comes about through a parliamentary arrangement which guarantees supply and support on confidence motions as a result of bargaining between the minority government in-waiting and another party or parties. Guaranteed supply and a vote of confidence are essential to convince a Governor that an installed government will be viable. Theoretically, minority governments enjoy neither the relatively free legislative rein nor the relative absence of parliamentary scrutiny that disciplined parties normally can achieve in a majority government.⁵ Whether the support is from a small minor party or group as for the Hogan Labor government (1927-28) by the ‘four black crows,’ a sizeable party as for the Dunstan government (1935-42) by the Labor Party or by a pair of independents such as the first Curtin Labor federal government in 1941, the outcome is the same, but Moon emphasises that the motivation behind the deal is the key factor.

Moon explains his model thus: a minoritarianism coalition form of minority government implies the motivation is to achieve some general program for change, whereas ersatz suggests the purpose is to keep a common enemy out of office by supporting the minority government on the floor of the house. Most arrangements will be a combination of both but one will be more important depending on the circumstances of the time. Allegiance is more than ad hoc but does not imply ‘tyranny of the minority.’ Rather the arrangement may compromise the government’s policy at times but the leverage allows advancement of commonly held policies while keeping the other major party out of office.

Minoritarianism also affords opportunities for the ‘corner party’ or cross-benches to persuade the government of the worth of their proposals with the realistic hope that these can be legislated even if the government would not normally contemplate them. As Moon points out, the members of the corner party have more influence than backbenchers in either minority or majority parties as they hold the future of the

⁴ J Moon, ‘Minority government in the Australian states: From ersatz majoritarianism to minoritarianism?’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 30, special issue, 1995, pp. 142-63

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 143

minority government in their hands. Moreover the compromises are more likely to be open, played out on the floor of parliament rather than behind the closed doors of the cabinet or the party room. The corner party, in addition to these legislative benefits, may also be rewarded with parliamentary positions such as Chairman of Committees or their request for particular select committees.⁶

During the period studied in this thesis minoritarianism is best illustrated by the Dunstan years when Labor, as the corner party, extracted some legislative advances and such inquiries as the Select Committee into Shorter Working Hours, although it was often frustrated by Dunstan's general policy inertia and deviousness. Both parties shared the joy of ersatz coalition by seeing a common enemy, the United Australia Party (UAP) representing city-based commerce, kept powerless in opposition. The arrangements fluctuated between the two models but started to unravel as Dunstan was seen to marginalise the more Labor-friendly members of his party and assumed a more dictatorial approach. On many occasions of tension, only mutual antagonism towards the UAP held them together.

Majoritarianism as compared to ersatz coalition is where two parties combine to form a majority government termed either a coalition or, as the Victorian Country Party liked to call it, 'a composite government.' The two are effectively the same but the farmers preferred the latter because it implied a greater, if *faux*, independence for them. A coalition shares portfolios and responsibilities and ensures each party is represented at the leadership level. Its formation is generally preceded by an agreement, but not always written, which is designed to strengthen the connections and guarantee the continuity of supply and majority votes on legislation. The decisions of a coalition cabinet may be considered separately by the parties and in joint sittings to promote an image of unity.

Over the period examined in this thesis, majority coalitions and majority single-party governments were the norm at federal level and in many of the other states while in Victoria there were five coalitions, all non-Labor. One lasted only five months and only one went full term. However, these coalitions brought less political stability or predictability than the minoritarian ten-year Dunstan government. Like ersatz coalitions,

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 144

the aim of majoritarianism is to ensure that a common enemy is confined to the opposition but is also more likely to deliver agreed upon programs than minoritarianism. Other than in Victoria, the associations between the non-Labor parties were more cohesive and likely to form coalitions or majority governments than minority governments. In Queensland there were no minority governments over the period 1910-77 and no coalition until 1957.

Coalition is defined by the *Penguin Macquarie Dictionary of Australian Politics* as ‘an alliance of political parties to gain the parliamentary numbers to form a government, while retaining their independent structures.’⁷ This reflects that in a democratic parliamentary system derived from the Westminster model, a government in order to govern must be able to command majority support to secure the confidence of the Crown and to win votes of confidence. Historically in the UK and the former colonies of the British Empire this has been achieved by a majority single-party government, a combination of one or more parties in government (coalition or composite government) or an alliance giving pledged support for a minority government from the cross-benches (conditional support). Before the emergence of distinct political parties, the operation of two opposing forces or groupings determined that majority governments were the norm in the lower houses of these parliaments.

The British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli was critical of coalitions even if they were necessary, saying in 1852 that ‘Coalitions though successful have always found this, that their triumph has been brief ... England does not love coalitions.’⁸ The UK voting system of ‘first past the post’ or simple majority with single member districts helped to limit the number of competing parties to two or at most three, the third being relatively small, reinforcing the majority government system. The Governors appointed to the Australian states by the Colonial Office were instructed within this parliamentary background and were consequently reluctant to install minority or coalition governments.

⁷ *Penguin Macquarie Dictionary of Australian Politics*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1988, p. 73

⁸ Speech to House of Commons, 16 December 1852, in T E Kebbes (ed.), *Selected Speeches of Late Rt. Hon. The Earl of Beaconsfield*, 1882

In the three decades covered by this thesis, the period spanning the two world wars, the emergence of an Australian rural party in the states and the Commonwealth changed the political landscape. Rural and city interests varied greatly due inter alia to the geographical size and historical pattern of European settlement. As a result, simple majority governments became less common, with the emergence of several parties. The introduction of preferential voting ensured that coalition governments and minority governments with conditional support could become entrenched. Nowhere in Australia was this more pronounced over time than in Victoria and at the federal level. The political scene in Victoria during the 30 years from the outbreak of the Great War to the end of the Second World War has been chosen for examination as it offers many examples of minority and coalition governments in action.

From 1913-45 in Victoria there were only four majority governments, all of less than one year except the Lawson Nationalist government of 1918-23. In contrast there were 11 minority governments, the most enduring being that of Albert Dunstan's United Country Party supported by Labor which lasted eight and a half years and four coalition governments lasting an average of two years. This lack of majority governments between 1923 and 1945 continued until John Cain, Snr's Labor majority government was elected in 1952. Victoria experienced many more minority governments than any other state over those years, averaging 2.3 per decade (1910-44). Furthermore, 56 per cent of those years saw minority government in Victoria, second only to Tasmania with 68 per cent over the same period due largely to the latter state's Hare-Clarke proportional representation voting system introduced in 1907 and the brief existence of the Country Party in that state. Again, Tasmanian minority governments had a mean life span of 4 years compared to Victoria's 2.5 years.⁹

The purpose behind any political party entering parliament is to obtain the necessary legislative authority to implement its policies and platform on behalf of its membership, supporters and voters. This requires a majority supporting those objectives, hopefully in both houses of parliament. Big parties have an advantage in possibly gaining a majority in their own right or the opportunity to seek support from independents and/or smaller parties on negotiated terms to obtain that majority. This has appeal to those sectors as

⁹ Moon, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-63

smaller parties can only exercise their influence by being part of the governing process either as a partner in a coalition or on the cross-benches offering conditional support.

In addition to achieving a majority government, coalitions or conditional support may be the result of other objectives, depending on the relationships among the parties. Experience of a satisfactory alliance may continue after going to the polls if re-elected, even if the larger party after that election can form a majority government in its own right. This is a form of insurance for the future, should that majority be wafer-thin or later evaporate. Also by consolidating the arrangement it may ensure cooperation in an upper house where the majority party in government does not have a similar majority. Generally, cooperative arrangements depend upon 'natural allies' sharing a commonality in platform and policies. Less often the alignment will be based on 'mutual antagonism' towards a third party where partners work together to deny that party government or when in opposition to frustrate it as much as possible in the upper house.

As will be demonstrated, the United Country Party in Victoria under Premier Dunstan was able to exploit to its advantage the animosity between Labor and the UAP by forming a stable minority government. Yet later the UCP would form a coalition with the UAP when Dunstan's dominance was put at risk. Coalitions built upon cooperation rather than mere office-seeking are stronger and have a longer shelf life. Coalitions with a mixture of the elements, office seeking and cooperation and mutual opposition to a third party, have an even longer life expectation.. Being in a minority government, the UCP maintained its independence and increased its parliamentary representation, reaching a peak at the 1943 election, until a redistribution slowed its growth.

An important point not to be overlooked is that the negotiating parties themselves are not always united and regularly contain competing personalities and factions which can impact on coalition building. If the differences are minor or if the particular party has been in an alliance before with the other negotiating party, an arrangement is more likely to proceed. Should there be major unresolvable differences or a change in the relative composition of those sub-groups following the election, a coalition or a continuation of it will be less likely. There may even be one section not prepared to compromise nor join a coalition which leads to a 'split' in the party and a stalemate or

alternate cooperative arrangement created. This occurred in 1926 when the Dunstan Country Progressive Party (CPP) split from the parent body and supported a minority Labor government in place of the existing coalition, a situation only reversed and the coalition restored when the CPP reunited with the Victorian Country Party to form the United Country Party in 1930. Five years later this Dunstan group had strengthened its position within the parliamentary party and its parent organisation to the point where they were able to break the Argyle-Allan coalition and to form a minority government with support from Labor.

These events raise the question of leadership and its strength relative to other major players in the party structures. During this period within the Country Party there was a clash of beliefs and strategies between the leaders of the parliamentary party and the Central Council, dominated by two strong men, Albert Dunstan and A E 'Bert' Hocking respectively. Dunstan's priorities were survival and to dominate his party to the point that later he set out to 'eliminate' Hocking when the latter threatened his position. Another instance of Dunstan's leadership style was when he promoted Norman Martin (MLA for Gunbower) to a Ministry without Portfolio in 1938 over the head of more worthy aspirants in order to prevent Martin's desertion from the minority government and its consequent collapse.

Coalitions are generally limited to the right of Australian politics because of the Labor Party's longstanding opposition to entering coalitions as distinct from participating in minority governments. However, coalitions between Labor and others did occur in the early years of the new federal parliament. The minority Watson Labor government of 1904 included a non-Labor Minister, H B Higgins, a radical Victorian protectionist, and relied upon support from other progressive protectionists. The caucus met formally on three occasions with these non-Labor MPs (the only time it ever has done so) and a document was published outlining alliance terms,¹⁰ essentially an electoral pact protecting those allies. At Labor's 1905 federal conference the Victorian state secretary, Patrick Heagney, advocated the banning of coalitions and alliances as his own state party had done. The compromise reached was that any alliance could only continue until

¹⁰ J Faulkner and S Macintyre (eds), *True Believers: The Story of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2001, p. 33

the next election and there would be no electoral immunity afforded coalition allies.¹¹ This arrangement of limiting a coalition to the duration of the parliament and maintaining their own identity would become a model 15 years later for the Country Party in Victoria. In 1908 the federal Labor conference finally agreed to a blanket ban on all parliamentary alliances¹² or electoral immunity.¹³

Coalitions and alignments last only as long as the parties comprising them believe that the survival of the agreement is more important than the uninhibited pursuit of their own interests.¹⁴ The support for Dunstan's minority government by Labor became fragile after three terms when Labor contemplated uniting in a temporary agreement with its avowed political enemy the UAP to introduce a fairer electoral redistribution to damage the Country Party. This imbalance had led to parliaments composed of a strong country faction and two opposing urban blocs, one sympathetic, and the other more hostile, to rural interests.¹⁵ By 1943 both major city-based parties could tolerate it no longer. Dunstan at the last minute outmanoeuvred Labor by briefly joining with the Nationalists to introduce a separate but more favourable redistribution Bill which would cost the Country Party fewer seats at an election.¹⁶

The two parties to an alliance also exploit to the full their ownership and contacts in the press to bolster their self-image and their role in the alliance. During the life of the Dunstan government, Labor was obliged to constantly remind its membership and the unions through its journal *Labor Call* that the advancements in social justice, even though they were small, were due to pressure from Labor. A major negative consequence of long-term coalition arrangements, such as at federal level between the Country Parties and the Liberal Party, is the threat to the identity of the smaller party, a form of de facto absorption. Its voters and membership increasingly come to regard the coalition as a single unit. Mindful of this, the junior party may attempt within the confines of the coalition to raise its profile to satisfy its support base by exaggerating its

¹¹ F Bongiorno, *The People's Party: Victorian Labor and the Radical Tradition 1875-1914*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 108

¹² *ibid.*, p. 109

¹³ Faulkner and Macintyre, *op. cit.*, p. 37

¹⁴ A J P Taylor, '1932-45' in D Butler (ed.), *Coalitions in British Politics*, Macmillan, London, 1978, p. 72

¹⁵ J Holmes, *The Government of Victoria*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1976, p. 83

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 87-8

own contributions. In the 1920s and 1930s the leader of the federal Country Party, Earle Page, constantly pre-empted coalition announcements by claiming the credit for government achievements and indirectly blaming the shortcomings of the Nationalists for their failures to deliver rural policies, particularly tariff reform.

Leaders negotiating or maintaining a cooperative relationship must hold mutual respect for each other and not publicly disagree on major issues. They must also be regarded as the supreme leader within their own party to give this inter-party cooperation legitimacy. The clash between the pro-Labor Albert Dunstan and the pro-conservative John Allan combined with their opposing views on coalitions and a compulsory wheat pool led to a split in the VFU to form the Country Progressive Party. Both became premiers, Allan the first Country Party premier in Australia heading a coalition in 1924. Dunstan as leader of the CPP supported a minority Labor government in 1929, then after the two parties reunited to form the Victorian Country Party (VCP) served in a VCP-UAP coalition before becoming premier of a minority VCP government in 1935. They did share a commonality – both were policy inactive premiers.¹⁷ Another major clash of leading personalities between Dunstan and A E Hocking, the Central Council strongman, was within the party itself. The leaders of the other parties saw it is a matter for the Country Party alone, watched it from the sidelines and did not try to influence the outcome. The UAP did try to weaken the UCP by trying to drive a wedge between the ‘Mallee Hens,’ whom they labelled as closet Laborites, and the pro-conservatives. The contest did not affect the alliance with Labor in the early stages but later, when Labor support was withdrawn, the Dunstan and Hocking camps split over the question of cooperation with the UAP. On the other hand, there was mutual respect between Dunstan and Cain but little personal warmth in the relationship: ‘Dunstan had protégés, favourites, associates and a legion of enemies, but no close friends.’¹⁸

Electoral systems naturally influence the fortunes of political parties. The major electoral determinants include the franchise or entitlement to vote, distribution of electorates and the variation in their geographic and enrolment size, as well as the voting system itself, whether simple majority, proportional or preferential. In the period

¹⁷ B Costar, ‘John Allan: The first agrarian’ and ‘Albert Dunstan: The jumping jack premier’ in P Strangio and B Costar (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, pp. 188-90, 194, 224

¹⁸ Costar, ‘Albert Dunstan’, p. 216

examined in this thesis each change to the electoral system was motivated by party advantage rather than a commitment to enhancing democracy. Female suffrage was introduced by the federal parliament in 1902. Perhaps the delay in granting women the vote in Victoria, seven years later, was a perceived connection by the conservatives that Labor won government shortly after the next federal election in 1904. From a coalition aspect, any outcome would need to be mutually advantageous or agreement would not be reached. As Victorian Labor's numbers grew and it was realised that a simple majority voting system could allow Labor to win over a 'split coalition' in an electorate, preferential voting was introduced for the Assembly in 1911 and for the Council 10 years later. For the same reason, to disadvantage Labor while the coalition maintained an electoral pact, preferential voting was introduced for the 1919 federal election following mixed results and expectations in several by-elections. Compulsory voting was a vexed question for the non-Labor parties as the outcome was an unknown quantity. It was introduced for the Assembly in 1926 and the Council in 1935.

Rural over-representation led to a three-party constellation in Victoria.¹⁹ That situation did not allow for majority government as the three parties were fairly evenly represented in the Assembly. The 30 years to 1952, when a Labor government under John Cain won office, saw a total of 19 governments, none of which commanded an absolute majority on the floor of the Assembly. Governments were therefore decided by alliances – coalitions and conditional support, each an admixture created for different reasons – to achieve common objectives, to oust a common enemy and for individual party survival. The most stable of those was Dunstan's minority government for eight years from 1935 and, after a short absence, for another two years in coalition.

The first crop of VFU endorsed MPs, sharing a common inexperience but reflecting their differing electorates, showed a striking lack of cohesion. Percy Stewart of the Mallee, a fiery radical reflecting the low income and harsh environment experienced by the farmers, sat alongside Labor. He was criticised by the conservatives in his 'party' from the relatively prosperous areas, such as John Allan. The conservative agrarians supported the Nationalists. The lack of unity was magnified when eight more VFU MPs

¹⁹ B Costar, 'National-Liberal relations in Victoria' in P R Hay, J Halligan, J Warhurst and B Costar (eds), *Essays on Victorian Politics*, Warrnambool Institute Press, Warrnambool, 1985, p. 157

were elected in 1920. The grouping of 13 now enjoyed the balance of power. Their immaturity as a party showed with their lack of discipline and strategy. No one or single section had the answer how best to exercise that power, nor knew for what collective reason – personal, platform or performance. These pioneers and their successors grappled with these competing objectives so that during 1923-35 they used their balance of power, divided or as a single party from 1926-35, to support no less than nine different ministries until they themselves came to office.²⁰

²⁰ G Browne, *Biographical Register of the Victorian Parliament 1900-84*, Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne, 1985, p. vii

CHAPTER 1

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY PARTY

‘The VFU is about measures not men.’

J J Hall, 8 June 1917

This chapter provides the history of the early development of the Victorian Country Party and deals with the interaction between achieving the objectives of the new party and the accommodation of the personalities and beliefs of those appointed and elected to achieve those objectives. The analysis confirms Bruce Graham’s argument that the desire on the part of the farmers to preserve the compulsory wheat pool, introduced as a wartime measure, was critical to its formation.

Politics changed dramatically for Australian farmers when the Commonwealth took over the marketing of primary produce to meet wartime demands and conditions. Acceptance of free markets, for wheat in particular, was displaced and farmers embraced the higher prices and security that accompanied the government wheat pools. The farmers realised that if pools were to continue they would be required to take more direct political action after the war. Over the years, rural factions within the major parties had proved insufficient to raise the farmers’ interests over the dominant group in each party. Based largely on the politics of populism, cooperation between farmers and workers in the United States and Canada, the Victorian Farmers’ Union (VFU) was formed in southern-central Victoria in 1916. Gaining its membership from both sides of the Labor and non-Labor spectrum presented both opportunities and dangers. As it grew, the nascent party drew membership and competing leadership from different rural regions of Victoria, reflecting different priorities and competing strategies.

Realising that the metropolitan-based press was not pro-farmer, the VFU set up its own paper, the *Farmers’ Advocate*, which would play a major role over the years in building and consolidating the new party. Entering the federal sphere exposed major differences between the VFU and its more conservative counterparts in the other states, especially regarding relationships with the major national parties. Preferential voting, already operating in Victoria, was quickly recognised as essential for the new third party to

succeed and it successfully pressured for the system to be extended to the federal sphere.

During the second half of the 19th century, small farmers, in contrast to the pastoralists and graziers who associated with the wealthier sections of society, felt somewhat distanced from the political decisions determined in the big cities. At times they felt their special interests were largely ignored and not represented by the various parliamentary groupings. Wheat farmers in low rainfall and drought stricken areas of Victoria's north-west were particularly disaffected. As early as mid-1886, Walter Madden, MLA for Wimmera (later MLA for Horsham), formed a country faction in the parliament to watch over and protect bona fide country interests.¹ It lasted four months before a dispute between free traders and protectionists led to its disbandment.² The next year another short-lived extra-parliamentary body, the Victorian Farmers' Protection Association, was formed in the Goulburn and Wimmera areas.³ A decade later the party system started to develop with Labor becoming the official opposition in 1904. In reaction a United Liberal Party was formed in 1907. The farmers realised that factions were no longer effective and that they had to work through the parties. Both parties sought their vote, with the farmers leaning towards non-Labor as the Liberals still tolerated a country faction among their MPs.⁴ Another influence was Federation which brought changes to the economy. Primary producers were affected directly by tariff policy which changed direction under Commonwealth control.⁵

The main issues for the farmers were the handling and price of their produce domestically and overseas, transport and electoral distribution. A group of country members who supported the Watt Liberal government in Victoria paraded as an informal 'Country Party' under the nominal leadership of Donald McLeod (MLA for

¹ Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 67

² *Age*, 21 October 1886

³ Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-70

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 83

⁵ U Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1963, p. 15

Daylesford).⁶ The *Argus* reported: ‘The Country Party has perhaps quite unintentionally become, if not a political party, at least a party of political influence.’⁷

When the Watt government introduced legislation in 1913 to slightly correct the pro-rural electoral bias, a ‘Country-Liberals’ faction combined with Labor to defeat it. Watt resigned tactically over the defeated clause to bring the ‘dissidents’ into line and to entice Labor into an embarrassingly ineffective term in government.⁸ The incoming Elmslie Labor government lasted just 14 days. On resuming the premiership Watt ostracised the country faction in his party – which proved to be a mistake. In response a People’s Party was formed to highlight rural issues. The outbreak of the Great War and the drought of 1914 intensified the frustrations experienced by the farmers. Similar events in Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales saw the Farmers’ Unions form their own political parties in those states. The Kyabram Movement of 1902, although confined to Victoria, was an illuminating example of what might be achieved by determined countrymen acting in unison for common ends. In less than a year it numbered 15,000 members and had brought about the defeat of a government.⁹ Victoria lagged behind its counterparts but the time had come for action.

During the Great War many factors and events determined party politics, its swings and its changes, none less so than a new player in the form of the Victorian Farmers’ Union. The farmers held strong feelings that they had been ignored by the major parties and economically exploited during the early years of the war. Two events dominated their interests apart from the weather. They had suffered several droughts, including the Federation drought of 1895-1903, one of the worst ever experienced.¹⁰ Now was added the war itself, which took many of Australia’s sons and labourers overseas, many of whom would not return, and the price for farmers’ produce in domestic and world markets would be regulated by wheat pools under government control.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 30

⁷ *Argus*, 30 August 1912

⁸ P Love, ‘Elmslie, Prendergast and Hogan: Labouring against the tide’ in P Strangio and B Costar (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 173

⁹ Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 14

¹⁰ S Wadham, R K Wilson and J Wood, *Land Utilization in Australia*, 4th edn, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1964, p. 63

The extremely independent farmers had expressed their lack of confidence in wheat pools earlier, immediately before the war, during the Royal Commission into the Victorian Wheat Trade that recommended the state could handle their wheat exports. The commission was dismissive of the farmers and their individual experience in their battles with poor soils and unfavourable weather cycles. It expected little organised opposition to the pooling, one commissioner being reported as saying that the farmers' influence on governments had been little as they were not all of one mind. Wartime marketing schemes changed that, bringing them closer together as they grappled with interference by bureaucrats displacing their experience and understanding of marketing. They suspected that the public servants could not do the job as well as they had done. The focus of rural politics was no longer simply the tariff, land laws or rural workers under the arbitration system, but the new marketing schemes directly and continuously affecting their daily lives.¹¹

The drought of 1914 was so severe that it necessitated the importation of six million bushels of wheat.¹² The Commonwealth took control of the wheat marketing and made advances to the farmers for the record crop of 1915-16.¹³ It was much larger than the first purchase in 1914-15, seven times as large in fact, so that shipping was difficult and a new pooling arrangement was required. The web of wheat pools established in 1915 was to be administered politically by an Australian Wheat Board consisting of the Prime Minister and a minister from each of the four wheat states, Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia. This in turn would be assisted by state authorities and counselled by an advisory board consisting of private trading firms. The Wheat Board posed new regulations setting the purchase price and allocating shipping to each port. Pools covered other produce such as wool, meat and butter but the reaction of the wheat farmers was the most important and the most hostile.¹⁴ The farmers organised themselves to meet the challenges of a labour shortage and a fixed return for their output. They believed their interests and concerns were overlooked because the major parties, Labor and the Nationalists, were directed, as the farmers saw it, by the Trades Hall Council and Collins Street financial interests respectively. The first issue of

¹¹ Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 97

¹² Wadham, Wilson and Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 108

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 108

¹⁴ Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-9

Farmers' Advocate put it clearly: 'We are neither Labor nor Liberal. The Victorian Farmers' Union exists because the major parties are essentially city based and directed and ignored the needs of country people.'¹⁵

Initial reactions by the farmers to the various pools were mixed, but delayed and staggered payments engendered unqualified hostility among the wheat farmers, a mood built upon a general distaste for a scheme which limited the independent freedom of the individual farmer. Storage facilities were inadequate for this record harvest and the bagged wheat was left in the open, as in the western Wimmera where enormous stacks, devoid of roofing, were alive with mice.¹⁶ Farmers also had their distaste for the middleman heightened when they observed the Wheat Board's payment was much lower than the ruling price in London, suggesting that traders and shippers had siphoned off more than their fair share of profits.¹⁷

During the 1930s when debate on economic policy was at its peak, the *Countryman* would spend many columns of its pages fulminating against Labor's socialism while advocating the benefits of compulsory wheat pooling and other cooperative arrangements. The farmers' paper also argued for the state to guarantee community services, particularly in the rural areas, without acknowledging that this formed much of Labor's alleged socialist policies. These common threads, not denied, would later help to knit a bond between those two parties. At the same time small farmers acknowledged the wheat pool had given them higher prices and greater security than they had enjoyed under a deregulated market.¹⁸ But the feeling of rejection, of being displaced by bureaucrats, was overwhelming and the initial response was for the farming organisations to demand representation on the Wheat Boards. The federal and state governments acquiesced with the result that a two-way information channel between farmers and the boards developed, improving the distribution system and informing the farmers of the problems encountered along with associated costs. Their initial hostility abated, they embraced the new marketing system and campaigned to continue the scheme under a producer-dominated council. This was the birth of the spread of

¹⁵ *Farmers' Advocate*, 2 February 1917

¹⁶ *Argus*, 28 April 1917

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 10 January 1917

¹⁸ Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 100

farmers' cooperatives – marketing built on the social connections they lived by. Pooling was also supported by the small graziers and mixed farmers for their cross-bred fleece but the large merino growers did not share their enthusiasm.¹⁹ Graham attributes this difference in attitude to the merino growers enjoying around double the price per pound received by cross-bred wool growers due to a virtual monopoly of fine wool supplies on the world market. Further, the merino grower had larger flocks and sold in larger lots bringing higher prices at auction. These market advantages vanished with pooling while the smaller farmers gained. Debate over pooling would continue for many years within the Country Party, causing divisions and unrest with leaders.

The farmers' attitudes to wheat pooling had reversed. No longer was it seen as socialism but as state corporatism in the public and growers' interests. Experience of the pools moved the biggest farming group, the wheat growers, to adopt a new economic policy and provided the final stimulus to form a political party to put that policy into permanent practice. They were not new to lobbying, as the long drawn out agitation for the improved wheat pools management had demonstrated. The campaigning had taken the farmers' organisations into the political sphere, firstly as pressure groups and now perhaps more could be achieved if they could project independent Country Parties into parliament.²⁰ The agrarian tradition and their populist beliefs stood firm while economic insecurity replaced by greater security through the cooperatives shook off their lethargy. Over the years they had learned that being a pressure group placed limitations on their effectiveness and that active participation in parliamentary politics was necessary, perhaps even contesting the very next election. Now the question was the best political electoral strategy to adopt so as to consolidate their position.

Anti-Catholicism, anti-metropolitan views and a distaste for organised unionism and socialism had determined that established growers' organisations were opposed to the city-based Labor Party and they worked closely with anti-Labor parties to maintain the electoral advantages open to them. When Labor split over the conscription issue in 1916, the simple choice between traditional Labor and non-Labor became blurred. Various state farmers' organisations were forced to review their strategies. In

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 102

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 103

Queensland they merged with the Liberals while in Western Australia, after supporting the Labor government, they negotiated with the Liberals and became a junior partner with that party. New South Wales wanted the best of all worlds and like their counterparts in WA wanted to be anti-Labor but independent of the Liberals.

In contrast to the anti-Labor organisations in the other states, the Victorian Farmers' Union would prove to be unexpectedly radical, drawing its most militant and enthusiastic support from the Wimmera and the marginal wheat lands of the Mallee. Here the fight by the newly arrived, largely inexperienced, soldier settlers to establish and maintain their smaller farms against the hostile climate and poor soil was won through their hardy initiative, inventiveness and ingenuity. Their very strengths in battle were now employed in their new battle to survive and prosper. Just as they experienced that comradeship was essential to survive in war they now learned to help one another in adversity such as illness when a farmer could not reap his own crop. Water shortages affected the Mallee more than other wheat regions and mixed farming was rare, the farmer having to rely almost solely on the success or failure of the wheat crops. New to the area and dependent on the fortunes of the wheat industry, the farmers created the Mallee Farmers' Union to consolidate the wheat pool as a permanent marketing institution.²¹ Their leader was Percy Stewart, one of the few genuine radical leaders of the early Country Parties. His boyhood had been spent in inner suburban industrial Melbourne and on leaving school he was employed in railway construction gangs before going to the Mallee to work as a shepherd for the Lascelles family. He spent four years in North America as an agricultural labourer then bought a farm in Canada. Here he encountered the political beliefs of the Populist movement, and on his return to the Mallee set about organising the farmers into a union along the lines of the Canadian Grain Associations. Hearing of similar moves in the southern farming districts he stayed his hand.²²

The Populist parties in North America provided an excellent blue-print for an emerging political party in Victoria. Their internal debates had created a fairly sophisticated awareness of the strategic and doctrinal problems which farmers' parties, particularly if

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 111

²² *Farmers' Advocate*, 20 November 1919

they were to become third parties, were to face.²³ Originally organised as factions within the established Democratic and Republican parties they had not made the gains expected. This was similar to the experience of farmers' efforts in the Victorian parliament. The Canadian agrarian leaders realised they needed to enter parliament with clearly established doctrinal principles of action and policy. To avoid a repeat of the historic absorptions of their movements, a separate farmers' party was essential to attain material benefits for its supporters and to assert rural values in an urban parliament.²⁴

Stewart heard of the press campaign by two journalists, J J Hall and Isaac Hart,²⁵ in the central Victorian farming districts around Trentham who were rousing enthusiasm of the farming organisations to become a political party. He joined them, the three working to set up the Victorian Farmers' Union on as broad a base as possible.²⁶ Stewart later became VFU organiser in the Mallee region. The initial meetings that led to the formation of the VFU attracted disillusioned supporters and voters from both major parties. The only way to accommodate these sometimes opposing views while guaranteeing the cohesiveness of the new organisation was to ensure that the new party be neither anti-Labor nor anti-Nationalist but independent. Very soon they would be forced to recognise that those former electoral allegiances or preferences held by members of the VFU would not rapidly dissipate under the new banner but would re-emerge later when questions arose of how the party should operate in the parliamentary sphere. The VFU needed to be more than simply not anti other parties. It needed to be positive and to stand for a constituency – the farmers and rural residents. The VFU was essentially an industrial party representing the farmers in the wheat, dairying and fruit growing areas. This commonality of purpose would act as a unifying factor in the same way as Labor benefited from claiming to represent the unions and the workers. As in the other states the VFU concentrated on its immediate objective of securing the inclusion of growers' representatives on the Australian and state Wheat Boards.²⁷

This farmers' movement in Victoria differed from its predecessors in that it was founded on a strong ideological component, based on common experiences of the

²³ Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 6

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 19

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 112; Ellis, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-1

²⁶ Ellis, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-4

²⁷ Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 100

membership, drawn from both sides of the political spectrum and from several farming industries. It was no longer a fine philosophical distinction from other groupings in the parliament. What distinguishes an ideology from a philosophy, both considered as prime types, is that an ideology arises out of social experience, the passions and interests of those who espouse it, while philosophy is constructed from first principles, by process of argument.²⁸ Ideologies provide the emotional base for modern political systems²⁹ and this analysis can be applied to the emerging Country Parties in each state and at Commonwealth level to explain that their differences in operation can be seen to emanate from variation in social experiences, passions and interests.

A draft constitution adopted the principles of organisation of the Labor Party, with endorsed parliamentary candidates having to pledge themselves to the platform. Membership, however, would be restricted to primary producers and the major plank in the platform was the demand for appointing farmer representatives to the marketing boards. This appealed to the wheat farmers and dairy farmers especially those producing butter. Irrigation settlers in the Goulburn Valley rallied to the cause in their desire to repeal a clause in the Closer Settlement Act which prevented them from acquiring the freehold of their leases. The VFU leaders were developing a strategy of 'divide and rule' among the other parties, and with a tight caucus could exploit being a party of the middle ground by promising support in return for concessions.

Victoria, as one of the later farmers' political groups to emerge, had learned from the other states, but its new activist model was not adopted elsewhere in Australia. For instance, agrarian radicalism travelled westwards along the Mallee region of South Australia but was kept in check by the conservative oligarchy of that state's Farmers' and Settlers' Association (FSA) which argued that the preferable strategy was as a pressure group influencing whatever party was in power rather than becoming an independent party. Evidence of the shortcomings and weaknesses of being a pressure group was provided by the VFU when the first few issues of the *Farmers' Advocate* from January 1917 published copies of correspondence on important rural questions from J J Hall, the secretary of the VFU, to leading parliamentarians. The replies, also

²⁸ D Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: A Study of Organisation and Survival*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1972, p. 7

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 7

printed in full, from state and federal MPs, the Premier and the Prime Minister were evasive and non-committal. At best, the parties offered farmer representation on various boards while the Prime Minister offered a minimum guaranteed price for wheat.³⁰ The title *Farmers' Advocate* was taken from the prairie publication of the same name set up in Winnipeg, Canada, in 1890 whose editorials covered political and economic issues.

The first VFU Conference was held in Melbourne on 11 September 1916 and now, with state farm bodies across Australia, the Australian Federal Farmers' Organization (AFFO) was created less than three weeks later on 30 September, also in Melbourne. The VFU clearly differed from those delegates from WA and NSW who supported anti-Labor parties on the understanding that a federal Liberal government would introduce either preferential or proportional voting to enable farmers to get their own candidates elected to parliament. This would require deals and a certain loss of independence. The VFU, on the other hand, argued strongly for independence from both Labor and Liberals, offering support for concessions to whichever happened to be in power.³¹

By 1916 the European war was not going well for Britain, and more troops were needed. Labor Prime Minister Hughes claimed the voluntary system had failed and presented to caucus the advice of the War Cabinet that more men for the front could only be met by conscription.³² When the whips reported that caucus was less than enthusiastic, Hughes suggested that a referendum should be held on the issue, adding as a lure that also 'wealth must be sacrificed to the State.'³³ Labor split on the issue of conscription, even though the issue was not defined in the party platform and the referendum to introduce it was defeated. In all states except Western Australia the 'No' vote was stronger in the country than in the cities, due mainly to the larger gain of votes from the Liberals, the majority for 'No' even more so when predominantly mining and industrial electorates were set aside.³⁴ Strangely, support for the conscription referendum was lower in the wheat growing districts. The German vote, counted separately in south-eastern Australia, outside the cities was overwhelmingly low. Ian

³⁰ *Farmers' Advocate*, 9 and 16 February 1917

³¹ Graham, op. cit., p. 114

³² I Turner, *Industrial Labor and Politics: The Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia, 1900-1921*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1979, p. 43

³³ *Stawell News*, 31 August 1916

³⁴ Turner, op. cit., pp. 113-14

Turner asks whether these men, from families which emigrated from Prussia, opposed the Kaiser but did not wish to fight their former countrymen. A more practical reason, he continues, could have been possible labour shortages in a good grain season if more men were taken away. Ironically, it was the non-Labor farmer bloc that defeated the government's proposals.³⁵ Hughes and his supporters dramatically walked out of caucus on 14 November 1916, were expelled, then joined the Liberals to form the Nationalist Party. In all states, except Queensland, Labor split along similar lines. A second referendum to introduce conscription was also defeated in 1917.

The Nationalist Party campaigned on a platform of solidarity, patriotism and a desire to win the war for the Empire. Because they were fundamentally anti-Labor in the other states, all the farmers' organisations, except the VFU, identified themselves with the Nationalists. It seemed that rural interests had more chance of dealing successfully with the Nationalist parties than they had with the Liberals of old because of the close association between tariff reform and preference for Empire trade, combined subtly with patriotism and contrasted with the Labor stance of world trade under tariffs and perceived socialism. Troubles began early, however, over the issue of tariffs, with the various state farmers' organisations differing in support according to the produce they marketed and the non-committal response from the city-based Nationalists, many of whom were connected with infant industries protected by tariffs.

The VFU was growing rapidly. It would almost double its membership in the three years to 1920, making it twice as strong as its NSW counterpart. The increase had come mainly from small graziers and dairy farmers from the Goulburn Valley and Gippsland regions with the result that its radical temper was toned down. However, the early radicals controlling the Central Council maintained the drive for an independent party. The only thing that deterred them from contesting the 1917 federal election was a fear held by branch delegates that a three-party contest without preferential voting could split the vote in several electorates, allowing Labor to top the poll and win.

In the same year, with Victoria already conducting its elections for the Assembly under the preferential system since 1911, the VFU exchanged preferences with John Bowser's

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 116

Economy Party, the rural faction of the Nationalist Party, and gained five seats. Foundation MPs included J J Hall (Kara Kara), Percy Stewart (Swan Hill) and John Allan (Rodney), all of whom later would play leading roles. Immediately the new MPs were pressured as to where their party stood on conscription. They maintained that this was a federal matter and while they declared their individual stance (three for and two against) any policy should be a matter for the rank and file.³⁶

The early euphoria dissipated somewhat in early February 1918 when the Nationalist candidate for Kara Kara, J W Pennington, challenged the result. The Parliamentary Elections and Qualifications Committee determined that a recount should be held and the seat was awarded to the Nationalist over Hall. Months later, when a petition from the electors of Kara Kara protesting against the committee's decision was presented to the parliament, the Premier rejected their argument that a by-election should be held as the current MP had been elected on a minority. Lawson saw to it that the petition simply 'lay on the table.' Suspicions arose, based on the belief that the major parties which made up the committee had 'conspired' to deprive the new party of that seat in parliament. Obviously the new party was 'not welcome on the voyage.'³⁷

After the election Bowser seemed reluctant to assume the premiership. Allan, an original member of the Kyabram Movement and who had been elected leader of the VFU, seconded the Address-in-Reply, his party having decided to provide conditional support to the Economy Party from the cross-benches. The newfound influence of the VFU was not to last. Ministries came and went until Lawson became Premier on 21 March 1918 following the 'fusion' of the Economy and Nationalist parties. Those Nationalists still supporting the former Premier Sir Alexander Peacock sat on the corner benches. The VFU had lost its balance of power. Again the major parties, with Labor part of the 'plot' to bring down the Bowser government, had indicated their distaste for a third party and the influence it could have when the major parties could not form a majority on their own. Three of the four VFU members, J Allan, I Weaver and D Gibson, moved into the ministerial corner, leaving Percy Stewart alone sitting alongside

³⁶ *Farmers' Advocate*, 7 December 1917

³⁷ *ibid.*, 2 August 1918

the Labor Party in opposition. However the three, although they attended Nationalist Party meetings, remained loyal to the VFU and insisted on their separate entity.³⁸

The VFU continued to organise and expand, targeting in particular country Nationalists. By mid-1918 it boasted 150 branches and 11,000 members. The case of Marcus Wettenhall, a fruit grower in the Stawell-Grampians area who became an organiser in the Wimmera region, illustrates the successful recruitment by the VFU. He warned that farmers must guard against being saddled with ‘city men’ as in the federal electorates of Grampians and Flinders. When challenged on why he himself lived in the city he replied that his health was no longer good for farming so had turned his property over to share-farming and moved to Melbourne for the better education of his six children. Wettenhall believed education was not good in the country and that the VFU should work to lift the standards. He also admitted that he had been a member of the People’s Party working against the VFU which he had then regarded as supported by the ‘socialists’ and incompatible with his convictions. He did not favour farmer-grower cooperatives as this conflicted with the cooperative companies with which he was connected. The VFU had since withdrawn from the commercial sphere and in his opinion now stood for politics only.³⁹

The second VFU Conference became immediately embroiled in debate over the relationship between their MPs and the organisation, in particular whether politicians should sit on the Central Council. A motion advocating not to be in coalition unless the VFU held a majority in the ministry, despite being politically unrealistic, was only narrowly defeated. Another motion calling for all VFU MPs to sit together was withdrawn after Stewart explained he held no loyalty other than to the VFU and that his choice to sit next to the Labor opposition should not be interpreted any other way.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 41

³⁹ *Farmers’ Advocate*, 30 August 1918

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 27 September 1918

Using their successes at state level as a lever, the VFU urged Prime Minister Hughes to introduce preferential voting at federal level 'or his party would be in serious jeopardy at the next election.'⁴¹ Notably, the Nationalist member for Grampians in the southern Wimmera region, Edmund Jowett, wrote a series of articles for the *Farmers' Advocate* supporting preferential voting for the House of Representatives.⁴² When Hughes was tardy in his response to the VFU's approach, and while he was overseas, the VFU pressured the Acting Prime Minister by nominating J J Hall, their ousted state MP, for a by-election in the federal electorate of Flinders in Victoria where the Nationalists had hoped their star candidate Captain S M Bruce would be elected. Opinion within the VFU was divided as to whether to contest, as under first-past-the-post voting it might deliver the seat to Labor, but 'as we are not pro-Nationalist why withdraw?'⁴³ The VFU decided to withdraw only two days before the election to be held on 9 May when they received an assurance that preferential voting would be introduced as soon as possible. Nominations had closed, the ballot papers had been printed and distributed. Actual withdrawal was impossible. The VFU advised electors to withhold the votes for Hall and vote for Bruce. In one stroke the Country Party had achieved a major policy objective and found a substitute for Hughes who, as Prime Minister, was a target for their sharpest darts.⁴⁴ The *Farmers' Advocate* asked why the government had been so reluctant to introduce preferential voting. Simply, the major parties saw it as harming the two-party system. The paper analysed the future federally of a three-party system based on preferential voting as already practised in Victoria. It noted that in Europe each country had four to six parties, including agrarian parties, yet their parliaments were workable and the parties were not losing their individual identities. The VFU and its counterparts in other states had only arisen, as in Canada and the United States, because of neglect of rural interests by the two major parties.⁴⁵

Later that year to underscore the issue, the FSA in Western Australia contested Swan, the seat falling to Labor from the conservatives when the split vote could not match Labor's 34.36 per cent. Unfortunately for the conservatives the legislation for

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 1 February 1918

⁴² *ibid.*, 19 and 26 April 1918

⁴³ *ibid.*, 10 May 1918

⁴⁴ *Argus*, 9 May 1918 (quoted in Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 43)

⁴⁵ *Farmers' Advocate*, 27 June 1919

preferential voting, introduced on 3 October, was not passed before election day.⁴⁶ A third federal by-election, again in Victoria, for the seat of Corangamite, seemed about to follow the pattern when the full list of nominations was known. The federal government quickly passed the relevant sections of the Electoral Bill concerning preferential and postal voting. Royal Assent was received on 21 November in time for the by-election on 14 December.⁴⁷ The Labor candidate, James Scullin, who led on the primary votes and who would have won under the previous 'first past the post' system, was overtaken in the final count by the VFU candidate W G Gibson, who became the first representative of the Country Parties in the federal parliament. His brother D H Gibson had been one of the first VFU members elected to the Victorian parliament. While the VFU claimed the victory because of the 'Flinders deal,' it appeared that preferential voting (also called the 'alternative' vote) had been favoured almost since Federation. In introducing the Bill, Patrick Glynn, Minister for Home Affairs and an original member of the House of Representatives, based his argument for the legislation on the 1902 Bill put forward by Senator Richard O'Connor (NSW).⁴⁸ Joseph Cook had included a policy in favour of preferential voting in his 1914 election statement but it was not until 1917 that Hughes finally adopted it.⁴⁹

The VFU now had the electoral weapons to further their aims of influence and representation at both state and federal levels, with the added advantage of malapportionment in Victoria for the Legislative Assembly. They could bargain on preferences with other parties or, if they felt they had little chance of winning in an electorate, they could trade preferences for policies. Jowett continued his campaign for a voting system more favourable towards the VFU, including proportional voting for the Senate, approaching the FSA in NSW and SA and the VFU itself. A study of Jowett's narrow preselection win in Grampians showed he had received behind the scenes support from the VFU as he was also a member of the NSW FSA as well as the Victorian Nationalists. At the by-election itself Jowett's support in the rural areas was

⁴⁶ Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 43

⁴⁷ G Sawyer, *Australian Federal Politics and Law 1901-29*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1956, p. 168

⁴⁸ Australia, House of Representatives, *Debates*, vol. 86, pt. 1, 4 October 1918, p. 6670

⁴⁹ J Uhr, 'Rules for representation: Parliament and the design of the Australian electoral system' in G Lindell and R Bennett (eds), *Parliament: The Vision in Hindsight*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2001, p. 272

two to one in his favour, useful as he won by 1,961 votes. The VFU's second choice, proportional voting, despite continuing negotiations with the Nationalists, would have to wait for 30 years when it was introduced for the Senate in 1949.

Now, by the deft use of preferences on a seat-by-seat strategy, the Country Party's influence could be extended in the House of Representatives without making permanent enemies of the other parties. Most importantly, for the conservatives among their ranks, the Country Party nationally could run candidates without the fear of vote splitting allowing Labor to defeat the conservative parties. The experience in Swan had demonstrated how important were the mathematics. Now they stood a chance of winning seats with a primary vote around the 28 to 32 per cent range and expect a flow-on of up to 90 per cent or more from candidates below them. It was extremely unlikely that Labor and the Nationalists would exchange preferences to squeeze out the Country Parties. (In 1972 the advantages of preferential voting for the Country Party would be taken to extremes when its candidate for McMillan in Victoria's Latrobe Valley, Arthur Hewson, drew a primary vote of merely 16.63 per cent (less than one in six) while the ALP received 45.8 per cent, but this increased to only 47.6 per cent when more than 95 per cent of preferences flowed to Hewson.)

The Central Council began calling for nominations for federal seats, concentrating on Gippsland, Corio, Echuca and Corangamite. Stewart was approached to contest Wimmera. Pressure by the local Nationalists was put on Jowett to explain his position. Why was he gaining support from the VFU branches in his electorate and what was the reason for the promotion of his articles in the *Farmers' Advocate* when he was a Nationalist MP? The Nationalists in the country, as indicated in articles in the *Stawell Times*⁵⁰ in his electorate, and the Australian National Women's League had long held suspicions about his loyalty after they noticed he had campaigned from two separate committee rooms. If the Nationalists had done more homework before his preselection for Grampians they would have unearthed his association with the FSA (NSW) whose Riverina section was affiliated to the VFU. Jowett started to attend meetings of the St Arnaud branch of the VFU 15 months after his election to federal parliament. Prior to

⁵⁰ *Stawell Times*, 31 October 1917

the fourth VFU annual Conference he resigned from the National Federation and signed the VFU platform and pledge.

How would this power be exercised at state and federal levels? Jowett's defection to the VFU emphasised the need for unity as the key to growth and influence. It was now a mixture of ex-Liberals, ex-Labor, ex-conservatives, ardent protectionists and free traders.⁵¹ One harbinger was when the Victorian MPs, apart from Stewart, would not undertake to cease attending other party meetings. As Isaac Weaver MLA put it:

we are there to support measures not men – to get into the discussion we need to attend other party meetings – even Labor but it is against their rules. The VFU does not abide by Caucus rule; we are an independent party.⁵²

More alarm bells rang when the *Farmers' Advocate* reported that two Victorian MPs, R B Rees MLC and A Downward MLA, who earlier had simply 'joined' the VFU parliamentary party, had been attending an anti-Labor parliamentary meeting. The paper stated: 'we are not anti anything but pro-farmer – we are a three-party parliament.'⁵³ Dunstan successfully moved at Conference that, like any ordinary member, all MPs, state or federal, must apply to join the VFU and sign the pledge: 'Too many have joined, considered and left their next moves open.'⁵⁴ Stewart said that when other VFU members stopped attending Liberal Party meetings he would sit with them. They refused and he continued to sit next to Labor. Gibson claimed that as he had been the only federal VFU member he needed to attend other party meetings to exert any influence. He was supported by Jowett: 'Decisions are not made in the House but in the party rooms, I have attended them. This is where we can exercise influence.'⁵⁵

The outcome of the Conference discussions was the recommendation 'that the VFU should sit as one party, have their own space and their own party room.'⁵⁶ However, the Speaker, used to the formalities of the two-party system, could only grant government and opposition seats in the house and this would require them to be either a corner party

⁵¹ *Farmers' Advocate*, 2 October 1919

⁵² *ibid.*, 16 October 1919

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 9 October 1919

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 16 October 1919

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

or side with one of the major parties. No final decisions were made and the debate was adjourned.⁵⁷

J J Hall, a former journalist with the *Bendigo Advertiser*⁵⁸ and now editor of the *Farmers' Advocate*, pushed the 'idealist route': 'Even in Australian politics, as history has shown, the third party holding the balance of power secured greater results than when it got onto the treasury benches itself.'⁵⁹ He emphasised his viewpoint:

The new party will back measures not men. It must be demonstrated we are distinct and separate. If we are the tag end of either two parties it will be difficult to hold the seats we have won.⁶⁰

The predictions held by the VFU proved accurate at the 1919 federal election when it again won Corangamite, this time with a primary vote of 28.5 per cent and a preference allocation of 94 per cent from the Nationalist candidate. While preferential voting had increased its chances, even under the 'first past the post' system the Country Party would have won such wheat growing seats in Victoria as Wimmera and Echuca (regained after the by-election three months earlier), Riverina in NSW and Swan and Dampier in WA. Compared to 1917, the farmers' parties had made a decisive rather than a partial break-through into the federal arena.⁶¹

Nationally at the 1919 election, the Country Parties won 11 seats out of 75 in the House of Representatives with a total vote of 8.4 per cent, whereas the ALP won 26 with 41.5 per cent and the Nationalists 36 seats with 45.5 per cent. There were two independents, one of whom, W J McWilliams (Franklin) a former Nationalist, would join the Country Party raising their numbers to 12. Notably, the numbers included the new MP for Cowper in north-eastern NSW, Dr Earle Page, who had won the seat from the Nationalists.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 33 (recorded recollections of S Allan Johnson, original member of the VFU, 1960)

⁵⁹ *Farmers' Advocate*, 27 November 1919

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 18 December 1919

⁶¹ Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 130

The outstanding performers were undoubtedly the VFU which had displayed great energy and determination to retain Corangamite and Echuca, both won at by-elections, and Grampians with Jowett, now a Country Party MP, along with Wimmera with Percy Stewart, transferring from state parliament, and Indi with Robert Cook. Sensing that the party system was 'hardening,' George Wise the independent member for Gippsland (in keeping with his name) stood successfully as a Nationalist Party candidate.

Unfortunately, in contrast to Jowett, he made the wrong choice and at the next federal election in 1922 was overtaken by VFU candidate Tom Paterson. Undoubtedly the VFU and the Country Party nationally could give thanks to the Flinders scenario and the preferential vote. On Christmas Eve the *Farmers' Advocate* proudly announced that the Country Party held the balance of power nationally – Labor 27, Country Party 12 and Nationalists 36.

The VFU successes at the national level flowed on to the state elections in October of the next year when it increased its following from seven to 13 in a lower house of 65.⁶² The original four had been joined by three others during the parliamentary session including John Bowser of Wangaratta, erstwhile Premier and formerly of the Economy Party, and Albert Dunstan who had defeated the sitting Labor MLA for Eaglehawk, Tom Tunnecliffe, in a cliff-hanger by 14 votes. Also Frank Old was re-elected in Mallee less than a year after he had succeeded Percy Stewart at a by-election when the latter resigned to contest Wimmera and enter federal parliament. Within a year the VFU gained the balance of power at state level but was denied the opportunity to exercise it through yet another government re-alignment. Then the Country Party gained that balance at federal level.

The national electoral map by 1921 showed that the VFU support was strongest in the wheat belts, the irrigation areas and mixed farming along the Murray in the Goulburn Valley and in eastern Gippsland. This did not mean that the VFU dominated the rural electorates, for the Nationalists were entrenched in the established dairying and grazing lands and Labor was well represented in the south-west due to the strength of the

⁶² Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 156, 1920, p. 195

Australian Workers' Union and the railway workers' unions and in and around the old mining towns of Ballarat and Bendigo with their large factories and railway yards.⁶³

Graham explains that the motivation to establish and expand the new party was due to a 'country-mindedness' which made its supporters feel they would have no place in a world dominated by city parties, whether radical or conservative.⁶⁴ He adds that preoccupation with electoral success blinded many of the leaders to the need to develop a party with a distinct identity and a sense of integrity, although he admits convenient alliances and adaptable relationships with the Nationalists contributed to their success. The result was a legacy of uncertainty which was to produce internal crises of major dimensions in most states within the next few years.⁶⁵

For the cooperative farmers making up the new inexperienced party to resist the overtures and threats by the long-term parties and their leadership, they needed their own strong leaders to counter those dangers. Those new leaders were Stewart, Hall and Hart in Victoria who were soon to be joined by Allan and Dunstan. Those men could not totally lose the characteristics of the general membership they represented for they needed to associate themselves with their group. Given their small numbers in parliament at this time of their development they were ready, when necessary, to protest, advance and promote their cause by engagement at the closest quarters with the enemy or fraternise with allies. At the federal level Page would demonstrate strong leadership after a weak start by Tasmanian McWilliams. Soon he would be assisted by Paterson from Victoria. Allan and Dunstan would argue and separate over tactics and policy while Page preferred to deal almost exclusively with the conservatives. This state-federal dichotomy would bring about differences within the rank and file and the parliamentary leadership.

⁶³ Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 138

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 139

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 142

CHAPTER 2 GROWING UP

‘It could be said of the Country Movement that it is getting out of its boy-hood; it was getting up to the stage where it was leaving school.’

Earle Page, VFU Ballarat Conference, 1922¹

This chapter deals with the early maturation phase of the Country Party and the consequent complications of the newly emerged three-party political system and the reactions by the Labor and conservative parties to the infant Country Party. It also highlights the strains between the parliamentary party, the general membership and the Central Council.

The argument of this chapter is that the fledgling Victorian Country Party carved out a unique relationship with the Labor and Nationalist parties. While non-Labor coalitions were formed, they provoked conflict within the Country Party and encouraged a nascent ‘faction’ which was prepared to cooperate with the ALP to form minority governments. This set the Victorians apart from their colleagues in the other states and, most importantly, was to cause a schism with the federal party.

By 1920 a three-party system existed at state and federal levels, the new MPs for the Country Party finding it difficult to be accepted by the two major parties. The Labor Party put it clearly: ‘the 2-party system is gone ... we may expect a very different parliament.’² Both major parties sought connections with the Country Party so as to strengthen their own position against the other. To prevent political contamination through unauthorised interaction between its members and those of the other parties, the Country Party adopted a constitution and caucus rules based initially on those of the Labor Party. The farmers’ party held the balance of power federally and in Victoria. This situation put enormous pressure on individuals to decide whether political office or pure principle and negotiating skills was the better way to achieve the party’s objectives – a case of ‘men or measures.’ Inevitably there were differences in approach between the general membership and the MPs who had to deliver in the parliamentary sphere.

¹ *Farmers’ Advocate*, 5 October 1922

² *Labor Call*, 24 April 1919

A major area of debate was whether the Country Party should be in coalition or sit on the cross-benches. The arguments were hotly canvassed within and between the parliamentary parties and the membership. The first coalition was the Bruce-Page (1923-29) government at federal level followed soon afterwards by the Lawson-Allan coalition (1923-24) in Victoria. The relationship between the two parties in government would determine whether they were coalitions under one united banner or ‘composite’ governments where each party claimed to retain its identity.

It was a steep learning curve for the VFU parliamentary party. The MPs from the established parties, Labor and Nationalist, looked down on the country boys, almost as intruders and not worthy of being in parliament. Both parties dismissed them, the conservatives as ‘horny-handed sons of the soil’³ while Labor saw them as being confused ideologically and politically. Labor hoped that the emergence of a farmers’ voice would see Australia following the mid-west of Canada and the United States where the farmers cooperated with labour to form the successful Populist Party. This alliance of farmers and unionists had recently captured all of North Dakota and was making ground in Oklahoma. Could a similar alliance here work to cut out the exploiters, the middlemen and the profiteers?⁴ On the other hand, postwar events in Europe and efforts to establish the League of Nations warned Labor that ultimately any partner to an alliance in war would later demonstrate self-interest after the conflict – ‘today’s friends are tomorrow’s enemies.’⁵ What was true of nations could also be true of political parties. One thing was certain. The two-party system was gone; the farmers’ party had constituted itself as a viable third force.

The Nationalists increased their attack on Labor to discredit that party as Catholic-controlled, anti-British and pro-strike, emphasising any aspect which might raise the farmers’ suspicion. The VFU had brought together farmers from across the political spectrum and any future alliance with the major parties would depend largely on which former sector was in the majority of the membership and which side of the fence their

³ Eggleston, *Reflections*, p. 105

⁴ *Labor Call*, 2 January 1919

⁵ *ibid.*, 10 April 1919

leaders formerly supported. In the lead-up to the fourth VFU annual Conference John Allan, leader in the Victorian parliament, in an appeal to delegates was already displaying his anti-Labor position. He held ideas of expansion federally at the expense of Labor, saying too much was being done for the returned soldiers (instead of the farmers) and that the federal electorate of Ballaarat should be contested.⁶ There the sitting Labor MHR D C McGrath could be threatened by the preferential voting system in a three-way contest. A former MLA for Grenville for nine years, he had held Ballaarat since 1913. That he had volunteered and served overseas until invalided home in 1918 might not be enough to save him. The election for Ballaarat⁷ would prove to be one of the closest results in federal history.

The particular voting system in place, varying among the states and at federal level, would be crucial now there were three parties trying to maximise their representation. Preferential voting, federally and in Victoria, would play a major role in determining electoral arrangements among the parties. Labor predicted that it would favour the farmer in the coming Echuca by-election.⁸ Labor decided not to contest the seat and supported the VFU candidate, W C Hill, who became its third MHR when he ‘routed’ the Nationalist ‘soldier’ candidate with a 69 per cent primary vote. Hill would hold Echuca for the next 15 years until succeeded by John McEwen.

Each party was determined to install a new electoral system or modify the existing one to improve its chances at the polls. To negate the preferential system working against Labor, Tunnecliffe (now MLA for Collingwood) put forward the Hare-Clarke system for Victoria, electing by proportional representation three state members in each federal electorate. The proposal was doomed from the start, other parties opposing it, although it remained on Labor’s platform for many years. The simple majority and block preferential systems for electing senators invariably resulted in one party dominating the field and controlling the Senate. Maintaining or challenging that majority illustrated the lengths to which parties in the state parliaments would go to replace a ‘retiring’ senator in mid-term. For example, in September 1917, the ailing Tasmanian Labor Senator R K Ready was replaced by a cleverly engineered overnight exchange where

⁶ *ibid.*, 11 September 1919

⁷ Renamed Ballarat in the 1977 redistribution

⁸ *ibid.*, 21 August 1919

the cabinet and Governor-in-Council appointed John Earle (Nationalist) to take the vacancy while the parliament was not in session.⁹ This ensured Prime Minister Hughes would have the Senate numbers to extend the parliamentary term so he could travel to England for the postwar conferences. Over the next decades, majorities in the state parliaments would vote for their own party candidates, ignoring the people's party choice of the outgoing senator.¹⁰

As the federal election approached, Labor was heartened by news that in New Zealand the farmers and the Labour Party were meeting in conference to cooperate on matters of mutual interest and the adoption of proportional representation. In Ontario, Canada, they had formed a coalition government. Prior to that election on 20 October 1919, Labour held one seat and the Farmers nil. Then Labour with 12 and the Farmers' Party with 48 combined to put the Liberals and Conservatives (with a total of 56) into opposition. Would the federal election deliver a similar result in Australia? The *Labor Call* editorial thought a Labor-Farmer coalition at the federal poll might be the best outcome for Australia leading to a 'union between producer and consumer – the essence of democracy.'¹¹ It also noted that the Canadian Farmers' Party wanted to remain independent. The *Farmers' Advocate* had warned that it would be 'fatal if the VFU was "tagged" to one of the major parties and lose its identity.'¹²

The NSW Country Party, essentially anti-Labor and sponsored by the FSA, in October 1919, saw it differently to their counterparts in the other states. Under their title, the Parliamentary Progressive Party, they did not dismiss cooperation with another party. They believed that temporary association with another party was one of a number of ways in which the new party could achieve their objectives.¹³ The party had decided earlier that being in coalition brought more results than from the cross-benches but the party split over forming a coalition with the Nationalists. The coalition failed and later, after becoming the new leader, M F Bruxner, who had opposed that coalition

⁹ Australian Constitution, s. 15, *Australian Parliamentary Handbook*, 18th edn, Government Printer, Canberra, 1973, p. 667

¹⁰ The *convention* that a retiring Senator was replaced by one of the same party was not established until 1951, after STV PR was adopted for senate elections. The *requirement* was established in 1977 by constitutional referendum.

¹¹ *Labor Call*, 2 October 1919

¹² *Farmers' Advocate*, 18 September 1919

¹³ Aitkin, *op. cit.*, p. 21

constantly, had to demonstrate that ‘support in return for concessions’ was a strategy that would produce results as well as preserve the independence of the party.¹⁴ The desired results were not forthcoming and (over time) Bruxner’s conditional support strategy seemed both grubby and profitless compared to the gains made by Page in the federal coalition with the Nationalists led by S M Bruce.¹⁵

The leaders of the Australian farmers were undecided what to do after the election. In Victoria the reigning view was to remain independent, not allied to any other party. One of those most outspoken for non-alliance was Stewart who was attempting to transfer from state to federal politics by contesting Wimmera against the sitting Nationalist member Sydney Sampson. The VFU was undecided also whether to contest Bendigo. They would wait until Prime Minister Hughes had delivered his policy speech.

The political effects of the Great War were still having a direct influence on campaigning. Labor would certainly oppose ‘the rat’ Hughes and endorsed an ex-soldier Lt Hampson to demonstrate that loyalty and bravery to one’s country and the motherland was not confined to the Nationalists. Strangely, Hampson’s return to Australia was held up by a repeat of the government’s strategy at the 1917 election when Labor’s Alfred T Ozanne MHR was held up in Colombo, only to arrive after the election too late to save his seat of Corio from the Nationalists. In South Australia another returned soldier, Labor Senator James O’Loughlin, was facing re-election. Promoting these men may have slightly offset the anti-conscription label affixed to Labor so the Nationalists coupled their strategy with anti-Catholicism, linking Labor’s campaign director and Queensland Premier, the Catholic T J Ryan, with Archbishop Mannix of Melbourne. The anti-conscription campaign took an ugly turn when one week before the election a large body of soldiers went to Maroona, 12 miles south of Ararat, and tarred and feathered former Labor MHR J K McDougall for anti-war poetry he had allegedly written some 17 years earlier during the Boer War. It appeared that one poem’s last line had been unscrupulously distorted in an anti-Labor leaflet.¹⁶ The Nationalists appeared to be prepared to do anything which would tarnish Labor’s loyalty to the Empire and alienate the farmers’ party from Labor.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 25

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Faulkner and Macintyre, *op. cit.*, p. 44

At the election, held yet once again at harvest time to the annoyance of the farmers, the Nationalists lost 14 seats: eight to the Country Parties, four to Labor and two to independents. Notable results in Victoria included Percy Stewart successfully transferring to the federal seat of Wimmera (Labor did not contest but campaigned for him), the second defeat of Ozanne in Corio and a dead-heat in Ballarat. A recount there resulted in another tie before a third count gave the seat to Nationalist E T J Kerby by one vote. The result was later successfully challenged and ‘voided’ by the High Court. Labor’s McGrath regained the seat at the subsequent by-election.

The farmers’ party was now in a position to support either major federal party in a coalition, alliance or from the cross-benches. An early approach was made by the deputy leader of the Labor Party, William G Higgs, who at the declaration of the poll for his seat of Capricornia suggested working arrangements, either a coalition with the dozen or so farmer MPs or even a minority Country Party government supported by Labor. He claimed that the smashing defeat of Hughes at the polls required a total rethink, adding that the unions had too much control over the caucus. This offer did not tempt the farmers but did induce Higgs’ fellow Queensland members to rebuke him and oppose any cooperation.¹⁷ When parliament met, T J Ryan saw to it that Higgs was expelled from the caucus. He responded by joining with the ACP to vote against Labor’s no-confidence motion in the Hughes government.

To assist keeping Hughes in government, the Nationalists and the Melbourne city press saw the necessity of no longer offending the farmers’ representatives. Noticeably in debate and in articles, the farmer and his party were no longer the butt of stories by Steele Rudd or referred to as cockies and hayseeds. They were now to be respected and courted.¹⁸ Some of the MPs had been endorsed by both farmers and Nationalists. John M Chanter, the member for Riverina, although elected for the FSA, showed dual party allegiance as did Jowett in Grampians. Chanter chose his former party the Nationalists over the ACP to secure the position of Chairman of Committees. When pressed, Jowett went with the ACP, putting measures above men. Arnold Wienholt (Moreton) also chose the ACP but declared support for the Nationalists ‘to give them a chance.’

¹⁷ *Farmers’ Advocate*, 8 January 1920

¹⁸ *Labor Call*, 29 January 1920

At the first meeting of the rural caucus, members determined to call themselves the Australian Country Party (ACP) and to act independently of other political organisations. Seeing how Chanter had been ‘seduced’ they decided it would be political stupidity to accept any nominations which bound them other than to their own party as this would reduce their numbers and threaten their balance of power. Provisional leader W J McWilliams immediately declared he could not support a Hughes government. Understandably, too, when he acknowledged that the Nationalists had made a clean sweep of the Senate poll he could not be in alignment with Labor as this would have been totally frustrating with most legislation being successfully opposed in the upper house. McWilliams had been elected party leader for a provisional 12 months on the basis of his long parliamentary experience. In parliament for 16 years he had been in the Liberal and Nationalist parties but now had joined the farmers. Moreover, given the different backgrounds of members of the new party, a definite choice of leader from one major party background over another was impossible. The farmers recognised they owed their numbers to both parties under the preferential system. An analysis of the Senate vote compared to that for the House of Representatives in three seats showed that the victories depended on Labor deliberately not contesting Wimmera, Grampians and Echuca. Where there were three-way contest wins, by Cook in Indi and Gibson in Corangamite, these depended on Nationalist preferences. The farmers decided to tread carefully, pledging themselves to be independent of both major parties.

While Labor detested the three-party system, it did acknowledge that financial questions would now be debated openly in parliament whereas before under the two-party single majority system they were decided beforehand and simply voted upon. The intrusion of the ACP also exposed the power of the Prime Minister and cabinet over individual MPs.¹⁹ In mid-year the Hughes government majority was further trimmed when Labor regained Ballarat at a by-election, this time the VFU turning it into a three-way contest. Labor was angry that the:

¹⁹ *ibid.*

sectionalist farmers party had entered what should have been a repeat two candidate contest in the provincial city and was somewhat pleased to see the VFU candidate lose his deposit.²⁰

Personal differences as well as the narrowing majority plagued Hughes' ministry. His treasurer W A Watt resigned to be replaced by Joseph Cook, while support from the ACP weakened as it split over a Labor sponsored censure motion. Stewart and McWilliams voted with Labor, while others voted against. It would be a testing time for the new third party and its leader to control its members, avoid splits and prevent members attending meetings of the other parties.

Similar pressures were experienced by the VFU in Victoria. The position adopted by David S Oman (MLA for Hampden) was untenable. Although a member of the Lismore VFU he remained a Nationalist and accepted the agriculture portfolio in the Lawson Nationalist government. The *Farmers' Advocate* was stirred to run a series of editorials calling for unity and a front page article as a reminder to all of the VFU's origins, purpose and challenges. It argued that the signing of a pledge was essential to ensure cohesion and loyalty and that the rank and file should be the body to approve coalitions and alignments. MPs were 'representatives, not the dictators of the movement,' it boldly stated: 'Mr Oman should remember he was a minister in a very different government under Bowser, one supported by the VFU. We did not elect him to the Lawson government.'²¹

These concerns were clearly evident as the VFU, flushed with success, sought more candidates in rural seats to expand their numbers. Candidates should be selected, not on personality nor local popularity, but on merits and the ability to deliver policies – measures not men.²² Marcus Wettenhall, who had been a tireless campaigner across Victoria at the previous election, now sought preselection for Lowan after the Horsham branch considered that the sitting Nationalist MP James Menzies should be opposed unless he signed the pledge and explained why he lived in Melbourne when he represented a country electorate. Observers would have also noted Wettenhall's earlier

²⁰ *ibid.*, 22 July 1920

²¹ *Farmers' Advocate*, 1 April 1920

²² *ibid.*, 18 March 1920

explanation for his own decision to live in Melbourne – for his children’s opportunity for education. Another fact to be noted was the excuse he gave when he failed to attend the declaration by the electorate council of his endorsement over another candidate ‘due to the late advice of the meeting.’²³ Both issues would be raised again 15 years later when Wettenhall was challenged by Hamilton Lamb as party strategists sought to oust him. Virtually hidden on page three of the same issue of *Farmers’ Advocate* were two lines detailing the endorsement of an A A Dunstan as VFU candidate for the electorate of Eaglehawk held by Labor.

As the election grew nearer and the quest for candidates intensified, the question of the pledge became a public issue. Oman complained that after giving a lifetime of service to country people he had been dis-endorsed. Raising the spectre of ‘sectionalism’ he promised to represent *all* people in his electorate and damned preselection by a few farmers as undemocratic. One VFU member, Tom Paterson who was contesting Dalhousie, responded: ‘there was a time when I doubted the necessity for the pledge; now I am convinced it is our sheet anchor.’²⁴ Later he would reverse this stand when his own career was threatened.

A by-election for the North Eastern province for the Legislative Council raised the hopes of the VFU even higher when Dr John R Harris won with a 56 per cent vote. The Central Council, with backing from the Bendigo Conference and buoyed by that election outcome, decided to contest 28 seats at the election. The major parties attempted to dampen that optimism as did the provincial press when the *Geelong Times* commented that it was absurd and hopeless to look to the day when it was possible to form a country ministry – at best it could hold the balance of power.²⁵

At the October 1920 election Lawson was returned on the back of a solid but hardly spectacular record and fell short of a majority in the Assembly.²⁶ The Nationalists lost seven seats. Labor gained two and the VFU six, including Wettenhall from the Nationalists in Lowan and Dunstan from Tunnecliffe (Labor) in Eaglehawk by just nine

²³ *ibid.*, 3 June 1920

²⁴ *ibid.*, 24 June 1920

²⁵ Quoted in *Farmers’ Advocate*, 30 September 1920

²⁶ M Fitzherbert, ‘Harry Lawson, sure and steady’ in P Strangio and B Costar (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 164

votes. Tunnecliffé had been vulnerable for in 1917 he had survived a close result on VFU preferences. At that election if the VFU had occupied second place it would have got over the line on Nationalist preferences. It seemed that in Eaglehawk Labor was the ‘common enemy.’

The farmers’ party now held the balance of power at state and federal levels, and the Labor Party found that meteoric rise somewhat disconcerting.²⁷ The successes of the cooperation between farmers and workers in Canada and the United States had failed to materialise in Australia. The despondency deepened as Labor recalled recent reports of the Farmer-Labor Party in North Dakota setting up a state bank and farmers insurance while enacting a Workers’ Compensation Act. The dream was apparently to be limited to North America.²⁸

Labor began to realise that in future their candidates for the upper house rural provinces would have to be farmers to receive any exchange of preferences. Victorian Labor now boasted three farmers in their ranks, with William Thomas (Glenelg) joining Henry S Bailey (Port Fairy from 1914) and Edmund J Hogan (Warrenheip from 1913). Also they needed more discipline in some country electorates to exercise leverage. Where Labor did not contest a seat it generally was united in delivering votes to the VFU, as with Percy Stewart, where Labor-minded farmers supported him. But in Kara Kara the Labor branches split in their advocacy of preferences for the VFU and Nationalist candidates.²⁹ Labor was learning fast that three-cornered elections and three-party parliaments were an entirely new experience.

When parliament resumed, Allan, the VFU leader, moved the no-confidence motion against the Lawson government only to see Labor move a number of amendments which, as Bailey admitted, confused the inexperienced VFU.³⁰ These sought clarification as to why the government had failed to deliver a range of policies (all Labor). They were passed with VFU support then Labor and the Nationalists voted to defeat Allan’s motion.³¹ Ultimately Allan’s party voted to support the Lawson

²⁷ *Labor Call*, 4 November 1920

²⁸ *ibid.*, 2 September 1920

²⁹ *ibid.*, 11 November 1920

³⁰ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 156, 24 November 1920, pp. 202-316

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 316

government, blaming Labor for forcing them to do so ‘through a series of clever amendments.’ Labor saw it differently – that the Nationalists had tricked the newcomers. As *Labor Call* put it: ‘the farmers were outmanoeuvred by the old stager – they may get up early but will have to get up with the moon to beat *them*.’³² Lawson exerted his control also by being the Minister for Agriculture.

While the conservatives appeared less troubled by the three-party system as they could generally call upon sections of the Country Party in times of need, the Country Party itself was still determining its forward path through the maze of options and possibilities. Labor stood to one side by virtue of its no-coalition policy. It was also virtually hamstrung by an electoral system that was biased towards country electorates, leaving it largely confined to the city with few exceptions such as the four farmer Labor MLAs mentioned earlier and provincial Ballarat. This was illustrated when Edwin J Mackrell MLA (VFU) was declared ‘unelected’ for the seat of Upper Goulburn as he had incorrectly completed his nomination form. At the by-election in the New Year Mackrell received over 78 per cent of the Nationalist preferences, enabling him to beat the Labor candidate. This was in contrast to the election strategy itself in 1919, where over several electorates Labor and the Nationalists had attempted to exchange their preferences to squeeze out the VFU.³³ The farmers were certainly learning that your enemies one day could be your friends the next, especially if they wanted something in return. Inevitably Labor was fast losing hope of working in tandem with the VFU, seeing the Nationalists and the ‘so-called’ Farmers’ Party as one. As *Labor Call* put it: ‘two parties in “bogus uniform”, camouflaged parties, designed to hoodwink the people. The farmers are happy to criticise the Nats, to deride them, but vote for them.’³⁴

This feeling was intensified when Victoria saw several pro-conscription Labor MPs in Western Australia leave to join the Country Party. Further, the leader of those ‘rats,’ John Scaddan, a former Premier at age 35, was likely to become Premier again, heading a Country Party government. It puzzled Labor why the farmers’ party was growing. It seemed to be a ‘sham and a gay deceiver but the name took.’ The electorate was simply

³² *Labor Call*, 2 December 1920

³³ *Farmers’ Advocate*, 14 October 1920

³⁴ *Labor Call*, 17 March 1921

replacing the Nationalists with a different form of ‘sectionalist’ conservative: ‘These mushroom parties will grow and the two-party system disappear.’³⁵

Federally, McWilliams had not proved to be a strong leader and had shown an increasing tendency to vote against the majority decision of his colleagues. He certainly had not measured up to the requirements of the editor of the *Farmers’ Advocate* who had outlined the essential characteristics of a leader for a small emerging party: ‘the ablest and keenest perception of our ideals’ and ‘the courage and determination of leadership.’³⁶ McWilliams was replaced by their most educated and best spoken MP, Dr Earle Page, who had been secretary of the parliamentary party. Oddly, in almost a form of reverse-snobishness, the *Farmers’ Advocate* would refer to their new federal leader as *Mr* Page. Page was an active proponent of the New States Movement, in particular arguing for the separate states of New England and the Riverina, but this cause did not distract him from the important issues of tariffs, government frugality and rural exports. Incidentally federal Labor at the time also had a proposal for reorganising the Australian states into some thirty sub-areas or mini-states.

Adjustment to the three-party system delivered several unplanned events. The *Age*, voicing the disillusionment with Hughes as Prime Minister, floated the possibility of the ACP coalescing with dissatisfied Nationalists to overthrow him. Publicly, for the first time, suggested new leaders included W A Watt and S M Bruce. An initial foray failed when James Fowler (Nationalist, Perth) a week later was unable to gain support for his attack on Hughes. Shortly afterwards, on 14 April 1921, Edmund Jowett moved the adjournment motion to discuss the excessive and crushing rates of ocean freight. The government was defeated when Labor’s whip, Jim Page of Maranoa, called a sudden division to test the resolve of the Country Party on the issue. Quickly Hughes and Earle Page gathered the numbers to vote confidence in the Nationalist government the next day. The new ACP leader, in the position for less than a fortnight, was proving his mettle. Ironically Jim Page, who had held his seat since Federation, died two months later, with James Hunter of the ACP winning the by-election and holding Maranoa for the next 19 years until it was briefly regained by Labor.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 24 March 1921

³⁶ *Farmers’ Advocate*, 8 January 1920

In Victoria the question of compulsory wheat pools continued. The businessmen and middlemen, the ‘Collins Street farmers,’ were opposed to any form of controlled wheat pools which cut out the merchants between grower and buyer. They set up a Victorian Farmers Committee to campaign against the VFU’s support for the continuation of the pool. The move failed, with 86 per cent of farmers supporting the poll for the pool. In office less than a year, the Lawson government was defeated in July by a combined VFU-Labor vote over its decision to abolish the compulsory wheat pool.³⁷ The vote of no-confidence was the second moved by Allan against the Lawson government.³⁸ On learning that the VFU and Labor were ‘conspiring’ to demonstrate to the Victorian Governor that a government could be carried on by these parties, Premier Lawson quickly persuaded the Governor that a dissolution of parliament was necessary and that the vote over the compulsory wheat pool issue would not translate into reliable, continuing government. Labor, which had argued that VFU support for a minority government was viable, alleged that Viscount Stradbroke had ‘capitulated to the Tories ... favouritism and weight carried the day.’³⁹

The role of the Governor in deciding which combination of parties in a three-party system could form a reliable and continuing government would be a major feature of Victoria parliamentary politics for the next 30 years. Successive Governors required that a concrete arrangement had been arrived at between parties seeking to form a government. Labor viewed the office of Governor as an outdated, conservative controller over the colonies, appointed from the British military and/or minor aristocracy. He would be one familiar with the political system in Britain which was somewhat different to that in Australia, the main difference being that ‘first past the post’ voting usually produced a clear majority in the Commons for one party, quite unlike Victoria’s party system sustained by the alternate ballot. Moreover, the British Labour Party was not against forming coalitions as was Labor in Australia which would form only a minority government or provide support from the cross-benches. Employing a measure of payback to the charge of Labor being Catholic and pro-Irish, *Labor Call* said that the Governor had been hustled by Alexander Peacock ‘who had

³⁷ Fitzherbert, op. cit., p. 164

³⁸ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 157, 1921, p. 111

³⁹ *Labor Call*, 11 August 1921

made Masonic signs at him.’⁴⁰ It had not gone unnoticed by Labor that most Governors were installed as Grand Masters of the Victorian Masonic Lodge.

Recently elected MLA for Lowan Marcus Wettenhall could see no reason for his party not supporting a minority Labor government: ‘just because Labor’s platform has a compulsory wheat pool is no reason for the VFU to reject it. It would benefit the whole country.’⁴¹ Wettenhall may have had his ear to the ground in his electorate but the use of the double negatives in his statement suggests that there was a strong conservative element within him still or he was being muted in his criticism of his leader Allan who opposed the wheat pools. Lawson responded that while the wheat pool had worked during the war it was ‘socialistic’ and had to go, and that the alliance between the VFU and Labor was ‘an insincere and temporary one between two hostile groups.’⁴²

Leading up to the polls in August, the Melbourne press railed against the VFU but this did not dampen the hopes of the farmers’ party gaining seats especially when they learned the result of the Maranoa by-election in Queensland. In Victoria however the swing to rural parties faltered and overall the electorate hardly shifted, the only change in seats being the loss of Gibson (VFU) in Grenville to Labor, which had picked up Collingwood while losing Prahran, a nett gain of one seat. The Lowan electorate was evenly divided, Wettenhall holding out from a come-back attempt by his predecessor James Menzies to win by less than 30 votes, a result confirmed after a recount. Now the party representation in the Assembly was Nationalists 31, Labor 21, VFU 12 and independents one. A minority government or a coalition would be necessary to govern, the two keys to the outcome being the VFU and the Governor’s response to any approach unless the decision was left to the parliament to decide on its resumption. The VFU, through the *Farmers’ Advocate*, criticised the city press as ‘the most disgraceful, unholy alliance of newspapers that this state has ever seen’ as those papers attacked the VFU during the campaign but now set out to woo it after the poll.⁴³ Any chance of the VFU and Lawson forming a coalition was dashed when the VFU Annual Conference at

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*, 25 August 1921

⁴³ *Farmers’ Advocate*, 8 September 1921

Geelong unanimously affirmed independence for their party: ‘we are not anti-Labor nor anti-Nationalist.’⁴⁴

Parliament met and Labor leader George Prendergast MLA (North Melbourne) confidently moved his no-confidence motion over the government’s refusal to continue the compulsory wheat pool.⁴⁵ He had been assured of the numbers and bolstered by the VFU Conference decision. Lawson sought an extended break for dinner, which was readily granted by the Speaker,⁴⁶ so that Allan could hector the VFU backbenchers into submission. The VFU MPs wilted under pressure during that two-hour respite. When the vote finally was taken only four stood firm – Carlisle, Dunstan, Old and Wettenhall, the latter declaring that ‘some good measures emanated even from the Labour [sic] party.’⁴⁷ The no-confidence motion was defeated 37:26.⁴⁸ Lawson would remain as Premier heading a Nationalist government which introduced a ‘wheat pool which while ostensibly voluntary, was in practice compulsory.’⁴⁹

Why had most of the MPs capitulated to their leader? Why had they denied the call for independence by the Conference and rejected the opportunity to continue the compulsory wheat pool, when 86 per cent of farmers supported it, and also have conditional control over a Labor government? Labor saw the answer in the VFU leadership. During the debate Allan had declared there was greater affinity between farmers and Nationalists than with Labor: ‘I was not sent into parliament to put the Labor Party on the treasury benches.’⁵⁰ He explained that the pool would not have worked under Labor as the Legislative Council was overwhelmingly anti-Labor. Labor also sensed another reason. If Labor had formed a government the VFU feared that it would have brought about a redistribution of Assembly seats (the Legislative Council willing) which would have diluted the VFU representation and threatened their existence.⁵¹ While the VFU was led by Allan, Labor’s hopes for minority government support were virtually nil. During his leadership Labor would regard the VFU with

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 22 September 1921

⁴⁵ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 158, 6 September 1921, p. 34

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 53

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 59

⁴⁹ D Garden, ‘Lawson, Sir Harry Sutherland Wightman’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 10, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1986, p. 17

⁵⁰ *Labor Call*, 22 September 1921

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 29 September 1921

suspicion and vigilance because that party's support was reliable only on issues in keeping with their sectional interests.⁵²

One consequence of the no-confidence vote in the Lawson government was that it exposed a clear difference of attitude between the VFU organisation and the parliamentary party on several matters. In particular these were issues covered by the pledge, the policies taken to the election and the Conference decision not to enter a coalition. Then there was the continuing question of unity on matters arising after the election while parliament was meeting. As a way forward the Central Council agreed that, after a meeting of the parliamentary executive where an issue was not covered by the party pledge and it was declared to be vital, a full discussion by the parliamentary party was to take place and all members were to vote accordingly.⁵³ This agreement gave more power to the leader and brought with it greater 'caucus solidarity.' Members were now prevented from attending meetings of other political parties but this did not stop cross-party discussions. Throughout 1921 a 'country-liberal' group was established within the Nationalists to canvass issues with the VFU MPs. The objective for the government was to avoid unnecessary debate in parliament, while for the VFU it gave an opportunity to influence government policy without being in any formal coalition. The VFU group included Allan, Bowser, Bouchier, Dunstan and Old. Not surprisingly Lawson viewed these informal cross-party links with some concern for his authority.⁵⁴

At federal level, the strength of the ACP was threatened by a draft Electoral Redistribution Bill which abolished two of their federal seats in Victoria, Corangamite and Grampians. Page demonstrated his negotiating skills when, after failing to convince the commissioners to increase the size of the House of Representatives by one to 76 to maintain Victoria's number of seats, he did manage to convince them to retain Corangamite. Redistribution also convinced Prime Minister Hughes that Bendigo was no longer a safe Nationalist seat and he considered transferring to another one, possibly North Sydney. Leadership is a key element in any party's strength, as Page was showing, and the Nationalists' respect for their leader Hughes was fading. The names of Bruce and Watt were still discussed in the corridors as possible contenders. Hughes'

⁵² *ibid.*, 20 October 1921

⁵³ *Farmers' Advocate*, 3 November 1921

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 6 July 1922

many lengthy overseas visits, his autocratic style and favouring of policies retaining some Labor characteristics were alienating some of his supporters.⁵⁵ As the postwar economy tightened and unemployment rose slightly there was division as to how these issues should be tackled. Business interests were not satisfied with Hughes' token call for lower wages (they wanted the whole arbitration system dismantled) and perhaps it was time to displace not only Hughes but also those former Labor ministers and MPs who had crossed the floor in 1917 to form the Nationalist fusion.

In mid-year, to appease the conservatives in his party and business leaders, Hughes completed the sale of the profitable Commonwealth Woollen Mills established in 1910 by the Fisher government. Page too, was expressing disappointment in Hughes, declaring 'the PM had been in office ten years and the result is seen in a decaying countryside with declining production,' yet he and most of his party continued to support the Nationalists.⁵⁶ The ACP and the VFU were careful in their voting on individual issues, wary of unseating the Nationalists at federal and state levels. Splits in their ranks enabled them to achieve both objectives – no danger to Hughes, but saving face with their rank and file. An examination of the Commonwealth *Hansard* from 10 March 1920 to the dissolution of the parliament on November 1922 demonstrates a series of split votes among the ACP either to deny Labor's policies or to save the government even though the outcome was against country interests such as better postal and telephone services for rural areas. Sometimes the ACP went against amendments moved by their leader McWilliams or directly against ACP policy such as delaying tax on increased livestock until selling them. In the Victorian parliament, the VFU developed its own tactics, and on one occasion decided not to vote at all on a particular question, thus achieving the double target of humiliating Premier Lawson but saving him from defeat.

The 1922 VFU Conference at Ballarat provided Page not only with a platform for the approaching federal election but also an opportunity to summarise the rapid growth in influence of the Country Parties across Australia. In five years of existence the party could boast 107 representatives in seven parliaments, holding the balance of power in Victoria and NSW, being the official opposition in Queensland and the watchdog

⁵⁵ See for example D Horne, *Billy Hughes*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2000, pp. 155 ff.

⁵⁶ *Labor Call*, 29 June 1922

federally. He told the delegates: 'It could be said that the VFU had a first class record at school.'⁵⁷ Page followed this with his election speech at Grafton where he outlined the ACP policy on cooperation with other parties:

We are not prepared to enter into any entangling alliances which would in any way destroy the entity of the Country Party. We are however prepared to cooperate with any other representatives of the people upon the floor of the House in the conduct of government of the country who hold the same ideals and principles which we advocate.⁵⁸

During the 1922 election the farmers of the Wimmera vented their great dissatisfaction with Hughes. When he visited Horsham a large protest exhibited similar hatred to that demonstrated during the 1919 election egg-throwing incident at Warwick in Queensland which led to the creation of the Commonwealth Police. Hughes was wise to have left Bendigo, as the Nationalist candidate Col. Geoffrey Hurry only narrowly won the seat on Jowett's VFU preferences. Had Hughes stood, the Nationalists would have lost the seat due to a serious drift in VFU preferences.⁵⁹ The election was held prior to Christmas, again during the early harvest season, annoying the farmers. There was a low turnout of less than 50 per cent. Most Labor MPs who had crossed with Hughes to the Nationalists over the conscription issue were defeated. Overall, the Nationalists lost 12 seats, four to Labor, three to the ACP and five to the emergent Liberals. The ACP had agreed to exchange preferences with those former Nationalists who had formed the Liberal parties in Victoria and South Australia to oppose Hughes' candidates.⁶⁰ The VFU maintained its numbers as Paterson's win in Gippsland compensated for the loss of Jowett when his seat of Grampians was abolished.

The ACP's balance of power was now much stronger and with this came the opportunity to be in a coalition government or to support one of the major parties from the cross-benches. Page could now put the principles of his Grafton speech into practice. The *Farmers' Advocate* was clear: 'strong leadership will determine our future

⁵⁷ *Farmers' Advocate*, 5 October 1922

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 26 October 1922

⁵⁹ Page, *op. cit.*, p. 112

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 109

and our strongest and weakest moment. Compromise and vacillation will see the ACP sink.⁶¹

Over January, following an invitation to the ACP by re-elected Nationalist leader Hughes to enter a coalition, the debate continued over the prospect and possibilities. For J J Hall, editor of the *Farmers' Advocate*, it was a clear choice between office or power – office without power or power without office. There was also the danger of the relatively smaller party being absorbed:

If we do not continue as a third and independent party it is nothing – we will be a rump. Conditional support is the best position as in Victoria where we have resisted fusion and coalition.⁶²

In advocating the corner position to achieve their platform he recognised that support for the Nationalists was more likely as Labor would not have a majority in the Senate.⁶³ Backbenchers were also warned that in coalition they would be restricted, as cabinet membership demanded solidarity from them as well. The experience in Western Australia had been that, in coalition, Country Party ministers broke away from their association with their backbenchers which weakened the party as a whole. Seeds for this weakness in solidarity lay in the fact that the coalition agreement of 1917 had not been confirmed and clarified so that the relationship deteriorated to the point that by the early 1920s the parliamentary Country Party was practically reduced to a ministerial faction, its cabinet representatives holding themselves responsible only to the Premier.⁶⁴ The backbench was ignored. This 'split' was temporarily healed when the September conference of the PPA convinced the backbench to share responsibility for government policy until the next election, thus avoiding a dissolution.⁶⁵

Finally, exasperated by Hughes' autocratic manner, Page and the ACP refused to consider coalition with the Nationalists while he was Prime Minister. Alternatives suggested were a new leader with whom Page could work or, if pushed to a no-confidence vote, a minority Country Party government with other party support. But the

⁶¹ *Farmers' Advocate*, 29 December 1922

⁶² *ibid.*, 4 January 1923

⁶³ *ibid.*, 4 January 1923

⁶⁴ Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 179

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 215-18

disadvantage of the latter was that Page would face a hostile Senate. Whatever the outcome, Labor would not benefit from the final arrangement between the two non-Labor parties. During the negotiations the new situation of three parties competing, with two of the competitors opposed to each other (Labor and Nationalists) vying to keep their opponent out of office, fascinated the press, the *Argus* stating that ‘the political game was not a game of three-hand cut-throat euchre’⁶⁶ while Labor saw it all as a three-card trick.⁶⁷

Labor could see that the Governor-General was growing impatient with the negotiations between Hughes and Page. Labor believed that Lord Forster, acquainted with British politics, ‘expected’ Hughes, who had been humiliated at the polls, to resign and a minority Labor government installed but Hughes maintained a coalition agreement was in the offing. Forster demanded action and not to wait until the parliament reassembled. After two and a half weeks of negotiations (described by one historian as plotting and scheming)⁶⁸ Hughes finally capitulated and resigned, recommending that the Governor-General send for Stanley Bruce.⁶⁹ Hughes advised the Governor-General to confer with Bruce rather than his deputy Littleton Groom not only because he was aware of the talks between Page and Bruce but because Groom was not ‘the man of the moment’ – a retiring and timid man and not one to welcome the onerous responsibilities involved in leading a government.⁷⁰ The coalition government was sworn in on 9 February 1923 and 18 months later the parties negotiated an electoral pact which caused controversy within the CP – especially in Victoria.⁷¹ The *Farmers’ Advocate*⁷² was somewhat perplexed by the formation of the coalition, especially as the Victorian president of the VFU, Tom Paterson (newly elected MHR for Gippsland), was selectively silent on the outcome which was contrary to policy. The paper asked whether the Governor-General had demanded unity for, if so, this labelled the ACP as anti-Labor which in Victoria it was not. Paterson claimed that conditional support or sitting on the cross-benches had

⁶⁶ *Argus*, 23 January 1923

⁶⁷ *Labor Call*, 26 January 1923

⁶⁸ B Costar, ‘The merger idea and Australia’s non-Labor parties 1917-1990’ in B Costar and S Prasser (eds), *Amalgamate or Perish? The Future of Non-Labor Parties in Australia*, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, 1990, p. 12

⁶⁹ *Labor Call*, 8 February 1923

⁷⁰ Page, op. cit., p. 122

⁷¹ Account based on material in Ulrich Ellis papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS1006,1-16 and 31-2, Box 4

⁷² *Farmers’ Advocate*, 15 February 1923

been virtually ruled out by Forster. To Paterson, any alternatives other than a coalition seemed unacceptable to the Governor-General as Bruce himself had rejected minority government. He added that external support from the ACP would have made his party the ‘tail on the dog’ for it to work.⁷³

With Bruce as leader, the negotiations resumed for a composite ministry and were quickly completed. The two leaders worked alone in Bruce’s Toorak flat with Gibson and Stewart on hand if necessary to assist Page. Stewart demanded that the negotiations followed the wishes of the rank and file but Page resisted this by leaving Stewart outside the dealings between the two leaders. Page’s precondition for any discussions was that all Hughes’ ex-Labor comrades be denied places in the ministry but he relented when Bruce insisted that George Pearce be included. The term ‘composite’ was deliberate to downplay any suggestion of fusion or coalition but recognising an alliance. The basic principle was that each party retained its separate identity.⁷⁴

The deal was concluded and the ministry sworn in before the AFFO or the ACP parliamentary party were given a chance to meet and consider or comment on the agreement. The Victorians were caught unprepared as the federal parliament would meet before the VFU had time to officially sanction the agreement. It wanted answers to several questions such as the allocation and numbers of portfolios, whether the ‘lust for office’ played any part and whether any successful coalition would continue after this parliament, suggesting an electoral pact would need to be put in place.⁷⁵ There was some consternation among members of the VFU Central Council and a measure of distrust as the deal had been done after most of the parliamentary party had returned home and the ministry sworn in before they reassembled.⁷⁶

The same issue of the *Farmers’ Advocate* canvassed a number of issues that troubled the VFU. Why was Paterson silent and excluded from discussions? What would be the role of the parliamentary party if the leader and his lieutenants ran the party as with the negotiations? What would be the future relationship among leaders, cabinet, backbenchers and the rank and file? What respect would be afforded the party platform

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Page, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-4

⁷⁵ *Farmers’ Advocate*, 15 February 1923

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

and objectives? It appeared all would be decided by the two leaders, and the rest expected to follow. Albert Dunstan was reported as saying he was saddened to see his party in alliance with a defeated and discredited party.⁷⁷ There was some consolation in that Page had obtained five portfolios in a ministry of 11, including the Treasury, Post Master General and Works and Railways and that there was not a single metropolitan-based MP in the ministry. Whether this latter aspect was by accident or design could only be guessed at but it did mean that the Country Party policy had a very good chance of being implemented.⁷⁸ Three months later the farmers would be disappointed when, contrary to their interests, Bruce completed the sale of the Commonwealth Woollen Mills and replaced the governor of the Commonwealth Bank with a carefully chosen board of directors.⁷⁹ The board now with four directors drawn from the rural sector and four from manufacturing would ensure that the Commonwealth Bank no longer ‘competed’ with the private banks, thus leading to higher rates of interest. A Rural Credits Department of the Commonwealth Bank was established.

Australia’s attention was focused on the federal parliament in the first months of the year, particularly in the Victorian press as the federal parliament was still based in Melbourne and the Prime Minister lived in Toorak, though he held the then rural seat of Flinders. Some interest returned to state parliament when it resumed after a six month recess. Again the Electoral Redistribution Bill dominated the VFU parliamentary discussions. They worried that if the city benefited at the expense of the rural community then the country would lose any benefits of active decentralisation, lower taxes and higher production. A by-election for Daylesford provided the opportunity for the VFU to demonstrate it also stood for the townspeople and that their future and prosperity was linked to the country not the city. The VFU endorsed the high-profile mayor of Daylesford but oddly he was a sharebroker which would not have necessarily appealed to the local farmers while Labor ran a farmer. After preferences Labor won the three-way contest by two votes. On a recount and a decision of the Parliamentary Elections and Qualifications Committee the seat was awarded to the Nationalists. This showed the VFU that they needed to select their candidates more appropriately for their supporters’ base if they were to expand their numbers in parliament. It also showed that

⁷⁷ *Labor Call*, 15 February 1923

⁷⁸ *Farmers’ Advocate*, 15 February 1923

⁷⁹ *Labor Call*, 3 May 1923

the Qualifications Committee, dominated by government members, was not impartial in its decision.

Premier Lawson on his return from an extensive overseas mission to Europe and North America encountered renewed unrest in his party. The Country Party members and a faction of the Nationalists known as the Metropolitan Liberals attacked the government, accusing it of ‘indolence.’⁸⁰ He was also criticised for being slightly pro-Labor in his administration and for granting ‘concessional plums’ to the opposition.⁸¹ Following this internal criticism he had reduced the size of his ministry and was under fire outside, particularly from Dunstan who had been critical of the conservatism of that ministry. On a vote in the house, Labor saved the government because it feared the possibility of the alternative – a coalition of Nationalists and farmers, quoting the *Herald* that such a coalition would be ‘an orgy of political conspiracy, bargaining, wire-pulling and barrow-pushing.’⁸² Labor’s vote only deferred the fate of a dying ministry, the dissidents among the Nationalists, the VFU and Labor combining to defeat the government on a vote of no-confidence. Lawson resigned as Premier and proposed a composite ministry with the VFU and Allan as his deputy along similar lines to the Bruce-Page example. Such an alliance had been encouraged by newspapers such as the *Argus* as the only way to keep Labor out of power.⁸³

For Allan the federal coalition, condoned by the VFU March Conference, seemed to be the model to follow and he agreed to duplicate it in Victoria. But whereas the ACP was drawn from several states and so most unlike the Victorian membership in profile, the support for a coalition was not as enthusiastic.⁸⁴ Conference had demanded equality or a majority of portfolios. Accusations flew that the VFU parliamentary party had been ‘sucked in by the lure of office,’ a feeling confirmed when the Central Council meeting *in camera* attended by MPs Allan and Wettenhall and chaired by Paterson gave its approval.⁸⁵ The decision by the rank and file at the March Conference had been ignored; there were only five VFU ministers in a ministry of 12. Allan claimed he was

⁸⁰ *Age*, 21 June 1923

⁸¹ Letter from A A Farthing to Lawson, 31 July 1923, Frederic William Eggleston papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS0423/7/71

⁸² *Labor Call*, 6 September 1923

⁸³ *Argus*, 28 August 1923

⁸⁴ *Farmers’ Advocate*, 7 September 1923

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 7 September 1923

virtually forced by circumstances into the coalition and referred to the coalition constantly as ‘this side of the House.’⁸⁶ In reality, Allan had exercised excellent political skills in achieving the deputy premiership and five portfolios in a cabinet of 12 when his party had only 13 members in the Assembly to the Nationalists’ 31. His achievement equalled that of Page at the federal level.⁸⁷

However, this tactic did not mollify the radicals in the VFU caucus who were left out of the negotiations. Suspicion on the legislative dealings particularly with respect to the Redistribution Bill was high. Allan, backed by Paterson, claimed that staying in the corner would not have persuaded the Governor that a minority government, of whatever party, would have been predictably secure.⁸⁸ Now the VFU, renamed the Victorian Country Party (VCP), was in coalition at both federal and state levels. Realising that he was alienated from the rank and file point of view, Allan explained that while the VCP had voted against the ministry on occasions past, the government had been in trouble:

it was time to get off the rail as critics and take part in government ... united on an honourable understanding to carry on the business of the State ... for the welfare of the people.

He boasted that the VCP had gained the three portfolios vital to them – Agriculture, Land and Public Works.⁸⁹ Furthermore, they now had the deputy premiership, the practice of holding separate party meetings conceded and Allan retaining the right to choose his own ministers.⁹⁰

Labor and VCP critics saw it differently. The two parties, hitherto bitterly opposed to each other, had combined to prevent Labor gaining office. Labor saw that the ‘farmers had accepted the lure of portfolios,’ and sowing the seeds of disunity among their ranks and endangering the party’s identity.⁹¹ Dunstan, excluded from the ministry, retaliated when he and his followers moved for the election of a new leader and deputy leader without success.⁹² Then he grabbed the opportunity to bond with the rank and file, declaring the coalition was in defiance of Conference and the membership. His Bendigo

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 14 September 1923

⁸⁷ Costar, ‘John Allan’, p. 189

⁸⁸ *Farmers’ Advocate*, 14 September 1923

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 21 September 1923

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 14 September 1923

⁹¹ *Labor Call*, 13 September 1923

⁹² Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 112

branch condemned those who had fallen to the temptation of office. Whether Dunstan had been actually offered a portfolio is unknown but he stated that he would only accept a portfolio if the VCP obtained a majority of them. The *Farmers' Advocate* quoted him as saying: 'Keep your portfolio. I value it less than my political honesty. Our party is an independent party designed to support measures and not men.'⁹³

Meanwhile one of the four ministers without portfolio, Marcus Wettenhall, a former critic of coalitions, engineered a motion of support for the coalition from the Dimboola branch of the party. Again, as in the argument for the Bruce-Page ministry, Allan rationalised that what was good enough at the federal level should be good enough for Victoria and that the alternative of a dissolution was not acceptable to any backbenchers on the non-Labor side.⁹⁴ Wettenhall was also reported as explaining that Conference delegates were inexperienced in politics so did not comprehend parliamentary business and tactics. His critics responded that these same men do understand how a portfolio with more pay and prestige can 'sway a man.'⁹⁵

The rationalisation for the breaking of the Conference decisions continued. Central Council argued the breach of the Conference condition of a majority of portfolios was only a technical one because there was an 'effective equality of power.' Central Council rejected any responsibility as there was no agreement on policy – it was still in the making.⁹⁶ It approved Allan's compact and urged support for the government until a full discussion could be held at the next Annual Conference.⁹⁷ The Melbourne press which earlier in the year had derided coalitions now endorsed the Lawson-Allan government. In February, immediately prior to the federal coalition being formed, the *Argus*⁹⁸ had attacked coalitions as 'a vicious practice initiated by the Labor Party of destroying the independence of the Senate by dragging its members into intrigue and party manipulation' and claimed that the only coalition which had been successful had been the Fusion party. Since then, the *Argus* continued, coalitions had been the 'artificial mixture of discordant elements, selfish in themselves and with only the

⁹³ *Farmers' Advocate*, 21 September 1923

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 12 October 1923

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 19 October 1923

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 16 November 1923

⁹⁷ VFU Central Council Minutes, 13 November 1923

⁹⁸ *Argus*, 2 February 1923

negative policy of being anti-Labor.⁹⁹ It now predicted that the Lawson-Allan coalition would be a success as 'it imitates the Federal one.'¹⁰⁰ Incidentally the state ministerial profile, like the federal one without a metropolitan-based minister, featured only one city Nationalist among its ranks. Two months after the coalition was formed, divisions started to appear. McPherson, a former member of the Economy Party and now a Nationalist, resigned as Treasurer. He wrote a letter to the Premier when he was unable to agree with him and cabinet after they 'contemplated more expenditure for which no financial provision had been made.' The letter, read by the Premier to parliament, stated that McPherson did not deny their 'highest motives' but 'unable to see where the extra revenue required is to come from, I feel compelled to resign.'¹⁰¹ The year ahead would be a tumultuous one, seeing five Victorian ministries come and go as well as dramatic changes at the federal level.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 7 September 1923

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 165, 20 November 1923, pp. 2209-10

CHAPTER 3

A CHANGE OF DIRECTION OR A QUESTION OF MEASURES AND MEN?

‘Composite Ministries, fusions and pacts
are playing havoc with the Country Party.’

A A Dunstan, 24 October 1924

This chapter concentrates on the division within the Country Party on whether to employ alliances to keep the Labor Party or the Nationalists out of government. The reason for the 1926 split and the creation of the two Country Parties is analysed.

This chapter identifies the cause of the split as essentially due to its leader, John Allan, refusing to adopt the compulsory wheat pool, as he believed that this rejection was essential to consolidate the coalition with the Nationalists. The breakaways came predominantly from the wheat growing areas of northern Victoria. Also, their leader Albert Dunstan was once a wheat grower in the Mallee. The major surviving link between the two parties was their mutual support for the electoral maldistribution which was essential to their existence and expansion.

The Lawson-Allan composite government was formed purely to keep Labor out of office rather than to deliver a common policy.¹ Not surprisingly it was short lived. Concordance was needed at all levels of the party organisations for a coalition to prosper. This was not forthcoming and a decade of transient composite and minority governments in Victoria began. The division within the VCP caucus between Labor and anti-Labor sympathisers was noticeably evident when some sat in opposition and some on the cross-benches during the time of the Prendergast Labor minority government of 1924. Three months later Allan became the first Country Party Premier, albeit heading a composite government often frustrated by a Nationalist dominated upper house. The side-lined Dunstan and Percy Stewart, who were anti-coalition and angry at the hold the Nationalists had over the VCP, broke away to set up a rival party, the Primary

¹ *Age*, 28 August 1923

Producers Union, later retitled the Country Progressive Party (CPP). This pro-Labor party was strongest in the northern districts and in the Wimmera and Mallee wheat growing areas which enthusiastically supported the wheat pools opposed by Allan. Despite its narrow majority and frequent defeats on legislation the Allan-Peacock government lasted two and a half years. The glue to the coalition was Allan's opposition to a compulsory wheat pool and adoption of the 'Argyle Blot' electoral distribution which strengthened both anti-Labor parties through malapportionment.

The Lawson-Allan government was to last just five months. The catalyst for its termination was the decision by the VCP to contest a by-election for the previously Nationalist-held seat of Dalhousie² and for not advising supporters to give their second preferences to its ministerial ally.³ Preselection was no longer closed and any member of the VFU was free to contest Dalhousie. More than one did and nearly half the preferences leaked from the Country Party candidates,⁴ enough to see Labor's Reg Pollard elected. Premier Lawson and the Nationalists were outraged at what they saw as a 'breach of contract.' If Lawson had thought that a de facto electoral pact was in place he was greatly mistaken. The hasty cobbling together of the first Nationalist-VCP coalition had not explored all the ramifications of being in harness, negotiated as it had been behind closed doors, separate from the parliamentary party and the general membership. The Nationalists had assumed there was a logical, tacit and moral understanding that parties in coalition did not contest a seat held by the other.

Allan tried to heal the rift, suggesting 'it was not wise to contest every rural seat; otherwise Labor would gain at the expense of its political enemies.'⁵ This comment earned him a general rebuke from the *Farmers' Advocate* as it effectively labelled the VCP as 'anti-Labor' and suggested a secret electoral pact may have existed on a personal leadership basis. The Labor Party with a no-coalition policy assumed the high moral ground. *Labor Call* boasted that Labor had won the seat and kept their purity while the Nationalists and the so-called farmers' party in the Bruce-Page and Lawson-

² Costar, 'John Allan', p. 189

³ *Argus*, 9 February 1923

⁴ Ellis, op. cit., p. 132

⁵ *Farmers' Advocate*, 15 February 1924

Allan ministries had ‘repudiated their ideals and identities and even their interests in order to obtain a spell of place, power and pay in those mongrel ministries.’⁶

The short period in coalition had produced a number of consequences and the 1924 March VFU Conference to be held at Bendigo ‘promised to be momentous.’⁷ Backed by the conservative press and threatening that the Conference must give unconditional support to the coalition, Lawson issued an ultimatum to Allan to deliver an electoral pact or leave the ministry: ‘our men believe that it is better to have an open enemy than a friend who is not dependable.’⁸ He then provocatively appointed F W Eggleston, a city-based anti-Country Party member of the Metropolitan Liberals faction of the Nationalists, as Minister for Water Supply rather than a Country Party Honorary Minister. Labor thought this proved their own view that the Nationalists treated the VFU with contempt.⁹

Conference celebrated the first anniversary of the Bruce-Page ministry, with Tom Paterson in his presidential address telling delegates it had worked well for country people and the state coalition should be just as successful.¹⁰ But the delegates were not of one mind. The VCP was ‘faction ridden; it had been formed from three distinct rural movements with differing political orientations.’¹¹ Some delegates saw other options as independence or juniors in an anti-Labor camp. If there was to be only one form of coalition, a conservative one, then the VFU was doomed as a single, independent party. Moreover, that would reduce pressure on the government to agree to and concede on policies.

Through press reports, verified by ministers Marcus Wettenhall and W P Crockett, Lawson had heard enough. It would seem the coalition could not continue. At best, the Conference debate indicated the arrangement, if it survived, would not be guaranteed beyond the life of the parliament. However this failed to bring about any change to the

⁶ *Labor Call*, 3 January 1924

⁷ *Farmers' Advocate*, 8 February 1924

⁸ Letter from Lawson to Allan, 6 March 1924, Eggleston papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS0423/7/94

⁹ *Labor Call*, 20 March 1924

¹⁰ *Countryman*, 14 March 1924

¹¹ J Paul, ‘John Allan’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1979, p. 35

Conference resolution. The Conference then erupted. Dunstan in a fighting speech was seen as the leader of the opposition to any coalition. George Goudie (MLC North Western) took the opposite pro-alliance view. The warring factions got nowhere until Stewart, who would earn the title ‘The Peace-Maker,’ working overnight to prevent a split ‘as only the Nationalists would benefit from that,’ successfully guided through a compromise which gave support for a composite ministry for the life of the parliament but allowed the VCP to campaign as a separate party. Central Council, representing only the rank and file, would be involved in the formation of any future composite ministries.¹² Lawson wrote to Allan warning that passing the motion would terminate the coalition: ‘I interpreted all this as no longer meeting the conditions I gave the Lt. Governor, that is, that there would be an alliance of parties.’¹³

When Lawson learned again through the press that the compromise motion had been passed, and while the Conference was still in progress, he resigned and sought to install a new government without consulting Allan or the VCP. He declared there had always been a recognition that for a coalition to operate there should be concordance between ministers, parliamentary parties and the party organisations. Lawson explained to Allan that the resolution was ‘a humiliation to every member of the cabinet. I had to act promptly and decisively.’¹⁴ He wrote a friendly letter to all VFU ministers except Frank Old then dismissed them,¹⁵ justifying his action by stating that the members of one party to an alliance cannot have it both ways; they cannot expect all the benefits of representation in the cabinet and remain free to fight their partners in the constituencies.¹⁶ Labor was again disappointed but not surprised that the Governor did not call upon them who, like the Nationalists, could only form a minority government. Labor believed that Stradbroke, being a conservative, a Freemason and Grand Master of the Orange Lodge of Victoria,¹⁷ would never consider Labor even though he knew that both the Nationalists and the VFU were divided while Labor was united and had won

¹² *Farmers’ Advocate*, 21 March 1924

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Letter from Lawson to Allan, 14 March 1924, Eggleston papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 0423/7/121

¹⁵ Fitzherbert, *op. cit.*, p. 168

¹⁶ Reported undated press release from Lawson, Eggleston papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS423/7/106

¹⁷ L R Gardiner, ‘Stradbroke, third Earl of’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 12, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1990, p. 114-15

the last two by-elections.¹⁸ Stradbroke was Governor from February 1921 to April 1926 and his years spanned five changes of ministry, of which all three, up to this point, had been conservative.¹⁹

On the resumption of parliament Allan led his party to the corner benches, offering conditional support to the minority Lawson government but reminding them that it was *they* who broke the agreement and that his party ‘would not eat humble pie.’²⁰ The government had lasted just 41 days. Observing the fracas in Victoria, Prime Minister Bruce pressed for an electoral pact, a common policy other than on tariffs, an exchange of preferences and no opposition to a sitting member of the other party at the polls. The Senate candidates were to be supported on a ratio of two Nationalists to one ACP. Other conditions were a joint policy speech and joint party meetings. As this was contrary to the Bendigo VFU Conference decision, Bruce tried to differentiate between the VFU and the national scene. For him the VFU Conference had nothing to do with the federal sphere; there was to be no influence over federal MPs by any state organisations.²¹ Being a Nationalist and knowing little of the VFU membership and culture this assessment was naïve in the extreme. However he had a close ally in Page who agreed with him on electoral cooperation between alliance partners.

Lawson was certain he would be replaced by Sir Stanley Argyle as leader by the conservatives in his party organised by F W Eggleston. He preferred to go with dignity and resigned to nominate for the vacant position of Speaker created by the death of Sir John Mackey (Nationalist). Once again Lawson had miscalculated his support and failed to secure the speakership. He was relegated to the backbench, tired, worn out and in ill health. The former Premier, John Bowser, was nominated and seconded by the Dunstan faction of the VCP and elected 32:26 with Labor’s support.²² Labor likened the turn-around by the VCP as a form of payback in a political divorce court.²³ Lawson stayed on the backbench for four years before transferring to the Senate in 1928, later

¹⁸ *Labor Call*, 20 March 1924

¹⁹ Gardiner, *op. cit.*, p. 114

²⁰ *Farmers’ Advocate*, 28 March 1924

²¹ *ibid.*, 2 May 1924

²² Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 166, 1924, p. 3373

²³ *Labor Call*, 17 April 1924

serving for a short time in Lyons' United Australia Party (UAP) ministry as Minister in Charge of Territories and Assistant Minister to Treasury.²⁴

Sir Alexander Peacock, Premier for the third and last time, now headed a Nationalist minority government with support from the VCP until such time as a composite ministry could be negotiated.²⁵ It lasted only 10 days longer than its predecessor and was brought down when the Electoral Districts Bill which enlarged the Assembly by three new metropolitan seats was defeated by Labor with VFU support.²⁶ The VCP split on the issue, with Allan and Dunstan predictably taking different sides. When A L Walter (VFU) won Mackey's former seat of Gippsland West in a by-election, Peacock gained a dissolution for an election in late June.

At the federal level Page, illustrating his strength as leader, claimed sole responsibility for all negotiations and actions on behalf of the ACP between AFFO conferences. He outlined his new electoral pact with the Nationalists. In Victoria this was perceived as a sell-out and effectively branded the ACP as anti-Labor because the only gains it could make would be at Labor's expense. The VFU believed that Page's untimely announcement could negatively sway Labor voters at the Victorian poll. Dunstan attacked this deal as 'one between leaders not parties.'²⁷ Labor leader Prendergast capitalised on this, emphasising rural policy in his election speech aimed at the VFU and other rural voters who might be enticed to the Labor fold.²⁸

Following the election the VCP continued to hold the balance of power in the Legislative Assembly as the Nationalists lost six seats to Labor, the other parties holding their numbers. Labor interpreted the unchanged result for the VCP as 'reaching their zenith.'²⁹ This prediction would not be immediately realised. With the three parties unable to govern without coalition or cross-bench support inter-party negotiations were essential. Mindful of being 'betrayed' twice by the Nationalists, re-elected leader John Allan's first preference was to approach Peacock for a coalition with the VCP receiving

²⁴ *Australian Parliamentary Handbook*, p. 289

²⁵ *Argus*, 17 and 24 March 1924

²⁶ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 167, 1924, p. 56

²⁷ *Farmers' Advocate*, 6 June 1924

²⁸ Love, *op. cit.*, p. 177

²⁹ *Labor Call*, 3 July 1924

the premiership and half the portfolios. Peacock rejected the idea of handing over the premiership to the smallest party as ‘unrealistic’ and opted to continue alone, expecting that Allan would provide support to his party rather than a socialist Labor government. Other combinations were possible such as a VCP-Liberal government with Nationalist support on agreed policies with Labor confined to opposition. There was even talk of a fusion between Liberals and the VCP. Labor opened dialogue with the VCP, offering attractive legislation to cut rail-freight costs, introduce the compulsory wheat pool and stabilise butter prices. Dunstan reminded the negotiators of the VFU Conference decision regarding coalitions and that Labor as the largest party should be given a chance to govern. Conservatives such as Allan were prepared to consider Labor’s ‘policy bait’ but remained concerned about possible radical administrative acts between parliamentary sessions initiated by the Trades Hall Council even if the VCP maintained control over actual legislation in the house.³⁰ A major hindrance to a VCP-Nationalist deal was personal, in that some Nationalist ministers were seen as arrogant and conceited with a vision limited to city interests. VCP MPs were particularly annoyed at the way they talked down to the ‘uneducated country bumpkins’ and doubted their intellectual capacity to serve as ministers. There was some attraction therefore for the VCP to support Labor so as to teach the ‘born to rule’ conservatives a lesson while achieving some rural marketing gains not possible from the businessmen-controlled Nationalists. The downside was that sitting on the cross-benches would allow the minority Labor government to claim all the kudos for any legislation at the next election, possibly winning some seats from the VCP.

Peacock would not concede and, bound by the Conference decision, Allan could not compromise. Allan still favoured the Nationalists because he believed the elections showed the people did not want Labor in government, as they held only 28 seats in an Assembly of 65.³¹ He conveniently ignored that Labor had won six seats from the Nationalists and was the largest party in the lower house. When parliament met, the Peacock minority government was defeated. Given that Allan had not accepted Labor’s legislative offer, Prendergast’s strategy was that on the floor of parliament the VFU and the reluctant Allan would be forced to support him as the VCP Conference had virtually

³⁰ *Countryman*, 11 July 1924 (*Farmers’ Advocate* was retitled the *Countryman* from 1 July 1924)

³¹ *ibid.*, 18 July 1924

negated supporting Peacock who would not meet the Conference imposed conditions. This view was vindicated when the VFU finally, if reluctantly, agreed to support Labor's motion of no-confidence and consequently a minority Labor government. Victorian Labor was in office for the first time in its history but only for as long as the other two parties could not agree. If they could do so then 'Labor would be out.'³²

The VCP's reluctance could also be explained partly because the debate over the federal coalition was continuing in Victoria at the same time and Allan did not wish to be seen as out of step with Page. Page was being criticised for acting autocratically without consultation and expecting a rubber-stamping of his position. He responded that he had to act quickly and assertively to prevent the Sword of Damocles falling on the coalition government. To Page it was the job of the leader to lead by making decisions and for the others to follow him or he would resign.³³ Eggleston shared a theoretically mixed view of tertiary educated leaders like Page. He believed that it was only natural that the intellectual should not occupy the highest position because the intellectual is an offence to the masses³⁴ but acknowledged that those 'masses' need to choose a leader then follow that leader. Following was as important as the need for leaders to lead.³⁵ Page satisfied both criteria and was the main reason why the federal coalition was as strong as it was. Allan was currently not hampered by being in coalition and realised his party was divided over the question. His leadership was not as secure as Page's. Given his hatred for anything socialist and his history of association with the Kyabram Movement it would not have been easy for him to see Labor in government with his party's support. The Kyabram Movement, based in his own Goulburn Valley electorate, had vigorously opposed Labor's perceived high spending programs funded by high taxation. In his maiden speech Allan had declared he and his country colleagues:

had come in with the object of bringing about efficiency and economy, which he hoped would be achieved by cutting down expenditure rather than to tax the people more than they are taxed today.³⁶

³² *Labor Call*, 24 July 1924

³³ *Countryman*, 11 July 1924

³⁴ Eggleston, *Reflections*, p. 12

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 14

³⁶ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 148, 4 December 1917, pp. 35-6

This time Governor Stradbroke did call upon Labor to form a minority government, as he had the example of Ramsay MacDonald leading a British minority Labour government supported by the Liberals as a precedent. In office the MacDonald government had displayed cautious commonsense and not gone to extremes. Philip Snowden, Labour's first Chancellor of the Exchequer and known for his parsimony, commented that in such an arrangement there was ample scope for applying Labour principles.³⁷

Victorian Labor saw themselves 'in the very same position to that of British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald's minority Labour government' and examined it closely to see why that government was secure.³⁸ It was not simply because of support from the Liberals but because the Liberals knew the people did not want yet another election. MacDonald had made it clear he would not resign on defeat of legislation but only on a vote of censure. Lord Asquith, leader of the opposition, also employed his own strategy, waiting for the impatient extremists within Labour to tear their party apart thus bringing about its downfall. Then the Liberals would take over by steering a middle course and counting on either Labour and/or Conservative support. MacDonald wished for the day when the three-party system would go and revert to a Labour versus Conservative situation. Perhaps this could be the future for Victorian politics too.³⁹ If Labor could demonstrate that it could represent the farmers as well as the VCP then this could diminish that third party's electoral base. So much depended on whether Labor could manage its own radicals who wanted immediate legislation after many frustrating years in opposition and whether the VFU [sic] thought along the same lines as the Liberals in Britain and would seek minority government themselves with Nationalist support.⁴⁰

The decision to support the Prendergast Labor government continued to rankle the anti-Labor section of the VCP. Allan strangely called a combined non-government party meeting to elect a single opposition leader, apparently not troubled that one could be in opposition and support Labor at the same time. The Nationalists did not respond and went straight to the opposition benches. Dunstan and Bowser also declined to attend as a single opposition leader would signal that the parties had effectively merged. Allan

³⁷ *Labor Call*, 10 July 1924

³⁸ *ibid.*, 31 July 1924

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

did not have the support enjoyed by Page at federal level and naively expected the others to follow. Bowser explained his absence on the grounds he had been re-elected Speaker and wished to remain aloof. The confusion among VCP members was evident as some sat in opposition rather than on the cross-benches, leading Dunstan to declare that ‘composite ministries, fusions and pacts were playing havoc with the party’.⁴¹

Labor closely examined why the coalition did not re-form, for their government depended on the separation of the non-Labor parties. Was the VCP afraid of another election because the parties could not agree on basic questions or because it believed that Labor’s legislation would do more for the farmer?⁴² If Labor could determine the causes it might be able to exploit them to retain government. It faced a hostile press with the *Argus* most critical and the *Age* more balanced in its comments. The *Argus* exposed its conservative partisanship in complaining ‘that the occupancy of office by Labor is contrary to parliamentary precedent and against public policy.’⁴³ Labor pointed out that Charles Sladen MLC had formed a government with fewer numbers and supporters than a quorum back in May 1868.⁴⁴ He is Victoria’s only Premier to lead a government, albeit ‘of last resort,’ in the Legislative Council.⁴⁵

The confusion and divisions within the VFU over which side to support at federal and state levels was illustrated immediately in a joint sitting of the Victorian parliament when five candidates nominated to replace the Labor Senator Stephen Barker who had died in June. The dominant parties, particularly the Nationalists with their large majority in the Council, usually ignored the party allegiance of the Senator to be replaced and exploited such opportunities to swell their numbers in the Senate. Surprisingly the Labor nominee Joseph Hannan was elected by the close vote of 46:43 indicating strong support for Labor by the VCP. State parliament then went into a five weeks recess to give the Prendergast government time to settle in and prepare its program. This would also give time to the Country Party to try to unify its factions.

⁴¹ *Countryman*, 24 August 1924

⁴² *Labor Call*, 4 September 1924

⁴³ *ibid.*, 11 September 1924

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ J Waugh, “‘The Inevitable McCulloch’ and his rivals, 1863-1877’ in P Strangio and B Costar (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 33

Peace within the Country Party did not last more than a week when Percy Stewart on 5 August resigned from the federal coalition ministry after cabinet, not the VFU nor the AFFO, endorsed the modified electoral pact. Stewart, who had been one of the managers of the original composite ministry, was adamant that the arrangement was only for the life of the current parliament. J H Prowse, the ACP whip, also resigned his position on the same objection. Stewart claimed Page had assured him on this but on Bruce's return from England the issue had been revived. Stewart maintained the ACP should be free to contest any electorate on the Country Party platform and to decide allocation of preferences at electorate council level. After conferring with Bruce, Page now thought it 'unthinkable to oppose (at elections) our partners in government.' The Nationalist objective was clear – to effectively return to a two-party system to keep Labor in opposition.⁴⁶ First New South Wales, then South Australia, endorsed the Bruce-Page election pact but the Victorian Central Council, overwhelming supported by the branches, declared it unworkable – a case of *pactitis*.⁴⁷ Stewart was gaining support in Victoria as he explained to the branches that he had only accepted a ministry as there had been no pact at that time. Ninety-three out of 100 VCP branches opposed the pact between the Nationalists and their party but the executive continued to support it. Stewart now advocated an elective ministry to reflect the parliament's will. He was concerned 'how a third party, like the ACP, could fit into a political system designed for two.'⁴⁸ The Country Party political stage was now trod by two distinct groups: the leaders Page and Allan, both anti-Labor and pro-leadership control; and the 'rebels' Stewart and Dunstan, fiercely independent or marginally pro-Labor and standing for control by the rank and file, for that was where their support lay.

Prendergast honoured his undertaking to the VCP by introducing a program heavily weighted towards country interests including an orderly marketing scheme for rural commodities, an agricultural bank, additional funding for rural roads and specific assistance for farmers.⁴⁹ When the compulsory wheat pool Bill was introduced, Allan who was totally against it resumed his talks with Peacock with a view to consolidating the non-Labor parties. Progress was not easy but two issues worked in their favour: both

⁴⁶ *Countryman*, 8 August 1924

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 3 October 1924 ('*pactitis*' indicates symptoms of long-term political consequences of a treaty)

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 26 September 1924

⁴⁹ Love, *op. cit.*, p. 178

leaders' opposition to the wheat pool and their mutual detestation for Labor's perceived lack of respect for Australia's war heroes. Premier Prendergast held strong views about the war and postwar militarism although he was supportive of providing concessions to soldier settlers. The government had refused to gazette Anzac Day as a public holiday, declined to grant 50,000 pounds to build the Shrine of Remembrance and moved to eliminate from school literature all stories that glorified war. The RSL essentially led the criticism but the issue soon became common ground for the non-Labor parties.⁵⁰ With 80 per cent of the wheat growers in favour of the wheat pool all VCP MPs voted for Labor's Wheat Marketing Bill which passed the Assembly but was blocked by the conservative majority in the Council. The Nationalists had successfully defeated Labor's attempts to deliver a Victorian wheat pool just as federally they had denied dairy farmers the Paterson butter scheme.⁵¹

As the parliamentary session moved towards the end-of-the-year recess the Nationalists, fearful of any further attempts to introduce what they saw as anti-business legislation, moved to terminate the government. They feared what Labor might do between sessions, when parliament was not sitting, via regulations such as to reinstate the police strikers who had been sacked by the Chief Commissioner with full support of the Lawson government when they refused to carry out their duties in November 1923. As Haldane points out in his seminal works, this is the only strike to have occurred in any police force.⁵² So antagonistic were the Nationalists to the idea of a Labor government that they now agreed to a coalition with the VCP, a proposal they had rejected as unacceptable four months earlier.⁵³ The VCP was to get the premiership and half the portfolios. Allan moved the successful no-confidence motion and Labor was soundly defeated. The government had lasted just 114 days, a brief time but longer than the previous two conservative governments combined. Prendergast believed he had gained the general approval of the electorate as demonstrated by the greatly increased vote at the Glenelg by-election and sought a dissolution. Governor Stradbroke thought otherwise and installed Allan as Premier, heading the first composite government in

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Named after Tom Paterson, Minister for Marketing

⁵² G Brown and R Haldane, *Days of Violence: The 1923 Police Strike in Melbourne*, Hybrid, Melbourne, 1998; R Haldane, *The People's Force: A History of the Victoria Police*, 2nd edn, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1995

⁵³ Costar, 'John Allan', p. 190

Australia with a Country Party Premier. While Peacock as leader selected his team, the VCP chose its ministers by exhaustive ballot, a procedure they had adopted from the Labor caucus.⁵⁴ Dunstan was openly critical of Allan and, not surprisingly, was not included in the ministry.⁵⁵ Given the exhaustive ballot, he would have been unable to blame Allan alone, nor Peacock, for insisting on his exclusion as a condition for coalition. His opponents within the VCP, led by Wettenhall, would later argue his exclusion was due to Dunstan's animosity towards the pro-Nationalist section of his party and the formation of the coalition rather than because of the direction of any individual.⁵⁶ Allan immediately strove to assert his leadership and the unity of the government by repeatedly referring to it as *my* government.⁵⁷

There was general if muted acceptance of the coalition arrangement. Allan's conservative supporters dominated Central Council and the board of the *Countryman*. Also Dunstan, leader of the radicals, was ill.⁵⁸ But the men of the Mallee were not pleased. Accusations by the Mallee newspaper the *Ouyen and North West Express* that 'the change of government was nothing short of perfidy and no more than a bare-faced grab for power by Allan'⁵⁹ seemed borne out when the coalition adopted nearly all of Labor's budget except 'vote-catching' aspects such as the removal of progressive taxation.⁶⁰ In not rejecting Labor's budget perhaps Allan who had been angered by the *Express* headline 'Political Perfidy' took the opportunity to acknowledge the article's other message: 'it is the rank and file who will pay for his premiership, in lost ideals and principles surrendered. We hold no brief for Labor but their legislation was pro-farmer.'⁶¹

Also the elevation to government did not stop the Central Council resolving to contest all Legislative Council provinces because of that chamber's rejection of the compulsory wheat pool. This would mean opposing their new allies in government. The wheat marketing issue and this consequent contradiction to the pact was a bellwether for the

⁵⁴ *Countryman*, 21 November 1924

⁵⁵ Costar, 'Albert Dunstan', p. 216

⁵⁶ *Countryman*, 23 April 1926

⁵⁷ *Labor Call*, 4 December 1924

⁵⁸ Graham, op. cit., p. 204

⁵⁹ *Ouyen and North West Express*, 15 November 1924

⁶⁰ *Countryman*, 5 December 1924

⁶¹ *Ouyen and North West Express*, 15 November 1924

future relationship between the factions of the VCP. It was no mean achievement for a party having only 12 members in an Assembly of 65 to gain control of the government, and consolidation of office was a prime objective. Approaching the very end of the spring session the government was saved by Speaker Bowser's casting vote and the coalition sought a long adjournment to preserve its unity. Despite being in coalition, members within each of the parties were not relaxed with it. Hopefully the internal animosity would dissipate before parliament resumed or as one old writer of *Tocsin* the forerunner of *Labor Call* put it: 'Nothing recedes like success.'⁶² The edgy relationship heralded a stormy time within the VFU that would tear the movement apart.

The Allan-led composite government would last for two and a half years. During that period his parliamentary party and the rank and file would be constantly in battle with each other over the question of coalitions versus corner party support and the establishment of a grower controlled wheat pool. At first these issues may seem unconnected but essentially the radicals (a term conferred upon them by the *Argus*) supported the wheat pool and opposed coalitions. Their champions were Stewart and Dunstan while their opponents on these issues were the conservatives led by Allan and his lieutenants Gibson and Wettenhall. Wettenhall, although his electorate of Lowan was in the Wimmera, resided in Toorak and this would go against him 10 years later when he faced electoral opposition from within his party.

The 10th VFU Annual Conference, held in Ouyen and now in autumn rather than as previously in spring around Show Day in Melbourne, provided the forum at which the whole structure and parliamentary tactics would be fought out. The role of the party's publication, the *Countryman*, under new management, so important in spreading the views of the factions depending on who was editor, would also be discussed. The major debate, not surprisingly, centred on coalitions both federal and state. The radicals moved the critical motion: 'That the policy of the VFU be that it refrain from joining any political party to form a government.'

⁶² *Labor Call*, 19 March 1925

In a strong speech, Allan claimed full support of the parliamentary party knowing he had the support of Central Council and the *Countryman*. Allan was taking a cue from Page who dominated the federal body with his leadership. He declared:

the present ministry is my ministry. You may not be proud of it but there is not a single minister who is not there with my approval. This ministry will resign when I say it will resign and not before.⁶³

Dunstan responded by deploring the ‘strong anti-Labor sentiment’ in the Premier’s address. ALP second preferences were crucial to win seats. Severing the Labor link and entering the coalition would cripple the VFU’s expansion electorally. The state government’s days were numbered because ‘Mr Allan and Sir A Peacock were married, but not mated.’⁶⁴

Repeatedly, delegates referred to the origins of the VFU, drawn from across the political spectrum to represent the rural interests perceived to be ignored by the major parties of the city. Country Party MPs had been elected in different regions on Labor or Nationalist preferences and the party should not be seen as ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ either of these parties but be independent. Others argued that the coalition gave them power and opportunities denied to them in the corner. Emotions were high and ‘proceedings were sometimes disorderly, sometimes chaotic and always lively.’⁶⁵ After a recount the motion was declared lost 165:155. This was interpreted as Allan being authorised to carry on the existing state arrangement until the effluxion of the parliamentary term.⁶⁶ Stewart then announced that those in the minority intended holding a meeting later that day.⁶⁷ The moderates had secured approval of the Bruce-Page pact and the state composite government with the proviso that it would only last the life of the government. It was not simply a matter of numbers but a recognition that the coalitions could not be simply undone without significant damage to the VFU. Any changes would have to wait for a more opportune time. The division over ‘men and measures’ was obvious and the threat of a walkout or split narrowly avoided.

⁶³ *Argus*, 12 March 1925

⁶⁴ Costar, ‘Albert Dunstan’, p. 193

⁶⁵ *Age*, 13 March 1925

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Costar, ‘Albert Dunstan’, p. 193

When parliament resumed Premier Allan, hoping to calm emotions, blamed the two-thirds Nationalist Legislative Council for the failure to pass any compulsory wheat pool legislation, but he himself was not seen as a champion of grower controlled wheat pools. The Premier also attempted to dampen the slogan of the radicals, ‘measures not men,’ by declaring to the Tatura branch of the party that ‘it was not one or the other but if they got the right men then they got the right measures.’⁶⁸ The animosity between the factions and the leaders Dunstan and Allan intensified when a ‘special’ Central Council meeting, the first in VFU history, was held in mid-year to press for the wheat pool (and, it was rumoured, to expel Allan from the VFU).⁶⁹ When Allan was accused of not carrying out the Conference-determined poll for a wheat pool due to pressure from the Nationalists he said it would have been a useless exercise as a legal opinion from Owen Dixon KC had stated that a wheat pool in one state would have been ineffective and unconstitutional and, even if they persisted, the Legislative Council would vote it down. He refused to table the legal advice when Dunstan countered that he had an opinion from John Latham KC which upheld the constitutionality of the scheme.⁷⁰ The Central Council then divided 14:5 in favour of the Premier’s determination not to implement the Conference decision for a compulsory wheat pool poll. The radicals were angry that the rank and file had been ignored and that the Premier had succumbed to Nationalist pressure. The rift widened and W P Crockett MLC resigned from the ministry in June in protest over the wheat pool and dried fruits issues.

The departure of J J Hall as editor of the *Farmers’ Advocate* the previous year and the change of management when the *Countryman* took over in July saw a shift to the right in the content and partisanship of its editorials and reportage. Labor was now attacked for its campaigning in rural areas, even if their leader Ned Hogan was himself a farmer, and Allan praised for his being the first ever VFU Premier heading a majority cabinet in a composite government.⁷¹ Hogan responded that Labor’s rural platform preceded that of the VFU and that Labor had supported a compulsory wheat pool during the war. The two parties were competing for the rural vote with the VFU also needing to explain to

⁶⁸ *Countryman*, 15 May 1925

⁶⁹ Costar, ‘Albert Dunstan’, p. 193

⁷⁰ *Countryman*, 19 June 1925

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 7 August 1925

the farmers and its membership its alliance with the Nationalists who were not perceived as pro-farmer.⁷²

A week later the *Countryman* blamed ‘a Labor plot’ for that party supporting the pro-Labor VFU candidate J J Hall for a Senate vacancy leading to the defeat of their pro-Nationalist VFU candidate D Andrew. A joint sitting of parliament elected Nationalist W Plain (53:39) to replace the late (Nationalist and former Labor) Senator E J Russell. (Andrew later served for three years as a Country Party senator until his death in November 1928.) The *Countryman* also decried the fact that Labor had not returned the favour when on an earlier occasion the VFU had assisted Labor to replace a former Labor Senator with another.⁷³ Dunstan, while not divulging his vote in the secret ballot, said that the VFU should have backed Hall from the beginning and that Hall had lost to Plain in the final vote only because the composite ministry had been anti-Hall.⁷⁴ Stewart was angry that his own side had voted to elect Plain into the Senate: ‘Why even bother with our own men?’⁷⁵ In the middle of the following year Dunstan would ‘reveal’ that Allan had told the Kyabram branch that the National Federation and the Women’s National League had opposed Hall’s candidature so the VCP parliamentarians could not support him as he would surely lose at the following general election.⁷⁶

The *Countryman* also associated Labor with communism and illustrated this by attacking the recently elected NSW Lang Labor government for refusing to use state police to enforce Commonwealth laws and for failing to counter industrial disputes, particularly those on the waterfront which affected farmers’ exports.⁷⁷ Internal relationships were not assisted when Central Council chastised the left wing of the VFU when it voted 11:6 to censure H Glowrey for his ‘disloyal public attack’ on the Council over the wheat pool debate and its support for Allan on the issue. Glowrey, Hall, Dunstan and Stewart walked out of the council meeting protesting that the vote was unconstitutional, Dunstan declaring it was ‘no more than a gag on opinion.’⁷⁸ The cleavage in the VFU was hardening and each faction increased their attacks on the

⁷² *ibid.*, 21 August 1925

⁷³ *ibid.*, 28 August 1925

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Labor Call*, 1 October 1925

⁷⁶ *Countryman*, 14 May 1926

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 11 and 18 September 1925

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 18 September 1925

other. The *Countryman* labelled Stewart a ‘straight out Labor man’ and inadvertently encouraged a split when it questioned how many would follow Stewart and Dunstan ‘if they took the plunge’⁷⁹ (to leave the VFU). The radicals used Show Week in Melbourne to campaign for their cause amongst the farmers and Dunstan was particularly critical of the *Countryman*’s attitude on political matters. Now a split seemed inevitable. Later in the year during the parliamentary debate on the wheat pool Dunstan accused Allan of repudiating his promise to honour the growers’ poll in favour of a compulsory wheat pool. The Premier responded: ‘Why on earth do you not go over to the other side of the chamber and sit with the Labour [sic] party.’⁸⁰

Bruce at Dandenong (Victoria) and Page at Grafton (New South Wales) gave separate policy speeches in the lead-up to the November federal election, both careful not to contradict each other and concentrating on national rather than sectional issues. Dunstan criticised the coalition by pointing out there were three parties, federally and in Victoria, yet only two party policies. The *Countryman* responded that the federal Labor leader Matthew Charlton refused to drop tariffs on farm machinery and that, despite Labor holding office in all states except Victoria, there had been no move to introduce compulsory wheat pools.⁸¹ The 1925 federal election was the first at which voting was compulsory. Labor lost half a dozen seats. The campaign by the coalition that Labor was disloyal and Bolshevik was hard hitting and successful against a background of maritime and police strikes. The Bruce-Page government was returned and the ACP gained three seats. All five Country Party seats in Victoria were retained and dissent in the Mallee curtailed when the pro-composite forces persuaded McClelland not to oppose Stewart in Wimmera. With 38 out of the 75 members in the lower house, Bruce did not need the ACP to govern but the ministry regarded the election as a mandate for the coalition. Also it would provide a buffer should any by-election lead to a loss of government electorates. Nevertheless there would be tensions within the coalition. While enjoying a shared approach to domestic economic matters generally, the two parties in coalition held opposing sectional interests but could ‘employ’ the Labor opposition to advantage those interests without undermining the coalition itself such as on tariffs and rural cooperatives.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 25 September 1925

⁸⁰ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 169, 7 October 1925, p. 1517

⁸¹ *Countryman*, 23 October 1925

In the New Year the Victorian anti-coalitionists decided they must rid themselves of any cooperative association with the Nationalists. Through his Bendigo branch Dunstan began a campaign to establish independence for the VFU by ‘freeing the VFU of any anti-Labor tag and to stop philandering with other parties.’⁸² On the Central Council he claimed the composite ministry had achieved nothing compared to the short term in office by the Prendergast Labor minority government. Rumours that another farmers’ party was to be formed gathered momentum and the contest for control of the VFU Central Council intensified. In the lead-up to the 1926 Conference each faction put their case regarding the worth of coalition governments, the relationship between the membership and their representatives and the adoption of Labor caucus type rules. Wettenhall led the argument for the independence of Country Party MPs and for the need to ‘trust your MP’ pointing out that he had defeated Glowrey at the last election in Lowan over the issue of coalitions: ‘Sitting in the corner means mainly being obstructive and shirking responsibility.’⁸³ The anti-coalition faction through Stewart warned that the greater intimacy and cooperation within a coalition may lead to absorption, unintentionally and by force of circumstances.⁸⁴

For the first time, accompanying the Central Council annual report was a ‘minority report’ by Stewart, Dunstan, Glowrey, Hart and McCann in which they asked: ‘while we hold the highest ministerial offices in the land why are matters at their lowest ebb?’ They attacked other Council members for supporting the Premier and his coalition in defiance of the decision of Conference and for failing to censure unofficial how-to-vote cards in Wannon distributed by an outside body (the NSW AFFO) or those state MPs who voted against Hall for the recent Senate vacancy.⁸⁵ Proceedings at the Ballarat Conference confirmed a split was inevitable. At the outset the Premier reminded delegates that a composite ministry was the only alternative to a Labor government. Chief president and Allan supporter, E A Pickering, on behalf of the coalitionists, accused the radicals of being disruptors and challenged them to get up and go if they could not accept the decisions of the majority of delegates.⁸⁶ After two motions

⁸² *ibid.*, 15 January 1926

⁸³ *ibid.*, 5 February 1926

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 26 February 1926

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 5 March 1926

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 12 March 1926

criticising the moderates were defeated 220:135 and 148:115 Stewart announced that the minority would meet in the evening to consider their position. This meeting, with Stewart absent, determined that a new organisation along the lines of the original VFU should be formed but not before seeking the opinion of the rank and file. Next day after suffering another loss on the floor, a second meeting convened by Stewart and Dunstan decided to form a separate left group, the Primary Producers, Union. This might operate within or outside the VFU.⁸⁷ If forced outside they would contest elections.

At the same time as the VFU Conference, Labor was undergoing a major change of leadership. The 72-year-old Prendergast retired. He had led the party since 1904 with the exception of the years 1913-18 when George Elmslie took over and served a time as Premier. The new leader was Ned Hogan, a farmer from Warrenheip, and the deputy Tom Tunnecliffe, a left-wing, long-serving MP. Elected on the first ballot, both were said to be associated with John Wren, a reputed power broker within the party.⁸⁸ These connections would be important for the formation of a future Country Party government almost a decade later. Meanwhile the Nationalists were not entirely happy with the coalition, especially as the smaller party had the premiership and half the ministry. The former Nationalist Treasurer William McPherson publicly attacked the coalition as having too much of a country focus and that it had adopted Labor's budget.⁸⁹

Over the month after the Conference the Bendigo branch of the VFU canvassed the options of a sub-group or secession. The Central Council appealed to the membership to remain loyal to majority decisions. A few branches in the Mallee agreed to secede but most decided to remain. Frank Old, a supporter of the radicals, argued against secession and to concentrate on building up their numbers until they became the majority. Others, fearing that secession would be the death of the Country Party, suggested a special compromise Conference to preserve unity. The new pro-Allan Central Council would not agree and in April resolved that all Councillors and MPs who associated with the secession movement should be expelled.⁹⁰ It was decided not to include ordinary members in the ultimatum at this stage. Immediately Isaac Hart, a pioneer of the VFU,

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Browne, *Biographical Register*, pp. 98, 211

⁸⁹ *Labor Call*, 8 April 1926

⁹⁰ VFU Central Council Minutes, 14-15 April 1926, p. 107

resigned from Council declaring: 'I am an idealist but the problems are not due to the left but to the right who have deserted the basic foundations of the VFU.'⁹¹

In a full-page article in the *Countryman*⁹² Wettenhall responded with a well composed and argued history of the People's Party, of which he had been a member, and its failure when taken over by commercial interests. The remnants were attracted to the VFU and the proof of the success of this 'wondrous step' was that they were now in government at state and federal levels. He accused Dunstan of being angry because he had missed out on a ministry and labelled him the 'chief of state wreckers.' By being personal and defending city interests Wettenhall had contributed to the final schism. Any chance of compromise or intimidating the radicals into remaining was gone. At Ouyen, Dunstan and Stewart convinced a meeting of 120 of their VFU supporters to formalise a separate organisation – the Primary Producers' Union (PPU) – which would field Country Progressive Party (CPP) candidates to contest elections.⁹³ J J Hall the new secretary of the PPU indicated that most activity for his organisation was in the Mallee, Wimmera and northern districts and asserted that it was not anti-VFU.⁹⁴ Later when Warracknabeal in the southern Mallee seceded the *Countryman* would describe the Mallee as 'the cockpit of the PPU.'⁹⁵ It quickly grew to 103 branches. The radical new party adopted a wider basis for membership embracing all country residents. Women could now be delegates and not be limited to the Women's Organisation. MPs would be ineligible to sit on Central Council thus increasing the say of the rank and file.

The VCP parliamentary party accepted Dunstan's resignation 'with regret.' Dunstan delivered a parting shot at Wettenhall: 'he defeated Menzies⁹⁶ in Lowan because of his criticism of the Nationalists. Now he is in their camp.'⁹⁷ Crockett who had resigned from the cabinet the previous year attended that parliamentary party meeting but left when Bouchier persuaded him to do so. He did not resign immediately and signalled he would wait until he saw the constitution of the new group. He later joined along with Glowrey. At federal level Stewart no longer attended ACP parliamentary party

⁹¹ *Countryman*, 16 April 1926

⁹² *ibid.*, 23 April 1926

⁹³ *ibid.*, 30 April 1926

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 23 April 1926

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 4 June 1926

⁹⁶ James Menzies, father of Robert Gordon Menzies

⁹⁷ *Countryman*, 30 April 1926

meetings but sought guidance from the PPU – an advantage of federal parliament still meeting in Melbourne.

The Allan-Peacock coalition survived a few scares. On one occasion Dunstan voted against the composite government but it was saved by Speaker Bowser's casting vote, leading the *Countryman* to describe the PPU as 'camouflaged Labor.'⁹⁸ A second time the coalition was defeated by one vote on the betting tax proposal, Dunstan again voting with the opposition. Some analysts believe that this Bill introduced Dunstan to John Wren, who made his money from the trotting and gambling industries. Wren already had contacts within the Labor Party and now extended them to the CPP to spread his influence against the moralistic Allan. These close votes in the Assembly led the *Age* to see the Allan-Peacock government as 'the Barnacle Government,' clinging to office. It had run out of petrol and had to seek aid from a 'handy bowser.'⁹⁹ The government's response was sharp: 'bad as we are, we do, at any rate, keep Labor off the Treasury benches.'¹⁰⁰ The same edition of the paper predicted that prominent barrister R G Menzies might contest Lowan to win back his father's seat lost to the VFU in 1920.

The government, after considering and preparing for a dissolution, decided to carry on when the independent Liberals indicated they would support the Redistribution Bill. Two electoral Bills were passed by the parliament towards the very end of the year. Compulsory voting would now operate in Victoria as it did for the Commonwealth, Chief Secretary Argyle arguing that this logically followed on from compulsory enrolment adopted in 1923. It received all-party support but the Legislative Council limited its operation to the Assembly. The influence of the Nationalists over their VCP partner was evident when the Central Council approved the Redistribution Bill which would slightly reduce the proportion of rural seats. Cleverly, Argyle had created three provincial seats, Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo, with a quota of 15,000, all of which were more likely to be won by the major parties. The Bill also provided for 36 rural seats with a quota of 10,000 and 26 metropolitan seats with a quota of 22,000.¹⁰¹ This did little to overcome malapportionment but probably strengthened the degree of cooperation within the coalition. Predictably the city interests and Labor, which

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 13 August 1926

⁹⁹ *Labor Call*, 12 August 1926, quoting *Age*, 5 August 1926

¹⁰⁰ *Age*, 7 August 1926

¹⁰¹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 172, 14 December 1926, pp. 3142 ff.

advocated ‘one vote one value’ on the basis of three state electorates within each federal electorate, were less than happy. Dunstan and the CPP voted for the legislation – dubbed the ‘Argyle Blot’ – realising that they too depended upon a bias in favour of rural electorates. The rural parties obstructed any further reform until a Cain Labor majority government reformed it in 1953.

The new Redistribution Act had to be put into practice. The electoral commissioners’ proposals sent shock waves through the parties when 11 seats were to be abolished, nine of them Labor. Most of the Nationalist and VCP seats were preserved. Labor with support from the Liberals and Dunstan defeated the proposals on a tied vote 30:30 and they were returned to the commission for review. The redrafted boundaries were finally approved by both houses in December. The Argyle Blot was the result of political strategy, not equity, leading Nationalist MLC Harold Cohen to describe the Redistribution Act as ‘born in intrigue, nurtured in chicanery and developed by the exercise of all the artifices known to political strategy.’¹⁰² Labor, the other city-based party, could not have agreed more. For 28 years these electoral arrangements worked to the benefit of the Country Party but to the detriment of good government.¹⁰³

Allan had held the government together on the simple basis that survival took precedence over innovation. He declared he would never resign and took comfort from the split in the VFU. The Nationalists were so relieved at the removal of the ‘socialists’ from the VFU that they were willing to continue the coalition until the election scheduled for early 1927.¹⁰⁴ Even when his government was defeated by as many as seven votes over the debate on the Milvain v Railways Commissioners verdict Allan stayed in office declaring he could rely on continued support. The *Age* was not impressed with those years under the Allan-Peacock coalition, dismissing it as: ‘never before in its political history had Victoria passed through such a valley of humiliation; never before had its destinies been in the care of such a politically immoral crowd.’¹⁰⁵

Over its period in office the coalition was defeated nine times and saved by the Speaker on another four occasions. One could well ask how the Governor could be satisfied by

¹⁰² *Labor Call*, 16 December 1926

¹⁰³ Costar, ‘John Allan’, p. 195

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 194

¹⁰⁵ *Labor Call*, 2 December 1926

Allan's claims. After each defeat he would still carry on, showing that the combined anti-Labor feeling across his cabinet and the parliament was sufficient to maintain supply and accordingly him and the coalition. Perhaps Stradbroke, followed in August by Lord Somers as Governor, had noticed that Allan had learned from Ramsay MacDonald on how to legitimately stay in office by refusing to resign over defeats on legislation but only on a vote of no-confidence. The *Herald* on evaluating the year said that 'Liberalism had paid a high price in compromise and humiliation.'¹⁰⁶

The battle between the CPP and the VCP would intensify from the New Year as each campaigned to attract the rural vote and to convince their membership and the farmers of the value in cooperating with one of the major parties – the VFU with the Nationalists and the CPP with Labor. A poll was due in Victoria. The president of the VCP, Pickering who had nominated for Bulla (Bulla-Dalhousie under the redistribution), decided to lead the charge against the CPP by now contesting Ouyen, at the heart of the Mallee cockpit. His target was the 'black crows,' a name given by the VCP to the CPP for they were the birds which fed off the carrion of the dead, and it would be a fight to the death.

¹⁰⁶ *Herald*, 3 December 1926

CHAPTER 4

FINDING DIRECTION

‘All over the world where fusion between parties took place [this] always meant a sacrifice of principle and policy and always ended in failure.’

A A Dunstan, 7 December 1928

This chapter examines the dependence of the Country Parties on electoral malapportionment for their existence and expansion. It acknowledges that the continuing series of minority governments and coalitions was the result of the closeness of the party numbers in the lower house. Labor and Nationalists shared the metropolitan seats and the Country Parties dominated the rural areas, their numbers enhanced through the favourable ratio of rural to city seats. This triangular situation explains the influence of the smallest party, the CPP, in determining which parties formed government.

The CPP and the VCP competed strongly in the lead-up to the 1927 election, the politically savvy Allan delivering a coalition policy speech but his party opposed some of their coalition partner candidates. Hogan formed a Labor minority government with support from the CPP and independents. Labor delivered some legislation for the farmers but mostly its Bills met defeat in the Nationalist dominated Legislative Council. There was a brief period of some consensus between the parties which saw compromised legislation through the parliament and no attempt by the non-Labor parties to put a vote of no-confidence as they waited for a propitious time to mount a challenge. This degree of cooperation vanished when Labor signalled it would introduce an Electoral Redistribution Bill. Non-Labor united to defeat Hogan because they would all consequently suffer if their electoral advantage was removed, even though the Nationalists would have benefited at the expense of the Country Parties. McPherson, without consulting other leaders and assuming united non-Labor support, formed a minority Nationalist government and gained an immediate seven months adjournment of parliament. In the face of a deteriorating Australian and world economy and an attempt at federal level to virtually abolish the conciliation and arbitration system, the people voted Labor federally into government on 12 October 1929. In Victoria the CPP and independents again supported a Hogan-led Labor government.

Another New Year opened and the animosity between the CPP and the VCP continued. Percy Stewart, the designer of the CPP constitution and rules, had had some time and experience to review its original practices and engineered some changes. Whereas the VFU had been limited to farmers it was now open to all country people prepared to sign the membership conditions. The VCP had done this the previous year to attract more members as well as changing its name from the VFU.¹ Now Stewart had done likewise, his group adopting the name Country Progressive Party and widening the membership. Those of his old friends, now opponents in the VFU, criticised him for his anti-coalition stance and for his accusation that the VCP members of the Allan-Peacock coalition had done so for ‘position and pay,’ something he had been accused of himself when he was a minister in the early Bruce-Page government. There was no love lost and the two sides would split hairs to show they had reason and right on their side of the schism.²

The VCP Central Council expelled J J Carlisle MLA for voting against parliamentary party decisions and ignored the urging of the city press to continue the coalition at the coming polls through a joint election policy. The party would go to the people on separate policies and opposing Nationalist candidates. Yet at Kyabram Premier Allan’s election speech was to announce the joint ministry’s program – not a VCP program. The impression given was that the coalition would automatically continue. All of the ministry were present except Sir Stanley Argyle. Harry Lawson attempted to undermine this unity by publicly appealing to electors to support only the Nationalists. This demonstrated that some leaders (and ex-leaders) believed they could over-ride party rules and decisions if they believed themselves to be crucial to the fortunes of the party.

The outcome at the polls was difficult to predict. Compulsory voting would operate for the first time but which party would be advantaged? Ninety-two per cent of enrolled voters went to the polls for the Legislative Assembly election on 9 April 1927 compared to 59 per cent under voluntary voting in 1924.³ While redistribution occupied the minds of the candidates, and particularly any deal on preferences, it did not appear as an issue

¹ *Countryman*, 18 March 1927

² *ibid.*, 14 January 1927

³ Costar, ‘John Allan’, p. 195

to the electorate at large. The Mallee, which had been divided into three constituencies, elected Albert Allnutt for Mildura while Harold Glowrey defeated Pickering in Ouyen. Glowrey had founded the Ouyen branch of the VFU years earlier. He had also contested Lowan against Wettenhall at the previous election as a VFU candidate. As president of the VCP, Pickering's disappointment at not achieving his quest in Ouyen would have been palpable. Party alignments did not change greatly. The result was a steady one for Labor which won nine of the new seats, compensating for the loss of the nine under the Argyle redistribution. All six independent Liberals held their city seats but the Nationalists lost two and the VCP lost three, one to the CPP which now had four MLAs.

There was plenty of time for Premier Allan and the parties to review the possible options in forming the new government. The lack of urgency was aided by the generally shared belief that the state parliament should not be recalled until the federal parliament had moved from Melbourne to Canberra and been opened on 9 May by the Duke of York. The outcome for the government was 'line-ball' if Dunstan's four 'black crows' sided with Labor. The manoeuvres started immediately. McPherson tried to form a Nationalist government with the VCP and independent Liberals to keep Labor out. Allan attempted to hang on, claiming there had been no real change between the party strengths and continued to act as Premier even making appointments to various positions. The VCP parliamentary party determined to renew the coalition ministry depending on cabinet numbers and policies. This too, depended upon the independent Liberals being included or sitting in the corner. The negotiations failed. Allan still refused to resign and the Nationalists withdrew from the coalition forcing him to accept reality and resign his post. While his plan to force the CPP to a vote of no-confidence on the floor of the house failed, the position of the CPP and the independent Liberals became clear when Ned Hogan, the Labor leader, was commissioned to form a minority government with conditional support from both those groups. Hogan had been opposition leader for just over a year. The split within the Country Party had delivered government back to Labor and it now seemed that Governor Stradbroke was more at ease with minority governments in Victoria even if they were Labor. One independent, Oswald Snowball (Brighton), received his reward when he gained the speakership. Another independent was elected Chairman of Committees. Both had been supporters of the previous coalition.

Allan now reversed his failed strategy of a few years earlier when he had called for a single leader of the opposition which the Nationalists had refused on that occasion. After Hogan assumed government Allan now wanted a two-party system: 'one country party and one city party is all we want.'⁴ This was a most unrealistic ambition given the situation. McPherson assumed the position of leader of the opposition, the Nationalists being the larger party in opposition. Allan continued to lead the VCP. He was furious with the CPP, particularly Dunstan, and criticised him for accepting a position on the Railways Standing Committee, a position Allan had offered him in the past but which he had then rejected. Dunstan as leader of the CPP declared that his group would support Labor as long as Hogan delivered useful country legislation. For the Country Parties the tactics of cross-bench versus coalition would now be tested.

The second CPP Conference, held in September, supported Dunstan's tactics over the past months but expressed annoyance that any pro-country legislation put forward by the Hogan government was voted down by the Nationalist dominated Legislative Council.⁵ The government attempted some social justice legislation such as assistance for the unemployed, fair rents and workers' compensation but was frustrated when it was either blocked or severely amended by the Legislative Council. Labor did earn some praise. Its direction over the State Electricity Commission led Sir John Monash to declare that its affairs 'always prosper better under a Labor government.'⁶ Hogan failed to establish a wheat marketing pool when he narrowly lost a growers' ballot in May 1928. However, he was a member of the 1927 Premiers' Conference which established the Loan Council, a body which brought a degree of stability to the pattern of Australian governments' borrowings.⁷ The Labor government had its quarrels too within the labour movement, experiencing serious differences with the Australian Railways Union over retrenchments and facing angry reactions to police shooting of strikers during a waterside workers dispute. The conservatives and the Melbourne business elite tried to undermine Hogan personally, spreading the rumour he was a 'Wren man.' But while

⁴ *Countryman*, 15 July 1927

⁵ *ibid.*, 23 September 1927

⁶ Love, *op. cit.*, p. 180; R McMullin, *The Light on the Hill: The Australian Labor Party, 1891-1991*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 141-2; G Serle, *John Monash: A Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1982, p. 458

⁷ Love, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-1

there was evidence they knew each other, there appeared to be no evidence of a direct link, notwithstanding that both were practising Catholics of Irish descent.⁸

For the Country Parties, at federal and state levels, being in coalition, while it watered down Country Party proposals, at least assured their virtual passage through the conservative dominated Senate and usually through the Legislative Council. Legislation of Labor governments and of minority governments supported by Labor suffered repeated defeat in those upper houses. Delegates to the second CPP Conference moved to have the undemocratic upper chamber in Victoria abolished, a similar position to Labor, but Dunstan demonstrated his hold over the Conference when he successfully amended the motion limiting the reform to full adult franchise and compulsory voting on the same footing as for the Assembly.⁹ The *Countryman*, mouthpiece for the VCP, interpreted the same obstruction by the Legislative Council as being a necessary brake on hasty and ill-advised legislation by the Assembly; the Council represented a 'national rather than a sectional viewpoint expressed by men with a stake in the country.'¹⁰

The series of minority governments and weak coalitions over the years led some MPs to consider alternative ways of establishing government. Toutcher (Nationalist) and Allnutt (CPP) moved to establish an elected cabinet within parliament along the lines of Stewart's proposals at federal level. This idealistic approach was considered unpragmatic and the vote was lost 29:15, at least indicating some support from others. The proposal had some of the hallmarks of the all-party governments that existed in Britain during times of emergency such as the Great War. Economic issues were a major concern of the electorate. The Australian economy was showing the first signs of a slowdown and reversal as external debt and unemployment increased. The voters were becoming nervous about their future and at the NSW election in October the Lang Labor government was replaced by a Nationalist-Country Party alliance formed to oppose Lang's intentions to improve rural workers' wages and conditions and to abolish the Legislative Council. The conditional support strategy was impossible if the NSW Country Party (formerly the Parliamentary Progressive Party until renamed in 1925)

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 180

⁹ *Countryman*, 15 July 1927

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 6 January 1928

was to remain opposed to Labor.¹¹ The Bavin-Buttenshaw composite government, the founding coalition for the NSW Country Party, included only four Country Party portfolios.¹² This would provide a template for those south of the Murray to follow a few years later.

The Hogan Labor government had its safety margin threatened late in the year when one of the three independent Liberals, Henry Bodman, died. The VCP was shocked when the by-election for his rural seat of South Gippsland was won by the Nationalists on Country Party preferences. Why had the VCP not won the seat? The CPP had not contested and accordingly there was no split vote. This suggested that the CPP as well as the VCP could not be relied upon to support Labor in parliament if it did not do so in the electorate. In reality the result should not have been totally surprising as Bodman had won the seat from the Nationalists only seven months earlier.

The year ended with Labor signalling it would introduce a new Electoral Redistribution Bill in the Autumn session. Until now the VCP and the Nationalists did not actively pursue the Labor government. There had not been a vote of no-confidence and 75 Bills had been passed by the Assembly with only 12 rejected by the Council. Labor saw this as ‘office by courtesy,’ the schemers waiting their opportunity to oust Labor before the Redistribution Bill could be put forward.¹³ Others blamed the weak leadership of McPherson, the *Age* scathingly describing him as a ‘pathetic figure’ who ‘cannot even make a feeble pretence of leading.’¹⁴ Would Labor be able to achieve its proposal to create three Assembly seats within each federal electorate? The Country and Nationalist parties supported this federal arrangement which allowed a safety margin for rural electorates by provision of a plus or minus 20 per cent variation from the average.

The debate over coalitions and the role of the agrarian parties in government continued as the two Victorian Country Parties competed for support amongst the voters. The ACPA endorsed the Bruce-Page electoral pact with an amendment that should a seat become vacant both parties would be free to contest. Page, recognising reality, reluctantly admitted that the VCP electorate councils had the final say and that ‘we have

¹¹ Aitkin, op. cit., p. 27

¹² Davey, op. cit., p. 51

¹³ *Labor Call*, 26 January 1928

¹⁴ *Age*, 20 July 1928

no desire to usurp that privilege.’¹⁵ The VCP challenged the electoral pact as it had been made by the leaders and not the rank and file. Now Conference should be supreme and the electorate councils should decide their candidates and what electorates to contest. But in determining in which electorates to campaign the VCP Central Council, through an editorial in the *Countryman*, indicated its anti-Labor bias: ‘of Labor and Nationalists we regard the latter as the lesser evil.’¹⁶ At the VCP Conference, in an attempt to secure support for cooperation with the Nationalists, Allan went further. He proposed an electoral pact which supported the other partner: ‘there are only two sides in the House, Labor and non-Labor, and the VCP is on non-Labor’s side at the present.’¹⁷

The deteriorating economy had its impact on the VCP Conference. Allan received another delegate’s rebuke for ignoring a decision in support of the poll for the compulsory wheat pools and Conference re-endorsed the principle. Those who had supported Allan when he failed to carry out that decision, because he knew the Nationalists and their city-based financial supporters opposed the cooperative wheat pools, now acknowledged Conference was right in the ‘current financial situation’: ‘all those involved, the farmers and the city-based and competitive financiers, merchants and distributors are currently disillusioned with the financial situation. Cooperation brings rewards.’¹⁸

Albert Dunstan grouped Page and Allan under the one banner, accusing both of sacrificing the growth of the Country Party for the sake of cabinet rank:

Leave that prize until you can form a government on your own but a CPP or VCP leader in Victoria would never be called upon to lead a minority government.¹⁹

In seven years Dunstan would change his mind after the two parties came together and he took the premiership. At the federal level he attacked Page, seeing ‘the ACP being used as a cat’s paw and that there were no gains for the man on the land; any claims for advantages won is a myth.’²⁰

¹⁵ *Countryman*, 9 March 1928

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 13 January 1928

¹⁷ *Countryman*, 16 March 1928

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 23 March 1928

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 10 February 1928

²⁰ *Labor Call*, 16 February 1928

The war of words would be put to the test when the CPP and the VCP both nominated candidates at the May 1928 election for the Legislative Council North-Western province which covered the Mallee and the Wimmera wheat growing areas. VCP candidate R D Elliott, being more pro-Nationalist, was quickly labelled a ‘Collins Street farmer’ by the Mallee rebels.²¹ The CPP candidate, W J McCann, won the election although Elliott polled well in the Wimmera. Rationalising its defeat, the VCP weakly blamed non-compulsory voting for the Council.²² Elliott would later be endorsed for the Senate, perhaps, as suggested by the *Age*, as ‘a reward for this Collins Street farmer’s heroic defeat.’²³

The Victorian parliament continued with little to suggest the wafer-thin majority vote for the Hogan government was in danger until a second independent Liberal, this time Speaker Snowball, died bringing about a by-election for Brighton. In a tied vote the replacement for the Speaker was vital especially as the Nationalists were expected to win back Brighton. Allan declared that no anti-Labor man would take the speakership but he reckoned without Sir Alexander Peacock, father of the house with 40 years service, who took over the chair, reducing the Nationalists vote by one even if he enjoyed another following any tied vote. In August, spurred on by the *Herald*²⁴ declaring that Victoria ‘would be next’ after Labor governments had been defeated earlier in the year in New South Wales, Tasmania and South Australia because of the deteriorating economic situation, the predictable censure motion was put by the McPherson opposition. It was defeated 35:28, with the CPP and remaining independents continuing to support Labor. The survival of the government encouraged the *Countryman* to carry a strong anti-Dunstan editorial calling upon another avian analogy when describing him as:

a political cuckoo – prefers to let others do the work and take the responsibility – laying the eggs in their nest. He dare not break with Labor lest Labor break him ... Dunstan is an unwitting tool and mouthpiece ... mulish, stubborn, anti-spirit used against his opponents rather than for the welfare of his constituents.²⁵

²¹ *Countryman*, 27 May 1928

²² *ibid.*, 8 June 1928

²³ *Age*, 28 October 1928

²⁴ *Countryman*, 8 June 1928

²⁵ *ibid.*, 27 August 1928

An accurate statement perhaps and one to be borne out in the future, but this spiteful material, while it may have pleased the supporters of the VCP, contributed little to healing the rift between the Country Parties. The battle seemed to be more about personalities and ambitions than policies or of men rather than measures.

The VCP admired how the Hogan government delivered to its base, the working man, and hoped that it could be as successful in delivering to the farmers. The mixed feeling on coalitions and minority governments led the *Countryman*, somewhat ambivalently, to conclude: ‘if Labor is a sinner, capitalism is far from being a saint.’²⁶ While there was some uneasiness on budget issues among the VCP in being so closely tied to the Nationalists it was the fear of any electoral redistribution that mostly concerned them about the government. They feared that the CPP would be trapped into a pro-city redistribution and escalated their campaign against it, warning that the Legislative Council could not be relied upon to vote down a proposal which affected the Assembly only.²⁷ They were silent on the fact that their preferred partners in any government held a substantial majority in the upper chamber and that the Nationalists would welcome a reduction of the rural bias. This proved to be the case when Hogan introduced the Redistribution Bill which would reduce the rural advantage from 47:100 to 77.5:100 (34 rural and 32 city seats) and increased the numbers in the Assembly by one. Edmund Greenwood of the Nationalists proposed no increase in the Assembly and Labor accepted the amendment, the first reading passing 32:26. Glowrey was attacked when he predicted the Bill would not be forced to a division, the *Countryman* describing the CPP who ‘gave parliament by a majority of six the opportunity for such legislation to be debated’ as committing ‘political treachery.’²⁸ However the CPP was not so naïve. The Hogan government was defeated by a single vote on a no-confidence motion related to the handling of police and waterfront disputes, the real intention being to prevent the Electoral Redistribution Bill being voted upon. To make the point abundantly clear to the VCP, the CPP had added the Bill as an amendment to the no-confidence motion even though this may have alienated preferential support from Labor at any forthcoming election.²⁹

²⁶ *ibid.*, 31 August 1928

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*, 2 November 1928

²⁹ *ibid.*, 16 November 1928

Dunstan's tactic saw him caught in his own trap as he tried to push the Nationalists to oppose the redistribution measure. Some members of the composite opposition, including Greenwood, W H Everard, Wilfrid Kent Hughes and Ian Macfarlan, labelled by the press as the 'renegade four',³⁰ and some of the Liberals were in support of the redistribution and had voted for the debate to proceed. Dunstan's 'mistake' saw the Labor government defeated, something he did not want at this stage, but it did prevent any reduction to the Country Party's electoral advantage. Hogan did not resign immediately as the Dunstan amendment confined the limits of the no-confidence motion and a few days earlier the parliament had been in favour of the Redistribution Bill being introduced. His determination was backed by three eminent legal authorities who advised that the no-confidence motion as amended was both incredulous and unintelligible.³¹ Eventually, with no alternative, Hogan resigned on 21 November 1928, following which the Governor commissioned McPherson to form a minority Nationalist ministry.³²

The tactics employed by the parties during these debates are illustrative of the lengths to which they would go to gain office. For example, when McPherson moved the no-confidence motion he limited it to Labor's handling of the police and waterfront disputes yet the next month as Premier he admitted that he now saw Hogan as right. Within a fortnight of the debate Greenwood admitted that he and his three colleagues reversed their support for the Redistribution Bill not because he was against it but 'definitely to bring about an election.'³³ Overall, given the knife-edge alignment of the parties, Dunstan's CPP controlled the debate but it was these four (Nationalist) 'renegades' who enabled the 17 Nationalists (just over a quarter of the total Assembly) to take over government from Labor without an election.³⁴

This close shave fostered a desire within the VCP to seek unity with the CPP, a reality made clear when McPherson formed an all-Nationalist government on 22 November 1928. It seems Allan and Dunstan were not consulted by him nor approached by the Governor to establish support for the minority government and some within the VCP,

³⁰ *Labor Call*, 29 November 1928

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Love, *op. cit.*, p. 181

³³ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 178, 28 November 1928, p. 3015

³⁴ *Labor Call*, 31 January 1929

awakening to the disadvantages of composite governments, were somewhat relieved that they would not be part of a predictably short-lived government. Everard, Greenwood, Kent Hughes and Macfarlan now acted to oppose adjournment of the house which would lead to a dissolution. The Governor accepted there was support for a McPherson ministry and installed the Nationalist minority government. Kent Hughes and Macfarlan were rewarded by being included in the ministry. McPherson did not trust the Country Parties and their differing attitudes towards Labor. Certainly he could not serve two corner masters. By going it alone, McPherson stood by his statement of a few months earlier: 'There is only room for two parties in this House – Labor and anti-Labor – choose ye whom ye serve.'³⁵

Contrary to the usual parliamentary practice to test a government's support, McPherson rejected debate on Hogan's motion to dissolve parliament and let the people decide. His minority government depended on support of country interests and this fact would contribute to its undoing.³⁶ He outlined his government's agenda with rural benefits such as the establishment of an agricultural bank and a uniform rail gauge. The conservative *Herald* welcomed 'the ministry's commendable energy and directness.'³⁷

The VCP believed that McPherson was playing for time and were not surprised when after gaining supply for seven months the house was adjourned until July but not until a joint sitting had been held to elect a replacement for the late Senator Andrew (VCP). The events associated with this would exacerbate and delay any rapprochement between the Country Parties. R D Elliott was nominated by the VCP and they expected reciprocal support from Labor as they had supported that party replacing its own last time. When former (VFU) MLC R H Abbott was elected 58:33 on the secret ballot, the suspicion fell upon a Labor-CPP plot hatched in Bendigo a few weeks earlier. This deepened when, at the last minute, A M Zwar MLC nominated Abbott who had been adamant he did not want Dunstan to nominate him as planned. Allan claimed ignorance of the whole deal. The basis for the accusation of a 'plot' was due to Dunstan's outspoken attack at the Bendigo branch meeting when as president he said the VCP 'would have been subsumed by the Nationalists except for his CPP' and that

³⁵ *ibid.*, 6 September 1928

³⁶ R Allsop, 'William McPherson: "Threepenny" premier and philanthropist' in P Strangio and B Costar (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 201

³⁷ *Herald*, 13 December 1928

‘independence is a non-negotiable aspect of any coming together.’³⁸ Dunstan had alluded to the VCP’s weakness when he asserted: ‘All over the world where fusion between parties took place [this] always meant a sacrifice of principle and policy and always ended in failure.’³⁹ The *Countryman* advocated that the months of parliamentary recess be used to explore conciliation between the two agrarian parties.⁴⁰

Page presented the federal budget and later hinted at a federal election to allow the people to decide who was best to turn around the worsening economy. He flourished on the floor of parliament the Labor campaign manual, written by E G Theodore, and attempted to demolish the former Treasurer of Queensland by rationalising the downturn in the economy and demonstrating the coalition was better than Labor to manage the nation’s financial affairs.⁴¹ The government hoped to capitalise on the timely arrival of the British Economic Mission (BEM), known as the Big Four: Sir Arthur Duckham, Sir Ernest Clarke, Sir Hugo Hurst and Mr Dougal Malcolm. The *Countryman* was critical of the mission, arguing that these titled men should try to see matters through Australian eyes.⁴² When Hurst stressed that ‘Australia should accept British standards not foreign standards,’ the paper explained that the BEM did not understand why Australia had different tariffs essential for a ‘young and undeveloped country.’⁴³ Before starting their mission they advised that Australian industry must expand as there were too many inefficient small factories and they were alarmed at the rising costs of production of the primary industries.⁴⁴ The *Age* criticised Bruce’s invitation to the BEM as ‘they do not come here with totally open minds – they are British businessmen. They will put the British Empire and England first.’⁴⁵ These comments did not deter Bruce from calling the election set for 17 November 1928.

In the Wimmera the VCP was anxious to eliminate the CPP federally. Harris opposed Percy Stewart, and Page actively campaigned locally but Stewart held the seat. The poll

³⁸ *Countryman*, 7 December 1928

³⁹ *ibid.*, 7 December 1928

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 23 November 1928

⁴¹ Australia, House of Representatives, *Debates*, vol. 119, part 2, 20 September 1928, pp. 7021-30

⁴² *Countryman*, 19 October 1928

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

saw a swing to Labor which picked up seven seats including Indi where the sitting MP Robert Cook (ACP) failed to nominate in time. Rumours abounded that he had deliberately done so. Being on the outside of the ACP group and the only one denied a portfolio or other position by the coalition Cook felt isolated, resented this and had sought retribution. He denied the rumours but Labor's surprised Paul Jones was virtually 'handed the seat' unopposed. Page explained the 'stupid action' as simply Cook mistaking the closing time for nominations and holding the cheque for the deposit in his pocket so that his overdraft would not be extended longer than necessary.⁴⁶ The ACP had already gained the seat of Wide Bay when Bernard Corser took over from his father Edward Corser, a Nationalist. The swing to Labor federally and against it at state level showed that rather than being simply anti-Labor, the electorate blamed sitting governments for the economic collapse and rising unemployment.

Victorian Labor's review of the year 1928 cast Dunstan as 'an uncrowned maker and breaker of cabinets' yet 'he claimed to stand for measures not men.'⁴⁷ Labor continued to campaign strongly in the wheat growing areas pointing out that the CPP, other than Glowrey, had deserted the farmers when they had failed to support a Labor amendment to continue the original Labor initiated Postponement of Payments Act (Moratorium) beyond the coming February. Labor claimed that the CPP had been outmanoeuvred by the Nationalists and the VCP, caught by the need to be seen as united with the conservatives on redistribution and the issues of law and order, such as the recent strikes and bombings in Melbourne, as the more militant in the community protested against the failure of governments to counter the economic downturn. Labor accused the CPP of joining their former political opponents even if it meant 'going against its professions, protestations and principles that they truly represented the man on the land.' *Labor Call* then quoted the *Age* to support its criticisms when the *Age* reported that the alternative of supporting Labor's amendment was 'death at the ballot box.'⁴⁸

Early in 1929 Allan showed his conservative side with 'full support for the final report of the BEM'⁴⁹ which had recommended inter alia a shift from government to private enterprise, more consultation with British banks and the establishment of a Loan

⁴⁶ Page, op. cit., p. 211

⁴⁷ *Labor Call*, 6 December 1928

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 10 January 1929

⁴⁹ *Countryman*, 25 January 1929

Council to oversee and honour British debts. The latter already existed from the previous year and this suggests a further task for that body. Allan was not perturbed either when, immediately after this, British shipping charges for freight rose 10 per cent to the farmers' disadvantage. Preparing his defence, Allan was quick to explain how McPherson had excluded the VCP from government by putting his party in a no-win situation. Lawson said that the Premier had 'expected' the support of the 17 non-Labor members and had not bothered to consult him. Now Allan rationalised that the VCP did not want to be in government with a minority in a ministry headed by a representative of city merchants. While he had not been given the courtesy of consultation, his party would give them a 'fair spin' but be ready to go to the people at any time.⁵⁰ This de facto rejection of a forced coalition would have stood up well against Stewart's support for unity between the CPP and the VCP – 'slowly and carefully as the rank and file wants it. It seems the leaders are the ones at loggerheads.'⁵¹ Sensing the general membership's increasing rejection of composite governments, the VCP turned its criticism towards the McPherson minority government claiming the Premier and Argyle did not consider the Country Party worthy of being in the ministry: 'They think they are born to rule and that no one else can govern.'⁵²

This growing contempt for the 'common enemy' saw the VCP and the CPP delegates meet in April at a round table held at the Temperance Hall in Melbourne. They agreed there should be no electoral pacts with other parties and that unity was desirable but they still could not agree on the question of composite ministries. The CPP did concede they were prepared to join a composite ministry in times of national emergency such as war. The delegates agreed that lack of unity would mean opposing each other in all seats at the next election. A new compromise was put forward: that the rank and file decide whether a composite ministry should be formed by a majority vote at Conference. The sticking point was whether that majority should be a simple one of 50 per cent, perhaps 60 per cent or even two-thirds.⁵³ At least there was a common recognition that control should be from the bottom up and not left simply to the political leaders.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 1 February 1929

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 25 January 1929

⁵² *ibid.*, 29 March and 5 April 1929

⁵³ *ibid.*, 17 May 1929

The economy was worsening and unemployment rising. There was friction at all levels of government as the remedies put forward by the BEM were debated and implemented. Given the differences of opinion on the economy amongst the non-Labor parties, Labor was able to force the Bruce-Page coalition government to two close votes, the government being saved on one occasion by the Speaker's casting vote. McWilliams and Stewart were pronouncedly hostile to the coalition which was also questioned by the *Age* stating that 'the nation was tired of the Siamese twins business in federal politics' and that 'nationalism is a political creed infected with dry rot.'⁵⁴ Hughes, for personal as well as political reasons, criticised Page over the pact, pointing out it was intended for one parliament only: 'he has surrendered independence, yet poses as a leader of an independent party; he is but a prisoner of *concubinage*.'⁵⁵

These outbursts explain readily why the ACP could never consider accepting Hughes as a member, nor indeed, that Hughes ever considered joining it. The union movement was active too in demanding it be included in any discussions and decisions and that it not be left only to big business and government. Strikes and industrial unrest increased.

Three Young Nationalists, R G Menzies, Marcus Saltau and Wilfrid Kent Hughes, had resigned from the McPherson government over a decision to advance payment to an uneconomic cooperative freezing works which they had seen as counter to the proposals of the BEM. Menzies saw these issues as a matter of men as well as measures. Speaking at a Wesley Church Pleasant Sunday Afternoon, the recently elected MLC and newly appointed KC questioned the sagacity of the government:

Why do we have underqualified people in parliament? They are more concerned with the effects on constituents thus forfeiting their rights as leaders ... the first desirable characteristic of a legislator is that he should have a well informed brain.⁵⁶

Had his own sense of self got the better of him or was the ultimate target his former state cabinet colleagues or the Country Party members who the McPherson minority government relied upon to survive? Certainly he was critical of the apparent reversal by

⁵⁴ Quoted in *Labor Call*, 21 February 1929

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 7 March 1929

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 9 May 1929

his Premier who, as a backbencher three years earlier, had criticised the subsidy of those works as ‘almost disastrous.’⁵⁷ Menzies saw the government as lacking policy and now McPherson providing no leadership, especially on this issue.⁵⁸ Furthermore, his hatred for the Country Party over the defeat of his family’s MPs a decade earlier obviously had not abated. Two weeks later the McPherson government survived only on the Speaker’s vote, showing Peacock would continue to support the conservatives (or the government of the day as a matter of principle as a tied vote is not a defeat) when the government decided to increase the salaries of some senior public servants in another decision contrary to the BEM’s legacy.

Six months earlier the Bruce-Page ministry had similarly survived on the Speaker’s vote over a decision to disallow a public service arbitration award for postal workers. Hughes, Stewart and McWilliams voted against the government, with four government members intentionally absent. McWilliams had returned to parliament as an independent after an absence of six years. With four party allegiances since his election in 1903 and despite being initial leader of the ACP he showed by this vote that he had not changed his political clothes. Bruce, determined to maintain the coalition, argued that the BEM policy was the only way to go to avoid further economic deterioration. Hughes and E A Mann voted several times against the government and were no longer welcome at Nationalist Party meetings. Moreover, Hughes and Stewart were rumoured to be implementing a *putsch* to replace Bruce with the Scullin-led Labor Party and conditional support but nothing came of it.⁵⁹ Moves to abolish the Arbitration Court after the referendum to do so had failed and the states had declined to voluntarily align their laws with the federal government further antagonised Stewart and Hughes. The BEM report was finally presented at the end of June, carefully worded so as not to offend the British and Australian governments while pushing free market and capitalist solutions to problems caused mainly by those very systems. Labor found little to agree with except that ‘the present circumstances in Australia are not favourable to immigration.’ This was understandable since unemployment had increased to over 11 per cent and the position on immigration was bipartisan.

⁵⁷ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 171, 27 July 1926, p. 442

⁵⁸ A W Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life*, vol. 1, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993, p. 69

⁵⁹ *Countryman*, 31 May 1929

Matters came to a head in August. The federal government saw increasing wages as the basic cause of that rising unemployment along with poor export sales. With the death in January of Justice Higgins, the government took the opportunity to legislate for abolition of the Arbitration Court. The House of Representatives carried the second reading by just four votes, cleverly combining the move with the Maritime Industries Bill designed to combat unrest on the wharves. It seemed the government had not closely observed the fate of a similar tactic by Dunstan in the Victorian parliament the previous year, for following a further amendment put forward by Hughes, the coalition was defeated by one vote. Mann and G A Maxwell of the Nationalists, Stewart and McWilliams provided Labor with the necessary support. Their argument was that there had been no mandate to go against the constitutional provision of arbitration except for the maritime industry. The government opted for a dissolution, the election to be held on 12 October, less than a year after it had been re-elected in 1928.

Stewart and the other ‘rebels’ were attacked by the VCP as being out of line with the farmers’ opposition to arbitration, especially for rural workers, and they decided to campaign against him. For the VCP the defeat of the federal coalition was seen as one ‘of personal avenues not principle.’⁶⁰ Stewart was seen as the chief stumbling block to political unity and often opposed to Country Party initiated legislation. He was therefore accused of effectively disenfranchising the Wimmera.⁶¹ Labor responded by deciding not to oppose him, channelling their votes to him wherever possible. This infuriated the VCP further leading them to label Stewart as the ‘official Labor candidate’ particularly when he repeatedly described the ACP as ‘the coat tail of the Nationalists.’⁶² The pressure to reduce government spending under the BEM proposals led Premier McPherson during the campaign to repeat a statement made about the Wimmera by one of his predecessors, Premier Bent, in 1902, when he posed the rhetorically damaging question: ‘was the Mallee with its low rainfall worth saving? You only get rain every four years.’⁶³ No doubt these ill-judged words contributed to Stewart’s healthy win.

The people demonstrated their anger over the government’s attempt to virtually abolish arbitration by referring all arbitration, except cases involving maritime industries, to the

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 13 August 1929

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 20 September 1929

⁶² *ibid.*, 4 October 1929

⁶³ *ibid.*, 11 October 1929

states after that move had been rejected at the referendum held on 4 September 1926.⁶⁴ Against the backdrop of a worsening economy they voted down the government of the day. The Prime Minister was defeated in Flinders by E J Holloway, who earlier in the year had been fined for urging the public to go on strike over the government's anti-industrial action. The court had seen this as a breach of the War Precautions Repeal Act of 1920. The electorate saw it otherwise. Gibson (ACP) lost Corangamite to Labor and McWilliams was returned in Franklin as an independent. He died only hours after being declared elected.

A week after the federal election the Mallee issue caused the defeat of the McPherson government over Glowrey's adjournment motion to discuss the reduced spending on Mallee public works. All of the CPP and two Liberals, F E Forrest and A C (Burnett) Gray, formed part of the 34:30 defeat. McPherson sought a dissolution. The VCP was irate at the CPP, the *Countryman* stating:

it was hard to identify a less fruitful period in Victoria's political history ... being a corner party had not been best practice ... to wield the balance of power one needed to get involved ... Allan's redistribution of Mallee rewarding the CPP with two of the three seats had been thanked with revenge ... The CPP is engaged if not married to the Labor party.⁶⁵

The VCP was torn in two directions. Obviously the Nationalists had reached their zenith, judging by the federal sphere, and a united Country Party was urgently needed. But such a party would inevitably be a step towards Labor and support for economic legislation contrary to the interests of the farmers as the VCP saw it.

At the state election on 30 November 1929 there was minimal change in major party seats but the balance was more even among them, the Nationalists losing three and the VCP and Labor each gaining one. Menzies had transferred to the Assembly by winning Nunawading and would have greater influence on his colleagues. Each party now considered its future. Would they opt for a minority government or a coalition? Which party would sit in the corner offering conditional support? Redistribution dominated their considerations. Dunstan saw that any successful move for redistribution would come from the Nationalists as the CPP would not support it. The VCP believed that a

⁶⁴ *Australian Parliamentary Handbook*, pp. 730-1

⁶⁵ *Countryman*, 1 November 1929

redistribution would not arise in a coalition as country conditional support would veto it: 'The Nationalists would not destroy the hand that feeds them.'⁶⁶ A conference was called between the Nationalists and the two Country Parties but the CPP declined to attend. Ostensibly the purpose was to achieve parliamentary cooperation and legislative unity so as to frustrate the formation of a Labor government. The city Nationalists suggested a form of 'fusion' under their leadership. This was rejected by the VCP.⁶⁷ When parliament resumed Peacock was re-elected Speaker, an essential outcome for the safety of the McPherson government. Pandering to the CPP, McPherson tried to demonstrate that he could now do something to ease the plight of the Mallee farmers. Dunstan was not convinced. The VCP stood by silently as the Hogan Labor government assumed office with support from the Dunstan 'black crows' and the independent Liberals after a 28:26 vote to defeat the Nationalist government.

Supply was quickly passed. The largest party in the Assembly was still three short of a majority, leading several Labor critics to warn their caucus of the perils of accepting minority government:

It has the advantage that Labor sponsors legislation and governs by regulation between sessions but do these advantages outweigh the disadvantages of placating the minor party support and facing a hostile upper chamber?⁶⁸

Who would have the most influence on caucus? It would be a battle for dominance between the unions and the Trades Hall Council on one side and the CPP on the other. But more importantly, would the Country Party support vanish if the CPP and the VCP finalised their discussions over unification? The Hogan government earned a respite when the CPP refused an invitation to a unity conference of Country Party MPs, Dunstan saying that the momentum must come from the rank and file.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 20 December 1929

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 13 December 1929

⁶⁸ *Labor Call*, 19 December 1929

CHAPTER 5

A MARRIAGE OF LOVE OR CONVENIENCE? BOUND TOGETHER BY THE ECONOMY

‘Splits transfer the focus of principles to persons and create antagonism to be bitterly fought out before solidarity be regained and the movement move ahead once more.’

Labor Call, 20 November 1930

This chapter covers the lead-up to the Great Depression and the interaction between the federal and state governments’ reactions to implementation of the Premiers’ Plan. The new bonds between the non-Labor parties and the splits within Labor are examined. The Great Depression disclosed, more than ever, the uneasy relationship between federal and state governments on economic issues and on party cooperation at both levels. The Premiers’ Plan was the reason for splits within Labor at both levels and for the healing of rifts between and within the non-Labor parties and coalitions.

In times of war or severe economic crises the events in state politics take second place to federal politics. During the depression of the 1930s the non-Labor parties were unified against the economic policies of Labor governments and attempts by the Scullin federal government to concentrate economic power federally. However, moves to achieve fusion between the CCP and the VCP were frustrated by personal ambitions and differing views towards composite ministries. Eventually the two parties did join together but they were still not ready to join with the Nationalists to vote the Hogan Labor government out of office. Labor, in government federally and in Victoria, tore itself apart over implementation of the Melbourne Agreement, installed under pressure by Sir Otto Niemeyer of the Bank of England. The New South Wales Labor government held firm under the authoritarian leadership of Premier Jack Lang while Labor in most other states enjoyed the luxury of opposition which allowed them, like Lang, to oppose the Premiers’ Plan but remain united. The Scullin government was forced to the polls when its pro-Lang Beasley faction voted with the opposition on 25 November 1931. Labor was defeated by disunity in its own ranks and not just by a unified anti-Labor vote alone. A similar scenario awaited the Hogan government in Victoria.

The severely depressed economy was a major influence in bringing about a closer working relationship between the Country Party and the Nationalists. On most questions the common enemy was Labor. The non-Labor parties may have differed on the details of tariff levels but had no argument on a common stance against the unions and lowering the costs of labour. The federal Country Party realised the parties must unite to form an anti-socialist government and to promote free intra-Empire trade based on the proposals promoted by the powerful and influential press baron Lord Beaverbrook in the United Kingdom. His central concern was meeting the staggering war debt, mainly money diverted to America, and the need for more regulated free trade within the Empire. Beaverbrook's argument had been elevated to a central focus in Victoria through the repeated publicity given by the *Countryman* at Page's insistence to his speech in the House of Lords, 'Free trade within the Empire'. The nexus between God, King and Country and economic responsibility was now thoroughly welded for the conservatives in Australia and for bodies such as the revitalised Kyabram Movement in the rural areas. It had been established in 1902 to reduce (halve) the size of parliament, the ministry, their salaries and state expenditure generally.¹ Its stance was based on protestant frugality. The *Countryman* now dubbed the Kyabram Movement as the Empire Free Trade Crusade.² In support it quoted the staunchly protectionist *Age* which dismissed Beaverbrook's claim: 'Its defects are so obvious that practical persons cannot take it seriously'.³ This revealed the ambivalence in the Nationalist Party over tariffs since it wished to protect city-based manufacturers.

Another unifying strategy exploited by the Nationalists, who with the Country Parties were unabashed federalists, was to feed the farmers' antagonism towards Labor's ambition to expand the powers of the federal parliament, particularly on economic, marketing, banking and industrial matters. In Victoria they also exploited the farmers' fear of Labor's policy to introduce the 'one vote one value' electoral system.⁴ Also, when the new Scullin government stood firm on its proposal to have an Australian

¹ J Rickard, "'Iceberg' Irvine and the politics of anti-Labor' in P Strangio and B Costar (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 120

² *Countryman*, 24 January 1930

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, 7, 14 and 21 February 1930

Governor-General appointed by the King, the 15th VCP Conference at Benalla strongly supported the Empire Movement and criticised Labor's intention as 'un-British.'⁵

At state level these tactics should have worked towards rapprochement between the two Country Parties but personalities and ambitions prevented any early progress. The barrier to unity was still the attitude towards composite ministries. The major question was what majority of the VCP Conference would be needed to make or break a coalition arrangement. The CPP Conference at Donald had set the mark at 66 per cent, too high for some, leading to the charge that this was rule by the minority, a situation 'against all British and democratic tradition.'⁶ The recruitment of country Nationalists continued, with the aim of building up the conservative element within the VCP while increasing overall membership. The city press saw this as a welcome precursor to a future composite ministry or even fusion. Tom Maltby, the Nationalist whip and moderate, was in accord as he bemoaned the loss of the two-party system – now the system was egocentric and perhaps an elective ministry as suggested by Percy Stewart would be the best outcome and achieve fusion of the anti-Labor parties.⁷

Labor too had its need for closer internal bonding. Its governments had inherited the consequences of their predecessors' poor economic management leading to the greatest depression Australia had experienced⁸ but it was not united on a single economic strategy. Most were for an expansion of the money supply as Australia's credit was exhausted, and for an increase in taxation. The unemployed should be protected and there should be no cutbacks in employment either directly or through competition from imported labour. In Victoria the parliament was recalled three months early to debate and implement economic remedies and action but the Legislative Council rejected any increase in state income tax and defeated the Unemployment Insurance Bill.⁹ A few in the caucus, including the left-leaning minister Maurice Blackburn, criticised Hogan for accepting CPP support as it 'rotted Labor's support in the country and for not endorsing candidates against the CPP.'¹⁰ The CPP was using this pact to win seats from the VCP

⁵ *ibid.*, 4 April 1930

⁶ *ibid.*, 14 March 1930

⁷ *ibid.*, 21 March 1930

⁸ *Labor Call*, 27 February 1930

⁹ *ibid.*, 27 March 1930

¹⁰ *Labor Call*, 24 April 1930

and there was no advantage for Labor. Had not Lowan been won by the VCP because Labor contested the electorate? If it had not, the CPP would have beaten Wettenhall.¹¹ In short, Blackburn and his kin believed solely in majority government and no pacts for Labor. He would try to show that Labor was best for the farmers when he introduced the Mallee Farmers Relief Bill (Moratorium) which had not been extended by the previous conservative government. His appeal failed when at federal level, with 200,000 ex-soldiers looking for work, the ACP was quick to criticise Labor for the ‘unwise decision to drop preference for returned soldiers in all government departments.’¹² Given Blackburn’s anti-conscription stand during the Great War, the Country Party hoped in this way to expose Labor as being unpatriotic. On most matters Dunstan took every opportunity to take the debate up to Hogan. Despite being on the cross-benches and leader of the smaller faction he appeared to be leader of the farmers.¹³

At the 1930 Benalla Conference the VCP agreed that the ‘debatable majority’ for forming a composite ministry should be 60 per cent of the Central Council and parliamentary party taken together, not a bare majority, but less than that demanded by the CPP. They also decided that any unity conference should invite country Nationalists as well as the CPP. A month later with no response from either group, the VCP Central Council resolved to contest all country seats at the next election. This earned a rebuke from the *Argus* for not reciprocating ‘the concession after concession given by the Nationals. Now they are treated with contemptuous indifference and lack of consideration by a partner weaker numerically and intellectually than itself.’¹⁴ The conservatives were not pleased with the VCP decision to oppose them electorally for this meant they were not true allies against Labor. The *Countryman* responded that this was ‘sectionalism carried to the extreme of fanaticism by the city controlled parties ... The *Argus* is and always has been deadly opposed to the Country Party.’¹⁵

As the depression deepened, the world’s leading economists debated its cause and likely cures. Disappointed that the Australian government had not adopted the recommendations of the BEM, the Bank of England with Scullin’s agreement decided

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *Countryman*, 9 May 1930

¹³ *Labor Call*, 29 May 1930

¹⁴ *Countryman*, 30 May 1930

¹⁵ *ibid.*

that one of their own, Sir Otto Niemeyer, should mount a follow-up mission. In England, Major Douglas presented his Social Credit Scheme to the Snowden Commission of Inquiry into Finance and Industry. In the United States, one capitalist favoured expansion. Henry Ford argued that deflation was putting the cart before the horse and that what was needed was to raise wages to increase demand so that workers would need to be employed to meet the greater output. These principles of economic and social organisation, termed 'Fordism,' would dominate half a century of the nation's life.¹⁶ It would be a few years before they gained a foothold in America.

In Australia the conservative economists captured the academic debate. Professor Ed Shann reminded the governments that his book *Bond or Free* had predicted the depression and that the causes must be reversed while Professor L F Giblin argued in his booklet *Australia 1930* that all must bear the load whatever their source of income. The high-profile Professor Douglas Copland saw the answer as lowering wages by 10 per cent to put a stop to Australia living beyond its means and that this was best done by MPs and public servants setting the example. The Scullin government remained unimpressed by these conservative economists but its main advocate for controlled expansion, the Treasurer Ted Theodore, weakened its case when he was forced to resign while an inquiry into the Mungana affair proceeded. Labor's and the farmers' cause was not assisted when the Senate defeated the compulsory wheat pool by three votes¹⁷ then delayed Scullin's attempts to put the Reserve Bank in charge of the economy via the Central Reserve Bank Bill.¹⁸ The economic debate was welding together the conservatives even if opinions and solutions ranged within Victorian Labor and the two Country Parties. John Allan reversed his attitude opposing wheat pooling under government control now that he could see the losses borne by the farmers. He fell out with Kent Hughes and Menzies over the issue, those two arguing, like Giblin, for *all* incomes to fall. It would not have gone unnoticed by the farmers that those two Young Nationalists, being conservative and bound to the economic and business establishments, were silent on incomes derived from interest rates and profit margins.

¹⁶ M Harrington, *The Next Left: The History of a Future*, Henry Holt, New York, 1986, p. 21

¹⁷ Australia, House of Representatives, *Debates*, vol. 125, 4 July 1930, p. 3716

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 11 July 1930, p. 4063

The overall debate narrowed and focused on one man in mid-year when Niemeyer arrived to meet the banking industry and the federal ministry in Sydney before addressing the Premiers' Conference in Melbourne. Those who saw the purpose of Niemeyer's visit as protecting British industrial and banking interests rather than Australia's and ensuring that Australia honoured its 400 million pound war debt to England were quick to repudiate his arguments. Those in Labor opposed to restrictions on the working classes pointed out that while Australia had given thousands of lives to help save Britain from the Germans they were now expected to honour its war debts to the very same bank which now issued loans to Germany and France at a rate of interest 2 to 2.5 per cent less than Australia's loans.¹⁹ Some went further (and personal) associating Niemeyer's name with the Jewish prophet Nehemiah, the money lender.²⁰ Anti-semitic and anti-British feelings were being exploited as weapons in the great debate just as anti-Empire rhetoric had been used during the referendums on conscription. On another tack the ACP tried to claim the higher economic and political ground when it boasted that Niemeyer's proposals followed Page's policies.²¹

During these intense economic debates significant changes were occurring in Victoria. A frustrated Sir William McPherson retired as leader of the Nationalists to be succeeded by Sir Stanley Argyle, making the party even more conservative. A combined meeting of the Central Councils and MPs of the two Country Parties agreed that a unity conference should be held during Show Week in September. The Depression was accepted as a time of crisis which mellowed each party's strict view for or against composite ministries as long as the new party resisted any merger with the Nationalists and became a 'true Merino country party' as Stewart expressed it.²² The attendance would be based on the relative membership of each organisation, advantaging the CPP, not only because it had taken branch members from the VCP, but also because it, unlike the VCP, had opened up its membership to non-farmers in 1926. Dunstan, with only five MPs in his party, also benefited from the agreement.²³ This Special Conference agreed to unification under the title United Country Party (UCP) proposed by Stewart and that a 66 per cent majority of the Central Council and the parliamentary party

¹⁹ *Labor Call*, 24 July 1930

²⁰ *ibid.*, 11 September 1930

²¹ *Countryman*, 29 August 1930

²² *ibid.*, 22 August 1930

²³ Costar, 'Albert Dunstan', p. 217

voting together was needed to approve any composite ministry. Also Dunstan was successful in having politicians excluded from the new party's Central Council.²⁴ General membership was widened to include any person over 18 as long as they signed the new membership rules.²⁵ Ratification by the two bodies quickly followed. Members of the CPP could now transfer to VCP branches under the new banner. The new UCP parliamentary party elected Allan as leader with Dunstan as deputy after Bouchier, former deputy leader of the VCP, stood aside for Dunstan in a display of unity and loyalty. Perhaps Dunstan had indicated that while he would have liked the leadership nothing less than the deputy position would do. Edwin Mackrell was elected party secretary.

The question now was whether the new UCP combine with the Nationalists to displace the Hogan government either in coalition or from the cross-benches. The new rules flatly rejected any idea of a ministry elected by the parliament as floated by Stewart and Glowrey, the latter declining to join the new UCP parliamentary party. It was recognised that the major fallacy of elected ministries was that differences would be fought out in cabinet rather than in the chamber. Leaders would spring up heading small groups, resulting in even more confusion not unlike the situation before the party system evolved. Opponents of elective ministries argued that they actually created the quintessence of compromise on a wide range of divergent principles – best to leave the choice of MPs to the electorates and form governments on a party basis.²⁶

The solutions to overcome the depression and in particular Niemeyer's proposals adopted by the Premiers' Conference would prove to be a telling factor on party unity and cooperation at state and federal levels. What happened federally impacted on the parties in the states. The show of unity by the UCP contrasted greatly with the divisions within Labor that followed the Premiers' Conference which had agreed to implement the Niemeyer plan. NSW Premier Lang did not agree with Niemeyer's solution but, with an election in full swing, did not openly repudiate the scheme. This decision contributed to Labor holding all its country seats in NSW and suffering no losses overall. In Victoria Hogan stood by the Premiers' Agreement and expected

²⁴ Minutes of Special Unity Conference, 23 September 1930, National Party Victorian Records

²⁵ *Countryman*, 26 September 1930

²⁶ *ibid.*, editorial, 25 November 1930

parliamentary support for a balanced budget. When challenged in caucus he put his job on the line. His stand was in recognition there was little alternative as ‘Labor was in office but not in power.’ No-one opposed this view.²⁷ The Trades Hall Council, however, demanded repudiation of the Plan and a revised budget. Sensing a possible defeat for the Hogan government a no-confidence motion was put but failed when the Premier was forced to disclose the changes being made to the budget. Despite reunification, the ‘four black crows’ continued to support the budget with Dunstan arguing that ‘Labor has done enough changes to the budget.’²⁸ More likely he was buying time to see how matters would develop. The amended budget was seen as ‘belated but welcome’ by the opposition and passed by the Assembly.

Federally, the Labor caucus was divided, particularly when after the election Lang openly defied the Premiers’ agreement to implement the plan. With Scullin overseas securing the appointment of Sir Isaac Isaacs, a former state and federal MP and High Court Judge, as Governor-General, the factions played havoc. A repeat of the split over conscription seemed inevitable. The consequence of splits on any party was well known through experience – to Labor, the Nationalists and the Country Party. *Labor Call* summarised it well: ‘splits transfer the focus of principles to persons and create antagonism to be bitterly fought out before solidarity be regained and the movement move ahead once more.’²⁹

Over the coming months, while Labor at state and federal level grappled with the economy, the conservatives waited ready to exploit the advantages at the polls as the general populace grew increasingly dissatisfied with Labor. They offered no alternatives to the Premiers’ Plan. The conservatives were not ready to displace Labor even if they had the numbers in Victoria for this very reason. Labor looked likely soon to split anyway, further weakening its electoral appeal, and the UCP needed to concentrate on rebuilding its strength. The *Countryman* urged the party to train younger MPs recognising the difficulties in obtaining suitable candidates in the most challenging electorates³⁰ and the need for younger members with a knowledge of economics ‘along

²⁷ *Labor Call*, 30 October 1930

²⁸ *Countryman*, 17 October 1930 (quoting Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 183, 14 October 1930, pp. 3084-5)

²⁹ *ibid.*, 20 November 1930

³⁰ *ibid.*, 9 January 1931

the Page path.³¹ A recent convert to the UCP, A E (Bert) Hocking, now became active on planning for a younger Country Party as had been sponsored by city businessmen for the Nationalists. He advocated that these new recruits should be good public speakers and form a UCP speakers association³² as had already been established in NSW.

As Labor started to tear itself apart at federal and state level there were calls, such as by the *Age*, for a unified national government as in Britain, 'putting national interests above sectional, personal and party interests.'³³ However, Labor believed that at home this would lead to the dangers of leaders forming sub-groups and splits in the party. Labor saw the same faults in a unified government (or national coalition) as the UCP had seen in elected ministries. Encouraged behind the scenes by business and political elites, Treasurer Lyons planned to cut expenditure but the federal caucus limited his options for reductions in spending and opposed his 'stumping the country for a new loan.'³⁴ On his return to Australia Scullin urged the caucus to reinstate Theodore (who now faced no charges) as Treasurer and deputy leader. Lyons and Fenton, both supporters of the Niemeyer Plan, immediately resigned from cabinet.³⁵ The Presbyterian Church, somewhat troubled by the anti-British comments within the Labor Party, further fuelled the crisis when it entered the fray backing Lyons to take over the leadership and attacking Scullin's proposals as 'vacillation, tergiversation and futility.'³⁶ A cabinet shuffle followed with Theodore back as Treasurer. The outcome did not appease the Langites and a little later they left the caucus and sat on the cross-benches.

There appeared to be some relief when pro-Lang Eddie Ward won the by-election for East Sydney. This was interpreted by Scullin as not a win for repudiation or for the Langites but rather a win against the conservatives³⁷ and perhaps even a sign of a favourable swing in popular opinion to compensate for the party's loss of Parkes to the Nationalists in a by-election earlier in the year. The elation was short lived when a fortnight later Lyons and several others broke ranks and crossed the floor to vote against Labor on a no-confidence motion which Scullin won by two votes. Theodore and the

³¹ *ibid.*, 20 February 1931

³² *ibid.*, 20 March 1931

³³ *Labor Call*, 12 February 1931

³⁴ Faulkner and Macintyre, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-6

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 66

³⁶ *Countryman*, 6 March 1931

³⁷ *Labor Call*, 12 March 1931

Commonwealth Bank board were now at loggerheads. The board since its reform by the Bruce-Page government in 1924 had acted as a hybrid, undertaking both trading and central reserve functions. It had cooperated with Lyons but now ignored Theodore's fiduciary expansions which would have provided loans to the government to assist the unemployed and the farmers. It refused to carry out the elected government's policy even though it had not criticised the Bruce-Page government for its 'expansion' in the past. Another blow followed when the pro-Niemeyer Nationalist controlled Senate rejected the Fiduciary Notes Bill using the opportunity also to indirectly protest against the action by the South Australian joint sitting which had elected Labor's Henry Kneebone in place of the deceased Country Party Senator John Chapman.

The *Age* which had been mildly supportive of Theodore's Bill again called for an all-party government but offered no alternative to the rejected legislation.³⁸ This appeared to have some influence on the government when Scullin, using a past National War Advisory Council as a model, offered the opposition a chance to confer if they had alternative plans, the strategy being to force them to declare their hand and to justify their hostility to Labor's expansionist policies. The opposition replied it was prepared to meet in conference but only if certain conditions were met. These were virtually unacceptable as they included dropping Theodore as Treasurer, abandoning the fiduciary note plans and that any conference decisions be binding on the government. Furthermore they demanded that the composition of the conference should reflect a parliamentary joint sitting, effectively giving the conservative parties a majority. Labor continued to reject an all-party approach to government.

The Loan Council, under the chairmanship of Professor Copland, met in May 1931 recommending a 20 per cent cut in the 1929-30 level in wages, pensions and government spending, the introduction of a more progressive income tax, a simultaneous reduction in mortgage interest rates by 22.5 per cent and a cut in government interest rates and for the banks to reduce deposit interest rates by 1 per cent.³⁹ Most of these recommendations were adopted by the Premiers' Conference three weeks later after more than 14 days of discussion, a sign of the competing politics and

³⁸ *ibid.*, 14 April 1931

³⁹ C B Schedvin, *Australia and the Great Depression : A Study of Economic Development and Policy in the 1920s and 1930s*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1970, p. 258

economics at play. Again Lang stalled, saying he would not pass the necessary legislation until the conversion of interest rates on the loans was reduced. There was little or no mention of reducing tariffs in the Melbourne Agreement. Until now, in solidarity with the Nationalists, the *Countryman* had criticised only the Labor Party but that display of unity became somewhat fractured when it complained of the Nationalists' refusal to even consider lowering tariffs. Critics of composite governments pointed out that the Nationalists expected unquestioning support from the Country Party in attacking Labor governments but would not reciprocate when the Country Party expected support from the Nationalists on reducing tariffs. The *Countryman* summarised it by saying support should be two-way.⁴⁰

With the conservative opposition continuing to offer no alternatives and nowhere else to move, Scullin reluctantly agreed to the Loan Council's advice to implement the Premiers' Plan on the principle of 'equality of sacrifice.' The conservative majority in the Senate was virtually controlling the elected government but it would be Labor who would be criticised for any outcomes. Stewart, as was his wont, took a completely alternative tack and suggested that the current parliament be extended by three years to deal with the situation and that a new non-party executive be elected by the parliament.⁴¹ Understandably, Labor could not accept this and it is not mentioned whether Stewart was aware that any extension to the life of the parliament would require consent through legislation by the British parliament, something they were most unlikely to do given they had sent Niemeyer to Australia to protect their interests.

While the CPP and the VCP had reunited in September 1930, behind the veneer of unity there still remained a hard core of members whose dislike of composite ministries could be a threat to a party anxious to preserve its unity at all costs.⁴² The other consequence of this reunion was that in the Legislative Assembly the 'four black crows' now crossed over from the corner to the opposition benches not on an issue related to government policies but one of internal party accommodation. Yet, although they had the numbers to defeat Hogan, it would not be until six months after the federal election at the end of 1931 that saw the Scullin government defeated, that the new combined opposition in

⁴⁰ *Countryman*, 7 August 1931

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 26 June 1931

⁴² Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 16

Victoria voted to defeat the Labor minority government. The arithmetic was simple enough, yet 35 non-Labor and anti-Labor MPs could not agree immediately to vote out a Labor government of 34 MPs. This raised the question of whether the UCP was truly united or there was a continuing division over economic strategy. Another interpretation is that the opposition was buying more time to reduce the Labor government's reputation to absolute tatters.

With the Labor government totally preoccupied with economic matters, the UCP used the opportunity to strengthen the agreement which had brought the VCP and the CPP together. The 1931 Warrnambool Conference first went through the formality of attacking the fiduciary note issue and declaring support for Page's policies, decisions which were forwarded to the Acting Premier Tom Tunnecliffe. The general opinion was that the federal Labor government must be removed and that perhaps Lyons was the best choice to lead the assault, but he was vague on tariff reform. Like Hughes, an ex-Labor man could never be relied upon to forget all his past beliefs. Central Council went further, saying they were prepared to see Lyons head a 'coalition' as long as the identity of the Country Party was preserved.⁴³ The party was responding to a reported attack by Menzies and Kent Hughes who, at a meeting in the Melbourne Town Hall, had accused it of 'not giving up their identity in a common cause.'⁴⁴ Adamant about its singular identity, the UCP attacked the *Herald*, seen as a mouthpiece for the Young Nationalists, which had predicted that the Nationalists and the ACP would dissolve to form a United Australia Movement with agreed upon candidates at the next election.⁴⁵ Then the Conference turned to internal matters. It was agreed that MPs should no longer be members of Central Council, fulfilling a condition of the unity agreement.⁴⁶ A move to revert to preselection of a single candidate was defeated as this was seen as 'Labor party machine politics' even though it was acknowledged that preferences with more than one UCP candidate could not be controlled.⁴⁷

State and federal Labor executives opposed the Prime Minister's acceptance of the Premiers' Plan while acknowledging that it was the Senate which had thwarted the

⁴³ *Countryman*, 24 April 1931

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 1 May 1931

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 8 May 1931

⁴⁶ Minutes of Special Unity Conference, 23 September 1930

⁴⁷ *Countryman*, 2 April 1931

government's proposals and forced acceptance of the Plan. The federal executive supported Labor staying in office but would not approve a Labor government implementing what they saw as anti-Labor economic policies. Federal and state MPs were urged to resist the proposals in caucus; 19 federal Labor MPs voted against adoption of the Plan followed by the Labor oppositions in Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania, while in Victoria the caucus accepted it 22:11 with the addendum that the reduction in public service salaries should not apply to married men.⁴⁸ The Victorian Labor government could not oppose the Plan as it could do nothing in opposition or anything else in government. At federal and state level Labor was effectively 'caught out by hostile upper houses.'⁴⁹ The Victorian Labor conference also rejected the plan (143:87) the majority arguing that acceptance at all levels meant 'a coalition of all parties.'⁵⁰ The *Age* agreed, describing total acceptance by all parties as a desirable 'consummation of parliamentary unity.'⁵¹

While Australia was bound by the policies of an overseas bank, the legislatures in other countries were realising that deflationary economic policies would not overcome the depression. They turned to mild reflation. Even Niemeyer's own Bank of England now opposed cutting wages as this also cut purchasing power and increased unemployment. John Maynard Keynes, as he developed his expansionist theories, was starting to have an influence but his ideas had not yet taken hold. The conflicting economic remedies being pushed brought about a similar division within the British Labour government as had happened in Australia. Unable to resolve the budget but unrestricted by a platform which opposed being a party in coalition as in Australia, Ramsay MacDonald resigned and formed a National government with the Liberals and Conservatives. Scullin's response to the British decision was that a Labor Party should be united: 'I have no confidence in coalition governments.'⁵² Scullin was proven right. The British National coalition did not survive. The Liberal Party split on the economic remedies and Lloyd George, an expansionist and advocate of the young Keynes, resigned from it. An election was called and Labour suffered a humiliating defeat, losing 222 of its 286 seats. Finally Stewart's idea died with him when he passed away in October. Scullin would

⁴⁸ *Labor Call*, 2 July 1931

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 30 July 1931

⁵¹ *Age*, 30 July 1931

⁵² *Labor Call*, 20 August 1931

also have noticed that the Bank of England was issuing fiduciary notes, a move denied to Theodore by the Premiers' Plan, a product of Niemeyer himself, a director of that very bank.

Events may have followed a different course in Australia if Keynes' proposals had been given more publicity. It was not until late May the next year that his ideas were promoted in the media. The editor of the *Herald* commissioned an article from Keynes who advised readers:

there is more chance of improving the profitableness of business by fostering enterprise and measures like public works than by furthering pressures on money wages ... Above all, expand the internal bank credit and stimulate capital expenditure as much as courage and prudence allow.⁵³

However non-Labor Australian politicians and economic advisers would still reject such expansionary advice for a few more years. Premier Lang was determined to push for his own expansionist policies. After months of refusal by Governor Game he was 'allowed' to appoint 25 new Labor members to secure a majority in the upper chamber and pass the necessary legislation. The Beasley/Langite group, on the cross-benches in the federal parliament, initiated a motion to adjourn the house on an issue totally unrelated to the Premiers' Plan (a charge of improper influence in the allocation of jobs at the Cockatoo Island dockyard).⁵⁴ They crossed the floor and the unholy alliance voted out the Scullin Labor government 37:32, bringing about a federal election six months before it was due. The Langites under 'Stabber Jack' Beasley had no other agenda than to hunt Lang's enemies, especially Theodore, when they moved the adjournment of the house.⁵⁵ Labor lost 17 seats including those of Theodore and two future Prime Ministers, Curtin and Chifley. To rub salt into the wounds, two of the Labor 'rats' in Victoria, Fenton and McGrath, retained their seats as United Australia Party (UAP) candidates.

The ACP picked up four new seats but handed Bendigo to the UAP when Weaver, the chief president of the UCP, after a plane and car dash, failed by nine minutes to lodge

⁵³ *Herald*, 25 May 1932

⁵⁴ Faulkner and Macintyre, *op. cit.*, p. 69

⁵⁵ D Whittington, *Ring The Bells: A Dictionary of Australian Federal Politics*, Georgian House, Melbourne, 1956, p. 17

his nomination in time,⁵⁶ a remarkable repeat of Cook's failure to nominate for Indi three years earlier. The planned by-election in Wimmera following Stewart's death had been overtaken by the election itself, seeing former VCP candidate McClelland elected on the former CPP candidate's preferences to beat the UAP candidate who had topped the poll. The radicals had lost the Mallee. Like Labor with the 'rats,' the UCP also felt cheated when Menzies, doubting that the UCP could win a place from Labor, arranged to field a full UAP Senate team ignoring the electoral pact which had agreed on a joint ticket. The *Countryman* vented its spleen stating that 'the UAP had not played the game' and that it was 'rank discourtesy for allies in a cause against Labor socialism.'⁵⁷

The Victorian Labor government was in trouble. Just before Christmas it was saved in a vote of the Assembly by the Speaker's casting vote. Its defeat would be postponed as parliament went into recess until the New Year. The deteriorating economy, resulting mainly from external pressures, was a major influence on the electorate turning towards the anti-Labor parties. The situation also encouraged greater cooperation between the UAP and the Country Parties including the UCP in Victoria. The fate of the incoming non-Labor governments would depend upon policies as well as personalities in their ranks – measures and men. They had sat back while Labor suffered, offering few alternatives other than compliance with the Premiers' Plan. Relationships between leaders would also be tested as they differed on the niceties of tariffs at federal level and transport and wheat pools at state level.

⁵⁶ *Countryman* 11 December 1931

⁵⁷ *Labor Call*, 17 December 1931

CHAPTER 6

THE MIDLIFE CRISIS – A LOVERS’ QUARREL

‘In Victoria composite ministries had created disunity and discord since they were first created ... principles before portfolios.’

A E Hocking, *Countryman*, 9 November 1934

This chapter introduces a new major player, businessman A E ‘Bert’ Hocking, into Country Party politics and studies his influence on the party and his conflicts with Premier Albert Dunstan. It argues that individuals, particularly leaders, as much as policies and programs, determine the strengths and weaknesses of political parties and their relationships among each other. The chapter also demonstrates the greater strength of a coalition when the leaders of the parties enjoy strong support from their members and hold mutual respect for each other. Likewise, parliamentary leaders can be buoyed or challenged by leaders within the party organisation. Such competition for influence, as illustrated by Hocking and Dunstan, may ultimately undermine either of the leaders or divide the party with negative flow-on effects for any coalition.

Hocking’s entry had a major influence on the UCP’s attitude towards non-Labor coalitions. The Premiers’ Plan dominated politics at federal and state levels. The Victorian Labor government was defeated while the Lang government in NSW was dismissed by the Governor. A minority Stevens-Bruxner (UAP-CP) coalition took over government and was formally elected soon afterwards. On the very same polling day Queensland Labor, led out of opposition by William Forgan Smith, took office on similar election issues even though, like Lang, it had opposed the Premiers’ Plan.

In Victoria, Allan acted without Central Council authority claiming the UCP was not entering a coalition but rather a ‘national government’ in a time of crisis.¹ The use of descriptions such as a composite, unity, cooperative or national government instead of coalition was a transparent device that did not appease all. The rank and file and some UCP MPs were not content with what they saw as de facto fusion and an anti-coalition

¹ *Countryman*, 25 May 1932

movement started within the Country Party. This discontent extended to the federal level when Lyons invited the ACP to join him in government totally on his terms. Page rejected this attempt to absorb the party. This dominance by the UAP at both levels accelerated the formation of a reform group led by Hocking determined to re-establish the independence of the UCP through greater control by the rank and file in Victoria.

In another tactic to broaden appeal, the UCP admitted to membership those former Labor MPs, including Hogan, who had been expelled by the Labor Party for supporting the Premiers' Plan. Major reforms adopted by the 1934 Conference strengthened the power of Hocking and his supporters. Now UCP candidates were expected to sign a pledge of loyalty to the party and its platform and the UCP caucus could not enter a coalition without a two-thirds majority of Central Council and caucus combined. The new UCP organisation often came into conflict with its federal body as Victoria expected its rules to apply to its federal as well as state parliamentarians. This was vigorously opposed by Page who was adamant that state bodies had no individual control over federal representatives. When Lyons lost his majority at the 1934 election he continued as a minority government but eventually compromised with Page to form a coalition. The main topic of debate again was whether the Country Party stood for measures or men. As the ACP was the junior partner the debate within its ranks was also whether the arrangement was a composite or coalition government or de facto fusion.

The UAP had been hailed by the metropolitan press as the saviours of Australia, leading Lyons to believe the credit was theirs alone and that he was not obliged to be over-accommodating of the Country Party. The conservative discussions for a federal coalition started off unsteadily when the ACP was refused the Customs portfolio. This weakened its influence over tariffs, effectively repudiating the joint policy agreed at the Sydney conference held a month before the Labor government fell. The joint policy program covered all aspects of administration and was accepted, as Page saw it, as a

symbol of a common objective.² With 39 MPs the UAP no longer relied on the ACP to form a majority. Lyons unwillingly sanctioned a composite ministry but advised Page he would allocate three minor portfolios to ACP men he himself chose. The offer was non-negotiable and first loyalty must be to the cabinet.³ Lyons was unwilling to discuss policy, the purpose of the chosen ACP members to be that of liaison between the parties. It seems the UAP wanted ‘the brains of Page and the ACP in cabinet but was not willing to recognise the Country Party as a distinctive political party with a definite policy.’⁴ One suspects that Menzies’ antipathy towards the party and his belief they were ‘uneducated’ had some role in this. Page refused the offer of the minor portfolios saying the Customs portfolio was a condition of coalition and necessary to achieve policy change. When Page refused to back down Lyons decided to go it alone and form a UAP ministry with the ACP on the cross-benches.

Following the tight win in Wimmera by Hugh McClelland the UCP decided to review its preselection procedures and reduce the number of candidates in individual electorates to try to overcome the weaknesses of a split vote and uncontrolled preferences, even if this meant adopting what was seen by some as ‘Labor machine politics.’⁵ Although preferential voting had been operating at state level for many years, preselection of a single candidate had been the norm until the introduction of preferential voting federally in 1918 (at Country Party insistence). Then the UCP Conference had opened up the opportunities for multiple members to contest electorates. The current debate seemed likely to reintroduce preselection to limit costs and travel and to avoid internal quarrels between factions now that the VCP and CPP had reunited. Yet these very arguments had failed when debated at the Conference held in Warrnambool in March 1931. New arguments were put forward. It was argued that other parties had not suffered through preselection and like the UCP those parties were a combination of factions. The first responsibility should be more to the party than to the electorate with its infinite opinions. It would mean that sitting MPs would no longer be able to take support for granted and

² Page, op. cit., pp. 250, 467-8

³ K White, *Joseph Lyons*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2000, p. 145

⁴ *Countryman*, 8 January 1932

⁵ *ibid.*

increased member and party interest between elections.⁶ The party was also concerned as to why its vote had fallen behind the UAP in all the towns across Wimmera, except Sea Lake where the two UCP (formerly CCP and VCP) candidates lived. Examination showed that the townspeople gravitated to the UAP as they felt excluded by the farmers' proposals for cooperatives and that the farmers went to Melbourne to buy their machinery and cars to negotiate better prices.⁷ The farmers might oppose city interests on general policy matters but if it meant cheaper goods, then so be it. These two major issues would be tackled at the coming Conference to be held in Warragul in April. At that Conference Dunstan put the case for preselection clearly – more than one candidate confused the voters and preselection limited dissent between candidates in the field as had happened in Wimmera. He said this explained why at state level the numbers of the Country Party MPs had increased by only one over the last decade. The debate was inconclusive and referred to Central Council for recommendation and decision at the next Conference.⁸

After its federal defeat Labor was smarting from a second defeat initiated from within, first by Hughes and now by Lyons. For Labor, adoption of the Premiers' Plan by Scullin had done more damage than adoption of conscription by the Hughes government.⁹ Again restoration of party unity was its most urgent task. In January 1932 the Victorian Labor Conference repudiated the Premiers' Plan and resolved to expel any MPs who supported further reductions against the interest of labour.¹⁰ The Hogan government was caught in a trap between the membership and Trades Hall and the Lyons government which was introducing the Financial Agreement Enforcement Bill to bring state borrowings within the federal ambit. This would be tested at the Premiers' Conference a few weeks later in April with the governments of the two most populous states, Victoria and New South Wales, essentially opposed to the Premiers' Plan. The party claimed control over its MPs, the Plan having been opposed now by three Victorian Labor Conferences, a federal Conference and most recently by the Victorian

⁶ *ibid.*, 15 and 22 January 1932

⁷ *ibid.*, 29 January 1932

⁷ *ibid.*, 29 January 1932

⁸ *ibid.*, 8 April 1932

⁹ *Labor Call*, 16 June 1932

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 11 February 1932

central executive. Hogan had relied on UCP support and now that party had gone over completely to the conservatives on the issue.

What could the Labor Premier do? The last time he had been under pressure in the parliament from the non-Labor parties, Hogan had disclosed at the last minute the necessary amendments to his budget to introduce the Premiers' Plan. This had bought time on that occasion but now Argyle moved a no-confidence motion as soon as parliament re-convened on the grounds that before the sitting even commenced Hogan had indicated he could not promise continuation of the Plan nor had he moved to implement it.¹¹ The no-confidence motion made no actual reference to the Plan and was taken coincidentally on the first sitting day of the Premiers' Conference and required 10 pairs during the vote. Moreover, Hogan was absent overseas. Acting Premier Tom Tunnecliffe, his faction being totally against the Plan, had already advised the Premiers' Conference that his government could not endorse the latest proposals as this would further impoverish workers and farmers. Lyons, heading the conference, responded that 'Victoria must sign or get no help from us.'¹² The Hogan government was defeated 29:25 and the election set for 14 May.

During the debate in the Assembly Harold Glowrey (Ouyen) had displayed ambivalence towards the Labor government, criticising it for not implementing the Plan but said that 'their record stands far superior to that of any preceding government.'¹³ This encouraged Labor not to contest his seat but convinced A L Bussau to oppose him – the only contest between two UCP candidates at that election. Essentially preselection was not an issue at this time. Again the UAP tried to wrest Lowan away from the UCP, but Wettenhall, a supporter of the Premiers' Plan, survived a strong UAP campaign headed by its president, the erstwhile conservative member for Lowan, James Menzies. The *Countryman* was also critical of R G Menzies during the campaign, describing him as a chameleon for opposing the Paterson butter scheme in the city but supporting it when in the Western District: 'he should be judged on his votes in the House and is against

¹¹ *ibid.*, 14 April 1932

¹² *ibid.*, 28 April 1932

¹³ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 188, 13 April 1932, p. 64

country interests. His flamboyancy will not win us over.’¹⁴ Perhaps they saw the younger Menzies as behind his family’s attempt to regain Lowan. As an example of differences over tariffs and export policies between the parties, the butter scheme or ‘Paterson Plan’ aimed to provide a bounty for export butter by raising the domestic price. It operated from 1926-33 and was denounced by its opponents as ‘Paterson’s Curse.’¹⁵

The middle of May saw a hectic week. In NSW the Lang majority government was controversially sacked on 13 May by Governor Game for allegedly breaking Commonwealth laws and a minority Stevens government installed until an election was to be held in mid-June. A day later at the Victorian election Labor was soundly defeated, a loss which would cripple the party for over a decade. It had jettisoned its leader, and the party’s lower house representation was shorn by nearly half.¹⁶ Bussau was successful over Glowrey, and Hogan was re-elected unopposed as a Premiers’ Plan Labor candidate, in his absence overseas.¹⁷ Support for the UCP remained steady and an Argyle-Allan coalition government was formed. Given the strong opposition to a coalition within its ranks, the UCP denied the ‘coalition’ label saying it was rather a ‘National government.’ The UCP parliamentary party took a long time before it unanimously agreed to join it. Eventually Central Council agreed that this was a time of grave national crisis and Allan was able to convince the Lieutenant Governor that his party could be relied upon for continuing internal support. Central Council did not demand a 66 per cent majority as it argued that a composite or coalition government was not being formed.¹⁸ This seems a strange twist of logic and semantics for if there was strong support for the Premiers’ Plan why was the vote not taken, even if heavily qualified, to show solidarity? When the Victorian parliament resumed, the UCP parliamentary party rubber-stamped, without a ballot, Allan as leader and Dunstan as deputy. Taking the lead from his federal counterparts, Argyle limited the UCP to three

¹⁴ *Countryman*, 6 May 1932

¹⁵ B Costar, ‘Paterson, Thomas’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 11, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 157-8

¹⁶ C A Hughes and B D Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890-1964*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1968, p. 485

¹⁷ C A Hughes and B D Graham, *Voting for the Victoria Legislative Assembly 1890-1964*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1975, p. 237

¹⁸ *Countryman*, 13 May 1932

portfolios and denied them Treasury and Railways, but Dunstan did secure Lands and Forests while Allan received Agriculture. Dunstan, the arch-opponent of composite governments, had found it politic to accept a portfolio in what he regarded as a 'national government' formed to deal with emergency conditions.¹⁹ The UAP was firmly in control, and Menzies as deputy leader would have had influence over whoever Allan put forward as ministers. The *Countryman* continued to refer to the Argyle-led coalition as a 'National all-party' government conveniently ignoring that Labor was in opposition.

In the composition of the 12-man coalition ministry lay the roots of its erosion and eventual destruction three years later.²⁰ In particular, Menzies' personality and impatience with the frequent demands made for special treatment for rural interests was a serious source of conflict.²¹ Reluctantly the rank and file accepted the inevitable, but below the surface, debate continued as to whether the UCP had sacrificed its independence and there were complaints that the government was city-centric to the disadvantage of country people. At the declaration for his seat of Mildura Allnutt rationalised the situation for the 'four black crows':

We will see to it that this first National government in Australia is a truly National government ... a composite government has a divided leadership and where the parties differ presents compromise policies. A National government is one with one leader selecting all of his ministry, bargaining with none and bound to no arrangements. He alone is responsible for the government' actions ... I will be free to criticise or oppose any legislation, something I could not do under a composite government.²²

In Allan's own electorate the Kyabram branch of the UCP expressed disappointment at lack of progress for the farmer and that accepting portfolios in an Argyle government was 'self destructive.' Branch president Mr Hounslow thought the party had given over country interests to the city controlled parties under the UAP's cry of a 'national crisis'

¹⁹ Ellis, op. cit., p. 192

²⁰ G Browne, 'Stanley Argyle: The incidental premier' in P Strangio and B Costar (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 208

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *Countryman*, 3 June 1932

and urged the UCP to resign from the ministry should country interests not be catered for.²³ A month later he described the government as ‘fusion’ and argued it was better to have conditional support than be absorbed and to sacrifice measures for men.²⁴ The Central Council differed and after reviewing the acceptance of portfolios by the UCP agreed that it had been inevitable since there was no other way to achieve the Premiers’ Plan. It would be for the life of the parliament only and on issues outside the Plan, the UCP MPs should be free agents.

The Premiers’ Plan was to be a nationally applied remedy and parties in each state watched carefully the developments federally and in the other states while determining their own position. Lessons learned could strengthen or alter their support for the Plan. In NSW Labor was routed at the polls on 11 June losing more than half its seats, the UCP gaining 11 to almost double its numbers enabling Stevens to be called upon to provide a coalition with an overall majority. Yet in Queensland, on the very same day, Labor won 13 seats to regain government from the Country Progressive National Party after only one term in opposition. The question as to why Forgan Smith won in Queensland while Labor lost in NSW and Victoria was a mystery to Labor.²⁵ Labor simply saw that the adoption of the Premiers’ Plan by Scullin had done more damage than adoption of conscription by Hughes and that governments are invariably beaten at the polls during a depression as a payback by the voters.²⁶ An examination by Costar²⁷ as to why Forgan Smith gained the four seat majority discloses his authoritarian control over the party bringing about unity and public acceptance compared to Labor in the other states. Another factor favouring Labor was that, unlike anti-Labor elsewhere, the Country Progressive National Party cracked under the Depression. On taking over from William McCormack in May 1929 Forgan Smith reorganised his front bench and firmed his support in the party through an alliance with the strongest union leader and ‘numbers man,’ Australian Workers’ Union secretary C G Fallon. They brought unity to Labor by rendering impotent a nascent Lang Labor faction. Being out of government,

²³ *ibid.*, 10 June 1932

²⁴ *ibid.*, 8 July 1932

²⁵ *Labor Call*, 16 June 1932

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ B Costar, ‘Smith, William Forgan’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 11, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 665-70

Forgan Smith enjoyed the luxury of avoiding making economic decisions by the party while attacking the deflationary consequences of the Moore government's budget.

The other state Labor Parties, by contrast, were wracked by factional conflict over the Premiers' Plan and imploded.²⁸ The Victorian branch looked to punish those MPs and members who had openly supported the Premiers' Plan. The central executive summoned Hogan and Ernest Bond (both re-elected), Henry Bailey, Esmond Kiernan and Robert Williams to show why they should not be expelled.²⁹ Towards the end of the year they used against Hogan his election statement that his constituents came before the party as an excuse to expel him unless he could give a last-minute but unlikely assurance that he would now support Labor's anti-Premiers' Plan policy.³⁰ Labor continued its vendetta and the State Conference held over the Australia Day weekend the next year endorsed the expulsion of the offenders.³¹ With Labor in government only in Queensland and Western Australia, the party concentrated over the year, with some exceptions, more on its internal dissensions and schisms than on the parliamentary stage.

The non-Labor parties had still not settled their differences on tariffs at the federal level. When three vacancies occurred in his cabinet following the resignation of two UAP ministers James Fenton and Henry Gullett who opposed the Ottawa Agreement's demand for lower tariffs,³² and Bruce who decided to take up the London post as Australian Resident Minister (later High Commissioner), Lyons, instead of turning to the UAP to fill the positions, re-opened negotiations for a composite ministry. He proposed three ACP ministers of his choice provided the ACP was loyal to the cabinet, that the two parties should meet together on matters which he considered major issues and that the Prime Minister's policy speech at the 1931 election should prevail, including approval of the Ottawa Agreement which imposed tariffs opposed by the ACP. Not surprisingly the negotiations collapsed.³³ This happened despite the lure of Lyons implementing the mutually approved reduction of federal land tax, seen by Scullin as one of the strongest planks in Labor's platform. Scullin saw the tax as government income from an unearned increment, produced by community work and not

²⁸ *Labor Call*, 23 June 1932

²⁹ *ibid.*, 9 June 1932

³⁰ *ibid.*, 3 November 1932

³¹ *ibid.*, 2 February 1933

³² White, *Joseph Lyons*, p. 145

³³ Page, *op. cit.*, p. 262

improvements, but that there should be exemptions in the case of hardship and low thresholds for farmers.³⁴ Henry George still had a hold over some of Labor's policies but no longer was an attraction to the Country Parties. That link between the parties was now broken. A special article in the *Countryman* speculated on why the Lyons plot to 'absorb' the Country Party into a national government had failed. He might have succeeded had he followed the models set by other composite governments – Stevens-Bruxner in NSW, Mitchell-Latham in WA and the former Bruce-Page government – all proven examples of working coalitions, but Lyons rejected these as impractical at federal level.³⁵

Lyons would also have been aware of the special problems in Victoria. There being no electoral pact in place between the UAP and the UCP, both parties contested the October 1932 by-election for Benambra, with the UCP winning on UAP preferences after Labor had led on the first count. However the real fight was between the two non-Labor parties.³⁶ While the UCP believed that 'the National government was as near to an elective government as one could get'³⁷ there were deadlocks on some policies with the UCP in the middle between Menzies and Argyle. This made the transfer of the mood of cooperation in the house to cabinet impossible.³⁸ Argyle was giving the impression of an indecisive leader presiding over a fractious government. Country Party members and a few UAP members crossed the floor to vote against and sometimes defeat their own government.³⁹ In line with Allnutt's declaration, the UCP was prepared to combine with Labor to force changes on issues outside the Premiers' Plan such as the Financial Emergencies (Mortgages) Bill and the exchange of crown land in the Forests Bill. While Argyle bowed to the will of the house, Labor was less than happy not to receive any reciprocal support from the UCP on other Bills⁴⁰ and retaliated by joining with the UAP to defeat, by one vote, a UCP move to reduce the flour tax, a reduction already in place in NSW under the Stevens-Bruxner coalition and which Labor had supported in Victoria only a year earlier. This case of political spite led the *Sunraysia*

³⁴ White, *Joseph Lyons*, p. 145

³⁵ *Countryman*, 21 October 1932

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ Browne, 'Stanley Argyle', p. 211

⁴⁰ *Labor Call*, 17 November 1932

Daily to claim the about-face was because Labor no longer relied upon the UCP to stay in government⁴¹ and the *Countryman* to say the UCP had been betrayed by those who at election time had posed as their friends.⁴²

In early 1933 the influence of the Country Party in the federal government was reduced as its leader Page retired from active politics for some months. He even considered resigning and returning to his medical practice, as he mourned the death of his son from a lightning strike. However his past refusal to support incorporation of the ACP into the UAP cabinet indirectly acted as a legacy prompting the more radical influences within the UCP to exploit and to question the value of coalitions. The *Countryman* editorialised that:

by general consent every composite government, federal or state with which the country party has so far been connected has resulted to the detriment of that party. We must agree with Earle Page, it is a matter of ‘policy before portfolios.’⁴³

The growing distrust manifested itself in Lowan as Wettenhall attacked Argyle for touring his electorate without invitation and for not being invited onto the platform when the Premier spoke at Nhill. The Premier’s refusal to meet an education deputation organised by Wettenhall ‘due to other commitments’ also rankled, leading him to declare that ‘the disregard for custom and decency betrays a weak and ill-regulated mind.’⁴⁴ This incident demonstrated that the UCP wanted it both ways – independence yet coalition, no electoral pact yet joint appearances, but separate election campaigns on the hustings. Wettenhall may as well have directed the barb more at Menzies than at the Premier for the Attorney-General was the well-spring of UAP opposition in Lowan and in other country areas. The *Castlemaine Mail*⁴⁵ also attacked Menzies as most indiscreet as a member of the national cabinet to ‘attack the UCP and campaign on its turf and that his oratorical skills do not hide his battering of allies.’ Allan was forced to defend participation in the ministry when the UAP opposed the Mortgage Bill and for their

⁴¹ *Sunraysia Daily*, 18 December 1932

⁴² *Countryman*, 16 December 1932

⁴³ *ibid.*, 27 January 1933

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 3 March 1933

⁴⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 17 March 1933

campaigning in UCP electorates declaring that ‘unity of purpose over-rode pique; we must act responsibly.’⁴⁶ In Kyneton a week later he told the local Chamber of Commerce that he would not resile nor apologise for deciding to form the ministry with the UAP – on that ‘I will stand or fall at the Conference in St Arnaud next week.’⁴⁷

The 1933 St Arnaud Conference debated the preselection of candidates, whether it should be up to the electorate councils or, as Dunstan argued, to the local membership itself. It adopted Allnutt’s amendment that where time permitted a preferential postal ballot should be conducted. Agreeing with Bussau, Wettenhall said that ‘if Members of Parliament did their job faithfully and well they had nothing to fear from a preselection ballot.’⁴⁸ At the next election Wettenhall would review that statement when challenged and losing to another UCP member, Hamilton Lamb. Allan, as expected, strongly supported the Argyle-Allan ministry but strangely and repeatedly used the terms composite ministry and conditional support during his address rather than refer to a National ministry. Wettenhall backed him saying the whole parliamentary party was responsible not just the ministers: ‘The party had on call in the party room the resignation of the ministers if the parliamentary party so decided.’⁴⁹ He was joined by Dunstan who dismissed Menzies’ attack on the UCP and confirmed Wettenhall’s outline of total resignation from the ministry should the party room so determine.⁵⁰

The ‘reform’ group banded together to put the organisation on a more independent base both financially and politically, nominating its champion A E Hocking for the presidency.⁵¹ With just one year on Central Council and three as a member of the Country Party he was successful. The link with Dunstan was evident when the daily newspaper in Dunstan’s electorate, the *Bendigo Advertiser*, in a lengthy profile described Hocking as ‘an advanced thinker of the Movement, who routed the Old Brigade at his election with his variety of interests and achievements – especially fitted

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 24 March 1933

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 31 March 1933

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ P Hocking, *Stormy Petrel: A Biography of Albert Edward Hocking 1885-1969*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1990, p. 47; B Costar, ‘Hocking, Albert Edward’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 14, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 459-60

to lead.’⁵² This description had been well earned. He had built up a reputation for energy and confident, clear speaking. He had called for new blood in politics⁵³ and while he had rejected ‘Theodore’s Trifling and Lang’s Lunacy’ as part of the plans for financial rehabilitation,⁵⁴ he was sympathetic to the farmers for the damage they suffered due to high interest rates and held a grudge against the banks for refusing to lower them.⁵⁵ His major policy achievement at the Conference was for the UCP to abolish land tax, much to the disappointment of those members who were strong advocates of Henry George, including one of the VFU foundation members Allan Johnson. However, six months later he would earn their respect when, armed with the status of president, he would call upon the banks to narrow the difference between the interest rates on deposits and borrowings. For him the difference was too great (usury), earning the accusation from some that he, like Labor, wanted to nationalise banking, something he absolutely denied.⁵⁶ After the Conference, Hocking’s first objective was to invite MPs to meet regularly with Central Council, ‘for closer cooperation between the parliamentary party and the governing body of the organisation and for more vigorous political action.’⁵⁷ ‘We do not desire to meet as masters of the parliamentary party but to cooperate and work with them.’⁵⁸ Dunstan, assuming to speak on behalf of his fellow MPs, reciprocated: ‘pleased to meet and exchange views ... should be greater cooperation ... somewhat lacking in the past. This is the time for free and frank discussions ... give it to us now.’⁵⁹

Reform and review on a broad front, ranging from leadership and policies to relationships with the UAP, was in full swing and its timing apposite as the Country Party had felt more than slighted when the Menzies became Deputy Premier over Allan despite him being the leader of the partner in the coalition government. Also the UCP had been denied any representation at the meeting of the Loans Council. Obviously, giving the minor portfolios allocated to the UCP had been employed simply to lock in

⁵² *Countryman*, 7 April 1933

⁵³ *ibid.*, 15 May 1931

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 22 May 1931

⁵⁵ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 20

⁵⁶ *Countryman*, 22 September 1933

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 21 April 1933

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 28 April 1933

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

the party to achieve government, not to allow it any opportunity to influence policy. A joint meeting of the Central Council and the parliamentary party, realising they were being sidelined, determined that should the 'National' government not become more productive and recognise UCP policies, they might withdraw their ministers.⁶⁰ Hocking drew a line in the sand with a virtual declaration of war: 'the day of the Country Party pacifism has gone and the party will fight.'⁶¹ He was backed by the organisation's treasurer Stahle who wanted to see the bloodless revolution with Council extended to the parliamentary party including challenging Allan for the leadership: 'We have had enough of the UAP's *Divide et Impera* through putting three UCP MPs in cabinet and muzzling the rest.'⁶² These exhortations did not lead to an immediate challenge and the leadership question was deferred to a later Conference of Council and caucus.

Hocking was determined to increase his influence over the MPs and stated that, between Conferences, Central Council was supreme and the parliamentary party was obliged to deliver those policies. He declared that Council wanted to see a change of leadership to give effect to those policies 'as the parliamentary party seems to have reached a dead end in that respect.'⁶³ The following week he attained his objective when Colonel Murray Bouchier replaced Allan as leader, winning on the first count from Dunstan, Old and Wettenhall. Dunstan continued as deputy leader. This put the UCP in a peculiarly weaker position as its new leader was not in the ministry, while the displaced Allan continued as a minister alongside Dunstan and Goudie. Argyle made no move to alter the arrangement and was rather derisive of Bouchier when the latter demanded, almost amounting to an ultimatum, that more be done for the man on the land.⁶⁴

Labor was still determined to punish Hogan for his support of the Premiers' Plan. He had filed in the Supreme Court to have his expulsion overturned as 'wrongful' and sought damages as compensation. The court ruled in favour of Hogan, finding him still a member of the Victorian Labor Party and awarding him one shilling in damages. In August the central executive appealed to the High Court which upheld Labor's right to

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 5 May 1933

⁶¹ *Countryman*, 19 May 1933

⁶² *ibid.*, 19 May 1933

⁶³ *ibid.*, 23 June 1933

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 20 October 1933

expel him but would not vary Justice Duffy's decision in the Supreme Court. When E A Coyle MLA resigned from the UAP and crossed to the UCP, feelers were put out to Hogan and Bailey for transfer as well. The UCP saw itself as providing a bridge for the moderates between the two major parties.⁶⁵ At the same time another bridge was reforming between Labor and the UCP. Members of the Henry George League were active in both the *Countryman* and *Labor Call*, putting forward their economic proposals and strongly criticising alternatives such as Douglas Credit while supporting reductions in interest rates already part of the expansionary policies of Keynes in Britain and Roosevelt in the United States.

The battle between the Central Council and the parliamentary party continued. The coalition had been formed without initial reference to the Central Council and the need for a 66 per cent majority approval vote of Council and caucus (Rule 114). Now Hocking argued that this rule could also be interpreted as saying the two bodies in a combined vote had the power to determine whether the three UCP ministers should retire from office.⁶⁶ It was decided that to prevent open division between the two the matter should be resolved at the Daylesford Conference the following year.

Spurred on by the Young Nationalists, Argyle continued to reward and protect his supporters by appointing Sir William Irvine (former MLA for Lowan and Victorian Premier then MHR for Flinders) as Lieutenant Governor while he was Chief Justice of the Victorian Supreme Court, while continuing to treat the UCP with disdain. He sometimes combined with Labor to get legislation passed such as when the UAP supported a Labor amendment to the Transport Regulation Bill to appoint workers' representatives to the board.⁶⁷ Another tactic employed by Argyle was to reduce the role of parliament in favour of 'administration.'⁶⁸ This further alienated the UCP. The lack of cooperation between the UAP and the UCP came to a head over the election of a successor to Speaker Sir Alexander Peacock who died in early October. The warring factions could not agree on a nomination and two UAP nominations were put forward

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 9 June 1933

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 3 November 1933

⁶⁷ *Labor Call*, 5 October 1933

⁶⁸ Browne, 'Stanley Argyle', p. 209

but both were defeated 34:26. Then Argyle and Tunnecliffe agreed to nominate Labor's Maurice Blackburn who was duly elected. This experience of the UCP being excluded led to the parliamentary party to agree that its decisions should now be binding on all its members whereas previously this was so only when an issue was declared 'vital.' It was time to adopt Labor Party solidarity rules. However Allan and his supporters were not ready yet to accept that Conference or Central Council decisions should be similarly binding on them.

The antagonism between the anti-Labor Allanites and the Hocking reformers gathered pace as nominations were called for various state electorates. Coyle wanted to continue as the MLA for Waranga and sought preselection, but Jack McEwen nominated 'to test the waters.'⁶⁹ McEwen was subsequently endorsed and Coyle, who claimed that he had been promised endorsement as a reward for crossing over, immediately declared he would run as an independent UCP candidate. When Wettenhall was likely to be challenged in Lowan by the disaffected vice-president of his electorate council, he responded that 'he bore the challenger no ill will on that account, that the government was doing a good job and it would be a mistake to change it at the present.'⁷⁰ A little over a year later his self-confidence would dissipate somewhat when he failed to dismiss a second challenge as easily as the first. Wettenhall was however reading the rank and file in his electorate a little more closely and taking aboard their complaints that nothing was being done for the farmers. Perhaps as a former minister in a coalition he had been a little angered by not being in the current ministry himself, for a week later he said in the parliament: 'People say the parliament has done nothing. What has been done this session? It is a sad thing to have to admit that nothing has been done.'⁷¹

Allnutt also antagonised Argyle when he reminded the government that as a member of the CPP, he and three other breakaways who held the balance of power in the previous parliament had gained many concessions through bargaining: 'We cannot do that now.'⁷² Being in coalition did not necessarily deliver benefits to the junior partner.

⁶⁹ *Countryman*, 22 September 1933

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 1 December 1933

⁷¹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 193, 21 December 1933, p. 4182

⁷² *Countryman*, 26 January 1934

The prelude to the 1934 Daylesford Conference was electric as the factions traded arguments on the relationship between Conference, Central Council and the parliamentary party. Central Council suggested it should not be assumed a coalition was continuous for the life of a parliament once a 66 per cent majority gave approval, but that a 66 per cent majority could also terminate it allowing candidates to freely campaign as a separate party. When Wettenhall was challenged by the Dimboola branch because of his ‘independence of conscience over party’ he vigorously condemned the radical element of the party, telling the Nhill branch that Central Council was trying to establish a junta similar to the Trades Hall Council control over Labor MPs: ‘We would end up going down the same disastrous electoral path as Labor did in 1932.’⁷³

Hocking’s opening presidential address was impressive. He dominated other members of Central Council, displaying an independence of thought and strong single mindedness of purpose. His power of mass persuasion was through the projection of a double image of his own personality – hard-bitten, yet when the occasion demanded it, highly emotional and capable of arousing emotion – ringing with the consuming zeal of a revivalist.⁷⁴ Hocking used the opportunity to broadcast his speech over radio station 3AW to emphasise that ‘low interest rates were regarded as the classical solvent [sic] of depressions’ and that while he hoped that conversion loans would deliver lower rates, clashes between state and federal governments’ rights and tax powers meant the Premiers’ Plan had not been implemented to advantage.⁷⁵ In a subtle way he was contrasting his party’s role and influence at federal level between Page and Lyons with that at state level in the Argyle composite government. He believed that the immediate aims of the party were to be accepted as true partners in a reciprocal national ministry and for Central Council to put an end to the ludicrous and incongruous position which threatened to disintegrate the organisation.⁷⁶

⁷³ *ibid.*, 2 March 1934

⁷⁴ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, pp. 19-20

⁷⁵ *Countryman*, 16 March 1934

⁷⁶ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 33

At the Conference the main issues debated were the introduction of the pledge, how independent an MP could be and who determined whether a coalition could be entered into. Dunstan reminded delegates that unity between the CPP and the VCP had been achieved a few years ago on the resolution that any composite ministry was subject to a 66 per cent majority approval by Central Council: ‘Let us not renew the old vendettas.’⁷⁷ He appeared equivocal although he did agree with his former leader Allan that no Premier would invite any UCP member to join a ministry with such a rule hanging over his head and that it would be most humiliating for the ministers to have to ‘trot down to the Central Council’ to plead continued participation in the ministry. Allnutt said it was obvious that the parliamentary party had decided to stay in the ministry no matter what Conference might determine and that it was time for the rank and file to exert its authority through Central Council. Bouchier, the UCP leader but not in the ministry, claimed that while he did not have a great time for such ministries, the real question was how the party could implement its policy. He reminded those present that the parliamentary party had unanimously decided to join the Argyle composite ministry after the preceding election.⁷⁸ Ultimately Conference adopted the policy that a joint meeting of the Central Council and the parliamentary party would decide the future of any composite ministry. The current National government could continue for the life of the parliament.

Returning to the pledge, Hocking questioned the degree of solidarity in the parliamentary party when he reported on the voting in the Assembly since the parliamentary party had resolved on 24 November 1933 that majority decisions were binding on all members. Up to that decision, there had been 21 unity and 29 split votes including a no-confidence motion when 10 had voted for the government and five against on 26 September 1933. After that there had been 28 unity votes and 22 split votes, some improvement but showing the need for more unity. The pledge had to be strengthened and in future all candidates would have to sign a nomination form embodying the pledge on Conference policy.⁷⁹ Wettenhall opposed the pledge:

⁷⁷ *Countryman*, 16 March 1934

⁷⁸ Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 207

⁷⁹ *Countryman*, 23 March 1934

It is unfair, humiliating and undignified to expect a sitting member who holds the confidence of the electorate for many years to sign such a form. It may be alright for a new member or a new electorate.

Allnutt agreed but added 'if it was good enough for new candidates it was good enough for the old.'⁸⁰ Then the debate turned to the question of preselection. Wettenhall had always been against preselection and was still opposed. He and Allan argued to leave the rule as it was – 'let them all stand.' Dunstan's contribution to the debate was to argue that it was wrong to have two shots at an election, losing preselection then facing the voters as an unendorsed candidate of the party: 'They should stand as an ousted independent.'⁸¹ Ultimately it was decided that any decision to have a preselection for actual endorsement would be up to district councils but this would not prevent unendorsed party members contesting an election against an endorsed candidate.⁸² The decision was soon put to the test when Norman Martin, after he had lost preselection, won the by-election for Gunbower as an independent. Labor support in Cohuna and Kerang had seen him over the line. Martin was expelled by the Central Council but admitted to the UCP parliamentary party on a 12:4 vote strongly supported by Dunstan and Allnutt, the latter arguing that Martin should now prove himself and seek readmission at the next Conference.⁸³

The major debates at Daylesford on preselection, the pledge and composite ministries would determine the parliamentary future within the year. That Hocking's stamp was on all these items was clear to those more familiar with the Conference and Central Council. Apart from some such as John McEwen there were few who displayed the essentials of leadership and, given Hocking's belief that those who represented the party should pay greater heed to the decisions of Conference, he gained the support of the radicals and those who opposed composite governments. This stance seemed to have sprung from a mixture of self-centredness as a leader and from a confidence in his own ability perhaps leading those who did not agree with him to see him as an arrogant

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*, 7 June 1934

bully. His ability to achieve was evidenced by his previous successes in his accountancy and fruit growing businesses and serving successive terms as the youngest ever mayor of the City of Camberwell, but failing to be elected to the Melbourne City Council. He was unsuccessful in his attempt to gain UAP preselection for Kew so he supported the independent (unendorsed) UAP candidate Wilfrid Kent Hughes at the election in April 1927. He became disinterested in the UAP and in 1929 joined the Country Party.⁸⁴ Now there was a new reality, that achieving the objectives of the UCP lay in exerting greater leverage than could be exerted through being a member of a composite government dominated by a conservative party subservient to major businesses whose agenda was not always in the interests of the primary producers. If the UCP ministers were withdrawn then the Central Council, with Hocking's influence, would come more clearly into the picture and automatically guarantee a better deal for the farmer.⁸⁵

Splits among the parliamentary and general ranks were not confined to the Country Party. Unresolved issues in all parties often led to formal divisions. The Labor Party was also dealing with those former members of the party who now stood at elections against them. The split in NSW meant that the party now had to determine the best way to deal with those recalcitrants. The NSW Federal Labor Party decided to contest all federal electorates against the NSW State Labor Party (the Langite breakaways) not so much as a statement over the Premiers' Plan but to determine who dictated policy at federal level – NSW or the majority.⁸⁶ They had seen Lang exploiting the Premiers' Plan to his advantage after first agreeing with it and passing the necessary legislation,⁸⁷ then abusing the Plan through Beasley to try and control the federal caucus. Until the Langites were ready to pledge loyalty to the majority of caucus they could not be readmitted.⁸⁸ In Victoria Labor saw two of its former MLCs R Williams (West Melbourne) and J P Jones (South West) who had been expelled for their support of the Premiers' Plan re-elected when the UAP decided not to oppose them.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Hocking, op. cit., p. 38

⁸⁵ Paul, The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan, p. 21

⁸⁶ *Labor Call*, 17 May 1934

⁸⁷ New South Wales, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, 28 August 1931, p. 5775

⁸⁸ P J Kennelly (Victorian Labor Party president), *Labor Call*, 17 May 1934

⁸⁹ *Labor Call*, 7 June 1934

The division between the UCP parliamentary party and Central Council came to a head three months later over the refusal of the MPs to meet with Central Council over the expulsion from the UCP of Dr Harris MLC who had refused to sign the nomination form but was still meeting with the parliamentary party. Wettenhall went to his defence publicly asking in the city press on 22 June whether MPs should be asked to submit to the people knowing the election platform could be changed by an outside body unanswerable to the electorate: 'this flies in the face of commonsense.'⁹⁰ Hocking replied that any pledge was binding only on policy at the time of the election and that MPs were then bound on other matters by the majority decision of the parliamentary party unless it was determined to be a matter of conscience: 'Wettenhall should not ridicule the Constitution of the party to whom he owes so much. This is left handed loyalty.'⁹¹ It would seem this was the last straw for Hocking who now had Wettenhall in his sights.

While the UCP Central Council was winning greater control over its elected state representatives it was critical of the federal organisation, the Australian Country Party Association (ACPA), which it claimed was run from the top down by the parliamentary party and its leader Page. One member of Central Council, McEwen, was particularly critical:

the entire control of the federal organisation, as in the state, should remain in the hands of the rank and file, the people who built it up and should not pass to the parliamentarians.⁹²

This would have appealed to Hocking but perhaps as a candidate for federal office McEwen had spoken too soon.

When a by-election for the federal seat of Martin was due in his home state of Tasmania, Lyons was anxious to avoid a loss and to deny the opportunity for continuing criticism from those arguing that the non-Labor parties at state level would benefit from 'fusion' under the Hare-Clark electoral system. Hoping to prevent further division between his party and the ACP and with the general election only six months away,

⁹⁰ *Countryman*, 29 June 1934

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² *ibid.*, 22 June 1934

Lyons called it early. As head of a majority government he had not needed to consult with any coalition partner for the dissolution but in a series of meetings prior to this he had secured an electoral pact for a joint Senate team, except in Victoria, and reciprocal exchange of preferences in any three-cornered House of Representatives contest.⁹³ The *Age* described the allegiance between Lyons and Page as ‘immoral and grotesque’ given the wide gulf between the parties on questions of protection and tariffs flowing from the Ottawa Agreement. Predictably the UCP rejected any electoral pact: ‘the rank and file won’t have it. They have been bewildered, disconcerted and split by previous experiments in both federal and state spheres.’ The Council confidently predicted that the ACP would be a dominant minority: ‘This election will prove the turning point in Dr Page’s career.’⁹⁴

Early in the campaign Page was determined to negotiate with the UCP to consolidate the federal electoral pact. In mid-July during nine hours of friendly, if inconclusive, discussions with the Victorian Central Council, Page said the Victorian rule on coalition formation was not meant to apply to federal candidates. He believed that no single state could determine whether a federal composite ministry should exist. Central Council disagreed declaring they were bound by the constitution of the Victorian party.⁹⁵ Tom Paterson, MHR for Gippsland, conceded the conditions relating to preselection and supported a printed platform but was not prepared to sign a ‘blank cheque.’ He would adhere to the federal parliamentary party but not go against his personal convictions:

the question of whether to enter a federal coalition or not should be left to those who are to enter or not enter it. It all depends upon a satisfactory agreement on policies – the basis for stable government.⁹⁶

⁹³ Page, op. cit., p. 264

⁹⁴ *Countryman*, 6 July 1934

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 20 July 1934

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 27 July 1934

Hocking persisted – those who did not sign the pledge could contest the seats as independents. Paterson, well prepared, said he had obtained an opinion from eminent counsel Sir Edward Mitchell which concluded that ‘those who insist upon a candidate binding himself to the extent stated would be held guilty of criminal conspiracy.’ Central Council was not swayed, Hocking saying that the pledge was designed to ensure MPs kept faith with the electors and honoured the principles of the rank and file, and that composite ministries put serious and embarrassing obstacles in the way of the full realisation of the aims and objectives of the party. Was Paterson prepared to go against his undertakings at an election if ‘coerced’ by the party’s political opponents?⁹⁷ Issuing a mild threat, Central Council said they did not wish to oppose those who refused to sign a nomination form but would be obliged to endorse any suitable applicants who did so. This was similar to the solution at state level. Council even obtained an alternative legal opinion from Eugene Gorman and John Barry which concluded that signing a pledge would not lead that person to be liable to prosecution under criminal law.

The party and the federal members had reached an impasse which had to be resolved quickly before nominations closed. A special conference was offered to the federal MPs but was refused. Paterson thought the cost of such a conference called ‘on the eve of an election was farcical’ and declared he would still refuse to sign a pledge regardless of the outcome.⁹⁸ The ACPA was reported as being prepared to set up a new affiliate in Victoria purely to process nominations for the election. Then the UAP intervened and refused to accept Senator Elliott on any joint ticket. It was rumoured that Menzies had agreed to transfer to federal politics only if Elliott was excluded.⁹⁹ Finally it was resolved that should any MP feel ‘improperly coerced’ they should not be forced to sign the pledge, the issue to be finally determined at the next UCP Conference. Page, who had earlier denied the threat of an ACPA (Vic) organisation being established, now announced he supported the compromise and any alternative organisation would not be proceeded with. McEwen abandoned his plans for Waranga and nominated for Echuca, signing the pledge while two other candidates for the seat did not. Paterson was not opposed despite not signing. Vice-president H L Simpson did sign and opposed

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 3 August 1934

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

McClelland in Wimmera who decided that rather than sign he would stand as an ACP candidate. During the election Page and Paterson campaigned for those who opposed signing the pledge, McClelland in Wimmera and G Stewart in Echuca.

The UCP campaign suffered two setbacks in the lead-up to the poll. Federal cabinet awarded a 40 mile radius radio station licence in Melbourne to the UAP after the UCP had withdrawn their application selflessly in favour of the RSL. Then Hocking had both his legs below the knee crushed at his Bundoora quarry works, sidelining him out of the campaign. Strangely, given the interference by the UAP regarding the Senate ticket, the *Countryman* carried a full page advertisement for the UAP Senate candidates.¹⁰⁰ Anything could be justified to consolidate the vote against Labor, especially in the Senate.

Nationally, a swing of around 4 per cent went against the conservatives, the UAP losing seven seats and its majority and the ACP two, while Labor and Lang Labor each gained five although the UAP improved its hold over the Senate. Archie Cameron in South Australia and Jack McEwen in Victoria were both elected and John Curtin re-entered the House of Representatives. Hocking claimed McEwen's victory as an effective answer to his critics and, with the gap between Labor and anti-Labor narrowed significantly, stated that 'the Country Party now holds the balance of power and we have a great MP in McEwen – a fine platform presence and one who carried the conviction of earnestness and sincerity.'¹⁰¹ Labor and the UCP wondered whether Lyons would continue to head a minority government given the apparently unresolvable differences with the ACP on tariffs and Page's accusation during the campaign that 'Lyons had not fulfilled the promises made at the 1931 election.'¹⁰² This had elicited the response from Lyons that 'he would not depart one iota from the election platform on tariffs.'¹⁰³ Would the Country Party again reject the offer of coalition purely on UAP terms as they had done twice over the last three years? Lyons and Page could not agree on the composition and conditions for a composite government and Lyons continued in

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 7 September 1934

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 28 September 1934

¹⁰² *ibid.*, 5 October 1934

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 12 October 1934

government with the expectation of ACP support. In standing firm on the principles of tariff reform the *Countryman* believed that this put paid to the taunts from their political opponents that the party's main objective was the plums of office.¹⁰⁴ A more astute observer would have said that the tactic was simply a bargaining ploy to refuse the initial unsatisfactory offer.

Labor recognised that the ACP could only enjoy the luxury of being a separate anti-Labor party as long as Labor's numbers were small enough to allow it. As Labor gained seats the major conservative party would dominate and absorb the smaller one in coalition to outvote Labor.¹⁰⁵ Page was determined to get this message across to Lyons and had gone with Labor to force a vote and defeat a government sponsored adjournment to allow MPs to attend the Melbourne Cup. Lyons accepted the warning that he could no longer simply rely on the ACP to control the house and, against the advice of the Young Nationalists such as Menzies, resumed his negotiations with Page. He conceded four portfolios to the ACP including the deputy prime ministership to Page along with the concession to abolish a wide range of tariffs on imported farm machinery. The Victorian Central Council did not share Page's enthusiasm for a federal coalition, Stahle demanding that Page must explain or the rank and file 'will think their role and conference is farcical.' In his response Paterson concentrated on policies arguing that the reductions on tariffs could never have been achieved if the party continued to look towards Labor. Hocking dismissed Paterson's explanation:

We can only build up our party by the maintenance of its independence, free and untrammelled by entangling alliances with another political party ... In Victoria composite ministries had created disunity and discord since they were first created ... principles before portfolios.¹⁰⁶

Hocking had conveniently ignored that Page had achieved policy and principles while gaining portfolios. This was a sign of strong leadership and negotiating skills, a prerequisite to any successful participation in a composite government by a minor party. But there were other pressing matters on the horizon for the president and his party.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Labor Call*, 4 October 1934

¹⁰⁶ *Countryman*, 9 November 1934

With a state election due by May 1935 the UCP determined to use the parliamentary recess to try to resolve the differences between the Central Council and the parliamentary party. A settlement was seen as imperative, one to be confirmed at the March Conference in Ballarat before the election. In a joint announcement, Hocking and Bouchier announced that ‘amiable progress was being made.’¹⁰⁷ More ominous was a prophetic statement by McEwen who, on resigning from the Central Council now he was an MP, said he did not regard his victory as a personal one but a justification for the cause Central Council had been fighting: ‘I hope I never give Council cause for regret in endorsing me and that I will prove to be a useful member of the Party.’¹⁰⁸ Four years later those hopes would be questioned.

The prospect of a state election interrupting the plans for Victoria’s Centennial celebrations and the Royal Visit by the Duke of Gloucester prompted Argyle to decide upon an election in March rather than May. The earlier date would frustrate Central Council’s timetable for a resolution of its problems. The Premier attempted to gain an advantage over his coalition partners with the announcement of the early election during the January summer holidays ‘as the UCP argued over the pledge while stealing most of the UCP policies.’¹⁰⁹ Quickly Central Council decided to close nominations on 1 February for those seats where candidates had not been endorsed.

Hocking also realised there had to be changes in the membership of the parliamentary party if he was to succeed with his plans for party reform. He had repeatedly argued that the party needed more younger members¹¹⁰ rather than simply trying to recruit country UAP members as he recognised the latter would merely strengthen the pro-coalition members. There was also the need to educate and train younger UCP MPs. If more seats could be won at the next election by candidates sharing the reformist zeal then maybe his plan could be realised. The wealthy Hocking was renowned for the time he put into travelling around the country electorates as part of his presidential duties, reserving his energy by cat-napping with his driver at the wheel and often covering several hundred

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 19 October 1934

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, 25 January 1931

¹¹⁰ *Countryman*, 9 January, 20 and 27 February, and 20 March 1931

miles in a day.¹¹¹ Hocking would continue to search for men who could faithfully deliver the platform and policies of the party. The party's will must be implemented. Divided votes in parliament, within the parliamentary party meetings and at the conferences, with MP reflecting on MP, showed this unity of purpose was wanting.

During the debates on monetary reform at Conference Hocking had become particularly impressed by one of the Henry Georgist proponents, Hamilton Lamb of Kyneton. He had read Lamb's articles in the *Countryman*. He acknowledged Lamb's presentation skills even if he did not agree with all he said. Lamb and Hocking agreed totally that 'usury' was a key cause of the Depression and the farmers' continuing troubles and that old age and invalid pensions should be restored and maintained. Where they differed was on the question of a land tax. Lamb was in favour, though he called it land rental and wanted a single land tax or rental to replace all other taxes, a little too idealistic and probably unattainable, while Hocking wanted the graduated federal land tax abolished.¹¹² Maybe they could compromise on that point. Lamb also met the qualities he was looking for in new members and MPs – young, educated and spirited. More importantly perhaps he had found his man to oppose Wettenhall in the seat of Lowan.

¹¹¹ Hocking, op. cit., p. 48

¹¹² *Countryman*, 17 August 1934

CHAPTER 7

THE 1935 CAMPAIGN TO GOVERNMENT

‘The Country Party – born of necessity, cradled in adversity, grown to maturity midst the jeers and sneers of the less informed. The party has survived the battle and Australia is about to reap the benefits of its labour.’

Countryman, 11 January 1935

This chapter deals with the 1935 Victorian election campaign and the installation of the first Country Party minority government supported by Labor and its subsequent performance. Analysis of the election reveals the importance of the role of leaders within a party at parliamentary and organisational levels. This role is further examined to demonstrate that personal ambition as well as achievement of policy was the reason for the decision by the smallest parliamentary party, the VCP, to form a minority government, supported by a former ‘natural enemy’ to displace the coalition in which it had been a partner.

An early election, timed by Premier Argyle to catch the UCP unawares, would deliver unpredicted results. The UCP would undergo a complete transformation – within its numbers, a change of leadership and formation of a minority government, the first Country Party government in the world.

The intensity of the debate between factions of the UCP over the issue of composite ministries saw several instances of more than one candidate contesting the same electorate at the 1935 election. Bouchier, leader of the UCP, confused matters when he stood on the coalition platform and also delivered his own party policy speech separately. After a close election result the Argyle coalition was expected to continue. This view was strengthened when the newly elected leader of the UCP, Albert Dunstan, who had won an unexpectedly close vote in his caucus, accepted the deputy premiership. A week later his party determined, by the closest of a two-thirds majority of the caucus and Central Council, not to continue the coalition. Rumours that Labor would support a minority UCP government were proven when the parliament met.

The debate on the no-confidence motion against the Argyle government exposed the innermost feelings and expectations of MPs on all sides towards the threatened coalition and the formation of a UCP minority government. Labor's support was virtually unconditional as its aim was to displace the government but it did express hope that some of their own desired programs would be delivered. Behind the scenes Allan tried to forge a last minute coalition, but to no avail. Argyle did not resign immediately and the Governor took some time to be satisfied that a minority UCP government would survive with the unusual pledge of Labor support.

The UCP experienced some problems with its rule that more than one candidate could contest elections as the factions battled for control. Central Council decided to endorse both Lamb and Wettenhall stating that the Lowan electorate council was not within the constitution in conducting a secret ballot to select only one candidate.¹ There is no doubt the chief president had more than passing influence on this decision. Only three electorates – Lowan (Wettenhall), Mildura (Allnutt) and Rodney (Allan) – saw more than one endorsed UCP candidate, them reflecting the intensity of the debate between the factions over composite governments.

The campaign in Lowan illustrated how complicated the situation and the unpredictability of the outcome could be for the UCP in those three electorates. Essentially, there were three concurrent campaigns which would determine the UCP candidates' parliamentary futures. In each local electorate there were two, such as in Lowan with the battle between Lamb and Wettenhall, and the fight between party divisions and confusing factions within the UCP.² Then there was the state-wide election among the major parties. Each campaign team stressed their candidate's strengths aiming their appeal at the party factions as much as the electorate at large. In a subtle appeal to those who opposed Wettenhall's pro-composite stance, Lamb emphasised his opposition to composite governments declaring that 'members of the Party should be free to support any proposal to assist rural interests.'³ In an indirect

¹ *Countryman*, 8 February 1935

² Paul, *The premierships of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 40

³ *Countryman*, 22 February 1935

appeal to Labor voters who could well determine the outcome between the two UCP candidates in the absence of a Labor candidate, Lamb stated that:

the policies of Labor and the UCP suggest no difference in affairs of state but the UCP policy will help *all* sections of the community ... the Premiers' Plan had no effect on the welfare of the people of the state, it only helped to balance the budget.⁴

Wettenhall, at the 1932 election, had openly supported the Premiers' Plan and criticised Labor's acting Premier Tunnecliffe for refusing to enact the Financial Emergency Act. Given his belief in composite government where 'two heads are better than one'⁵ he was entirely consistent when he remained supportive of the Argyle government. Despite the previous year describing it as a 'do nothing government,' Wettenhall now said:

as the government of the day is not seriously challenged at this election there is no special issue to be decided so it remains to consider the most important issues to be dealt with are rural relief, unemployment and transport coordination.⁶

His earlier assessment was backed by McEwen who claimed the lack of achievement by the ministry did not justify a continuation of the alliance.⁷

The short campaign began with the entire composite ministry backing Premier Argyle on the stage of the Malvern Town Hall when he launched the government's policy speech, concentrating on the gradual economic recovery achieved under the Premiers' Plan. There was little reference to rural rehabilitation and only cautious reference to replacing sustenance payments with relief works or other social reform proposals. This was understandable as any expansionary programs depended upon federal funding and this was based on a particular state's recent budgets. Those states which had run deficits, such as New South Wales in its expansionary phase under Lang, received more funding to assist in balancing their budget. In contrast, Victoria received relatively less financial assistance as it had delivered balanced budgets under a conservative government and there was less perceived need for federal assistance. In short, the greater the past deficit, the more financial assistance a state received.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Marcus Wettenhall papers, Kyabram, 23 April 1932, National Library of Australia, Canberra, Nf 329.9945 W542

⁶ *ibid.*, campaign pamphlet, 1935 election

⁷ *Countryman*, 2 February 1934

Labor opposed both non-Labor parties, seeing them as ‘spring cousins – only the centre letter in their initials a distinguishing mark. Before the election they were at loggerheads now they are united in coalition.’⁸

Labor still advocated an expansionary program in place of the Premiers’ Plan to relieve unemployment and to start abolishing Melbourne’s slums, using the State Savings Bank to help finance these projects. It attacked the UAP scheme for rehabilitation and proposed a new mortgage corporation. When Labor also advocated the selective abolition of the state land tax on properties used for production, even the supportive *Age* questioned where the money was coming from to restore salaries and pensions, build houses and expand transport.⁹ Appealing for rural votes, Labor attacked the UCP as:

only a joint in the UAP tail – maybe occasionally wagging the dog but we know who the teeth belong to. The UCP and the UAP are only united when they are in danger.¹⁰

Labor also offered to review the scheme of soldier settlement, organise marketing for primary products as in Queensland and support ballot approved cooperatives.¹¹

Bourchier, leader of the Country Party but uniquely not a member of the coalition cabinet, understandably centred his separate appeal on rural issues and carefully avoided overt criticism of the Argyle government. His other concern was to accommodate the opposing factions in his party. He advocated reducing interest rates to the lowest possible level, the creation of a Debts Adjustment Tribunal and a combination of rail and road transport under the same Act limiting the powers of the Transport Board to recommendation only.¹² Strategically, given what was expected to follow after the election, the policy speech lacked individuality beyond a difference in emphasis from the UAP. The metropolitan press gave it scant coverage, seeing little change from that of Argyle who was expected to continue as Premier after the election.

An article in *Truth* on that Friday morning, election eve, summarised the current politico-economic position well:

⁸ *Labor Call*, 31 January 1935

⁹ *Age*, 7 February 1935

¹⁰ *Labor Call*, 7 February 1935

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *Age*, 8 February 1935

Over the last three years little had improved and Argyle's speech had contained nothing constructive – For all its talk Labor couldn't do anything, it smacked of Langism and would be opposed by an overwhelming anti-Labor majority in the Legislative Council anyway. The answer to the economic problems lay in creating new jobs and bringing about more spending power – rural rehabilitation required a plan and a writing off of debts – the government needs to ease debts on public works associated with primary production especially water and rail. The root cause is the curse of interest rates – the people should vote to say more should be done by the government.¹³

The article was silent on the Country Party, not unusual for a city-based publication.

On Friday night, election eve, the candidates for the Country Party completed their campaigns reflecting on their chances and whether they had campaigned as well as they might. Hocking would have shared their feelings, his mood not helped when one city newspaper had that day predicted the National government would be returned but that 'Mr Hamilton Lamb was not expected to beat Mr Wettenhall.'¹⁴ The *Argus* advocated putting Labor last, and in Lowan to choose either candidate as both were endorsed by the UCP but in the neighbouring electorate of Stawell and Ararat to put the UCP candidate Alexander McDonald last.¹⁵ The *Age* predicted some UCP gains but added that in Lowan, Mildura and Rodney the UCP had the election to themselves and a change of representation in two of them wouldn't change outcomes.¹⁶

Monday's newspapers gave the expected results. 'Sanity Triumphs at the Polls' stated the editorial in the *Sun*, 'Country Renews Mandate' being the headline, but on page 4 'Mr Lamb is expected to win Lowan.'¹⁷ The *Argus* proclaimed 'A Fresh Mandate for the Argyle Ministry' and 'Wettenhall defeated ... Bouchier declines to comment on position of Wettenhall in Lowan and Old in Swan Hill.'¹⁸ The *Age* reported 'Ministry Given Another Chance' and that the Premier was 'delighted with the decision' and that Bouchier was 'well satisfied,' whereas Labor, through Tunnecliffe, predictably

¹³ *Truth*, 2 March 1935

¹⁴ *Sun News-Pictorial*, 1 March 1935

¹⁵ *Argus*, 1 March 1935

¹⁶ *Age*, 1 March 1935

¹⁷ *Sun News-Pictorial*, 4 March 1935

¹⁸ *Argus*, 4 March 1935

declared ‘the government had no cause for self congratulations.’ The *Age* reported that ‘Mr Wettenhall has been rejected for another Country Party candidate, Mr Lamb for Lowan’ and that the two surprises of the election were Allnutt defeating three UCP opponents in Mildura despite all of them putting him last and Lamb beating Wettenhall. Cameos of the new members appeared on page 12.¹⁹

A reader of the *Herald* would have been surprised to learn that an election had been held, such was its poor coverage of the event. It seemed the newspaper was more interested in Sir Malcolm Campbell’s new land speed record at Daytona Beach, USA, but by Tuesday in its editorial stated:

The UCP owed its numbers to a distribution that is an offence against democracy. With 20 UCP members elected on less than one-sixth of the people they can hardly expect a parliamentary dictatorship ... need a spirit of cooperation rather than increased members in the ministry.²⁰

Within a few days, with the outcome for each party better known, Labor leader Tunnecliffe surprised all when he proposed that the current ministry be displaced by the Country Party with Labor’s support. He said the ALP would assist the Country Party to put its policies into effect as it had made gains at the expense of the UAP and should replace the ‘Argyle do-nothing government.’²¹ ‘With a UCP government supported by Labor we can have an effective rural rehabilitation plan. Our parties have much in common – the farmers and workers need to unite.’²² The likely representation was UAP down four to 25, UCP up with two gains to 20, Labor also two wins to 17 with three independents.

Until four years earlier, the Country Party had only 10 members in the Victorian Legislative Assembly. Now they had doubled that, gaining four seats over the life of the last government and now two more at the election, all at the expense of the UAP. Indeed another reason for Hocking to see that Wettenhall was replaced with an anti-composite man was that Wettenhall had been one of those who had opposed the idea of forming a minority government with Labor support. The opportunity had arisen earlier, following

¹⁹ *Age*, 4 March 1935

²⁰ *Herald*, 5 March 1935

²¹ *Age*, 6 March 1935

²² *Labor Call*, 13 March 1935

the cross-party transfer to their side by E A Coyle in August 1933 and the by-election wins from the UAP in Benambra and Gunbower during 1934. The anticipated further gains at the next election had strengthened the ‘inside’ talk of minority government,²³ a bigger step than sitting in the corner, and Hocking was motivated further to act decisively. The desire to avoid coalitions was hardly novel in Country Party circles. As early as the 1934 Conference there was talk amongst the delegates of abandoning Argyle.²⁴ With the experience of being in minority government themselves with support of the Country Progressive Party and independents, Tunnecliffe’s offer could be seen superficially as merely the floating of a reciprocal idea to keep the UAP out of government. No formal contact had been made with Bouchier and as *Labor Call* had made no mention of it in its post-election issue, probably the offer had not been canvassed with the Labor executive, at least before that paper had gone to bed. *Labor Call* simply proclaimed an increased vote for Labor and the win by William Brownbill in Geelong. It saw the perceived parliamentary role for Labor as that of an active, critical and well-informed opposition.²⁵ There was no discussion of other options.

The Melbourne dailies were dismissive of the Tunnecliffe offer as were the UAP and the ‘pro-composite’ faction of the UCP. Premier Argyle quickly derided it, describing Labor’s proposal as that of a ‘political flirt’²⁶ and confirmed he would be going to London to attend the Silver Jubilee celebrations of King George V, leaving Allan acting as Premier. Any discussions regarding a change in the number of UCP portfolios in the composite ministry could wait until his return, probably in September, as could the budget. Argyle saw Labor’s offer as simply one of ‘displacement’ of his government with Labor courting a new partner: ‘how he detested the UCP, now he professes love and has proposed.’²⁷

The treasurer of the UCP Federal Council, L D A Stahle, was quick to comment on the re-election of the composite ministry, pointing out that after this election any party needed the cooperation of another to form government:

²³ A A Calwell, *Be Just and Fear Not*, Lloyd O’Neil, Melbourne, 1972, pp. 40-1

²⁴ Costar, ‘Albert Dunstan’, p. 218

²⁵ *Labor Call*, 7 March 1935

²⁶ *Age*, 7 March 1935

²⁷ *ibid.*

The UCP can take a stand with either Labor or the UAP or witness a series of farcical week-end cabinets of the continental type! ... We can do more in government than by sitting on the fence and diminish the charge of parochialism ... a good workable government could be based on UCP, UAP and independent members [whereas] Labor will not support a composite ministry for selfish and sectional reasons.²⁸

Reflecting the split in the Central Council, two days later putting the radical faction's views, Mr Reseigh the vice president, active in the Mallee, joined the fray, arguing for an end to a composite cabinet and to consider Labor's offer:

Our policies received no respect from Argyle, and nothing was done even though the situation was urgent. We need to consider alternative tactics, including Labor's offer. Our UCP MPs now have the opportunity of their lives to work in amity with the Central Council and members of the rank and file on national policies of rehabilitation and re-employment.²⁹

A few days later he would press further: 'The UCP is only an appendage of the UAP – this 'composition' is a continual problem in our party since its conception – the UAP are opponents of country interests.'³⁰

While the party membership displayed the big split in their ranks on the issue, Bouchier and Dunstan remained fairly quiet, obviously testing the waters as it was announced that they would compete for the leadership of the parliamentary party.³¹

During these early days of the post-election period, the city newspapers were very much of the same opinion – steady as she goes and continuation of the composite government, although the *Age* was far more analytical and did question whether the Country Party would accept the status quo while the Premier was overseas unless they received a pre-departure assurance of extra cabinet members. It also reported that there had been a reconciliation between the rival factions in the UCP. It was expected that Bouchier would take part in a composite government provided that it had adequate representation

²⁸ *Age*, 6 March 1935

²⁹ *ibid.*, 8 March 1935

³⁰ *Argus*, 11 March 1935

³¹ *Age*, 8 March 1935

to enable it to put its policy into effect.³² When Tunnecliffe's offer was made public the *Age* changed tack slightly predicting that if the UCP did not get its minimum of five portfolios it might opt to leave the composite ministry and sit on the cross-benches.³³ When further counting confirmed the UCP gains the *Age* shifted again and acknowledged the sharp division of opinion among parliamentary members about the composite ministry and the strong opinion in the Central Council for withdrawal. It then canvassed the possibility of the three existing UCP ministers putting their resignations on the table subject to a decision by Central Council in April following the Conference in Ballarat. Then, reporting Bouchier's statement that his party welcomed *all* help to put UCP policy into effect, the *Age* interpreted this as an 'equivocal, enigmatic response' to Labor's offer and that a UCP government was 'no longer remote.'³⁴

In an article, which it later claimed was based on exclusive inside information, *Truth* predicted that the internecine disputes in the UCP might be resolved if it formed a government on its own. Certain discussions suggested that if the UCP did not get UAP concessions on rural relief then the Governor might send for Bouchier to form a government based on Labor's support of its program on unemployment and restoration of wages. Most prophetic was *Truth's* conclusion:

once having got itself formed, a skilfully led UCP government would get a long run of life because only a fusion between the ALP and the UAP could bring it down. The Country Party realises that failure on behalf of the UAP to deliver was due to the Young Nationalists, who if a Country Party government is formed would be left gnashing their teeth. Talks between the UCP and the UAP over the coming weeks will be undertaken in earnest but may not prove as easy as many appear to think.³⁵

It was almost a week after the election that the next issue of the *Countryman* (of which Hocking was chairman) appeared. It explored the options open to the UCP with the new electoral shares of each party. Would it be the kite-flying of the metropolitan press – a composite government with the UAP but with greater representation in cabinet, in the corner, or complete independence, a position backed by Central Council? Then it

³² *ibid.*, 6 March 1935

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*, 8 March 1935

³⁵ *Truth*, 9 March 1935

proposed the third option – to accept the offer of Labor’s leader to form a Labor-supported minority UCP government. This would mean unqualified support to enable the UCP to implement abolition of the dole, rural rehabilitation and restoration of workers to award wages. The *Countryman* reflected general party opinion when it questioned the sincerity of Tunnecliffe’s surprise offer as he himself had targeted the UCP with vitriolic abuse in the previous campaign and during this election.³⁶ The *Countryman* thought no-one would be more embarrassed than Tunnecliffe should the UCP accept his offer but this was unlikely as it was generally considered to have too many pitfalls.³⁷

This issue of the *Countryman* also gave its general account on the election, proudly reporting that the UCP now had its highest ever parliamentary representation of 20, the new members being Henry Bailey, Finlay Cameron, Hamilton Lamb and Alexander McDonald, adding that the only sitting member to lose was Marcus Wettenhall. Inside the Country Party the debate over measures and men continued. Wettenhall’s supporters were still angry, one complaining that:

the application of ‘United’ in the name of the Country Party was a mere travesty of the word following the contested election in Lowan. Victoria had lost one of its greatest statesmen, Mr M E Wettenhall, and no credit was due to Mr Lamb for having gained the Lowan seat.

Another said if Wettenhall had been more amenable to sectional interests he may have won but he was a man of principle, adding that the statement that a member should live in his electorate was too ridiculous for any person to entertain, as Wettenhall had traversed his electorate often but his duties required him to live in Melbourne: ‘Many of us feel like resigning from the Country Party.’³⁸ Would they carry out their threat? If they stayed would they cause internal disharmony or would future events ease their concerns as they adjusted to the political game?

It would not be revealed for many years that the catalyst behind the Labor Party offer was Arthur Calwell when he later claimed (boasted?) that the idea was ‘his and his

³⁶ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 47

³⁷ *Countryman*, 8 March 1935

³⁸ *ibid.*

alone.’ In 1935 he was president of the Victorian branch of the ALP and says that nobody else had thought of it although, as mentioned earlier, the idea had been debated within the Country Party and it is unlikely that the ears of the Labor Party had not picked up those discussions. On reflection his claim is somewhat ‘unpersuasive.’³⁹ It is more likely that it was his idea to initiate action to implement the proposal. He went to work on it immediately, sounding out the idea with Jack Holland the Labor member for Flemington who was neither for nor against it. Regardless of that response he went straight to John Wren who enthusiastically embraced the idea indicating that he would see to it that the votes were there in the Labor Party if Dunstan was willing to take up the offer.⁴⁰ Tunnecliffe, widely regarded as ‘a Wren man,’⁴¹ immediately acquiesced. At the outset there was opposition within Labor’s ranks to the alliance, particularly from Ted Cotter, the member for Richmond, a survivor thanks to Wren’s assistance in a recent bitter preselection contest. John Cain, the deputy leader who did not depend upon Wren’s influence, saw the deal as a complete betrayal of all their principles.⁴² Also *Labor Call* was not a supporter of the proposal. It thundered that if the coalition continued there would be defections from both sides and probably an early election from which Labor could benefit. Was the UCP a suitable partner when it needed a change in mental outlook? The obstacle was the innate selfishness and narrow parochial sectional outlook of the farmers and they were a barrier to a more equitable redistribution of electoral boundaries which could only hurt the UCP. So, it concluded, ‘Labor has little to gain from coquetting with the UCP.’⁴³

Wren was also close to Albert Dunstan and undoubtedly could have acted as a broker between the parties. Tactics included anticipating such moves as a possible change in leadership of the UCP, the numbers to effect the break with the composite government and a back-up plan to ensure Dunstan was not compromised if the ‘plot’ collapsed. Wren had played this game before with Dunstan by backing his breakaway CPP in the 1920s and had given financial assistance to several Country Party members. He had brokered the deal which saw the Hogan Labor government take office in 1927, relying

³⁹ Costar, ‘Albert Dunstan’, p. 218

⁴⁰ Calwell, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-1

⁴¹ K White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor 1917-1957*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1982, p. 76

⁴² F W Eggleston, Confidential notes: The Victorian parliament as I knew it, Australian National University Library, Canberra, p. 16

⁴³ *Labor Call*, 14 March 1935

on the precarious support of the CPP and independent Liberals. Hogan had sought financial support and advice from ‘the Old Man’ and allegedly even consulted him before finalising his first ministry.⁴⁴

Calwell might well claim the idea as ‘his and his alone’ but history proves the adage that ‘there is nothing new under the sun.’ What does seem fantastic is that one man could engineer an alliance between two ideologically incompatible parties (on more than one occasion) and that it should last for so many years.⁴⁵ There is also a sense of surrealism when it is acknowledged that the main ‘signatories to the contract’ were personal political opponents, Dunstan having narrowly defeated Tunnecliffe for the seat of Eaglehawk in 1920. That Wren was able to assure Dunstan of Labor support ‘proved’ to his enemies, such as Eggleston of the UAP, his complete control of the Labor Party and that he had increased this power by this signal assistance to the Country Party.⁴⁶ Putting Eggleston’s bias to one side and allowing for exaggeration of Wren’s influence, the historic event shows that an alliance is more often built on confronting a common enemy than on a commonality of objectives.

Success would require keeping Bouchier and Hocking out of the loop for a while as Hocking had on more than one occasion indicated his distaste for the Dunstan-Wren association. At the same time Dunstan, while keeping quiet his own involvement and knowledge of the scheming, would employ Hocking’s enthusiasm for an end to the composite ministry and the opportunity to either sit on the cross-benches or, now the offer was out in the open, to form a minority government. The *Countryman* and many others in the Country Party, however, were suspicious of the offer from a former enemy, asking what Labor expected in return for its support.

Vestiges of Dunstan’s open and opportunistic thinking regarding minority governments can be seen in his re-election speech at a civic dinner, held before the election as he had been unopposed, when he asserted ‘it was essential in times like the present that there should be the fullest cooperation to obtain the most beneficial results.’ Yet three years earlier he had said it was beyond the capacity of one party to bring about the

⁴⁴ White, *John Cain*, p. 55

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 76

⁴⁶ Eggleston, Confidential notes, p. 16

rehabilitation of the country: ‘Although it was easy to sit cowardly in the corner and criticise, one must give the Ship of State a helping hand to steer it to safety.’⁴⁷

Generally the Country Party MPs felt restrained from commenting publicly on Tunnecliffe’s offer, but former CPP member Albert Allnutt was not as reticent, threatening to break away from the party if it continued in office with the UAP without Central Council endorsement. If it did so he would sit in the corner with possibly three other members taking an independent stand.⁴⁸

The UAP was set to meet on Tuesday 12 March to elect their leaders and to clip the wings of the Young Nationalists as that group dominated the conservative thinking of the UAP⁴⁹ and further alienated the radical wing of the UCP. The parliamentary party had to decide how to keep the UCP within the coalition, probably through increased cabinet representation. The cabinet itself was meeting on Wednesday but little was expected to happen until after the UCP parliamentary party met the following day to elect their leaders and finalise their demands for cabinet positions and policies within a composite government. The sequential timing of these meetings proved to be crucial.

Rather than being marginalised, the Young Nationalists strengthened their hold with Kent Hughes being elected deputy leader, displacing Ian Macfarlan by a big margin. Kent Hughes opposed any increase in UCP representation in cabinet and his elevation would only serve to further antagonise the radicals in the UCP. The meeting decided that negotiations with the UCP were to be left to Premier Argyle and it was unlikely he would go beyond four ministries for the UCP including one of honorary minister.⁵⁰

Those new to the parliamentary scene would have depended greatly on others for advice, even instructions, such as Hamilton Lamb whose election had been chiefly organised by Hocking.⁵¹ To a degree he owed Hocking a certain loyalty. His opposition to composite governments put him among the radicals. Lamb also was an idealist – delivering the policy of the rank and file expressed through freedom from a restrictive

⁴⁷ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 15 February 1935

⁴⁸ *Argus*, 9 March 1935

⁴⁹ *Age*, 9 March 1935

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 13 March 1935

⁵¹ Paul, *The premierships of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 225

and sometimes antagonistic composite government was paramount to him. On the morning of the first UCP parliamentary party meeting the newspapers wrote that it was expected that the radicals would be overwhelmed by the moderates but that the radical Central Council would enforce the constitution rules. This referred to the requirement that termination of any coalition arrangement required a two-thirds majority of Central Council and the parliamentary party taken together. The moderates argued that for many reasons Council would fall into line but warned that ‘the United Country Party is on the brink of a disturbance’ and that a breakaway group of at least three would sit in the corner if the composite government continued.⁵² The *Age* also carried a timely report of Tunnecliffe’s public statement at the declaration of the Collingwood poll the previous day when he repeated that the UCP and Labor had identical policies on unemployment and rural relief and that he had offered to support that party in parliament.⁵³

The slight alteration in the balance of forces within the UCP parliamentary party with its attendant swing towards radicalism was an important contribution to the events at the meeting. Hamilton Lamb who had campaigned according to the Central Council line had replaced Wettenhall, a stout supporter of the Argyle government and composite ministries, while H S Bailey, a former Labor member, had regained his seat of Warrnambool after Central Council, on Hocking’s recommendation, had endorsed him following his expulsion by Labor over his support for the Premiers’ Plan.⁵⁴ The untested Alexander McDonald who had won the seat of Stawell and Ararat from the UAP was another newcomer.

Bourchier opened the meeting at 10.30 am and commenced proceedings by reading two letters, one from Central Council urging the parliamentary party to be separate from the UAP, the other Tunnecliffe’s formal offer of support on the condition that the Argyle government be defeated. The Council letter allegedly was a ‘set up’ and was in response to an unnamed MP seeking clarification of the requirements of a composite ministry.⁵⁵ It was then decided to delay the elections for the leadership and the other party positions until after the general discussion on composite ministries.⁵⁶

⁵² *Age*, 14 March 1935

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 50

⁵⁵ *Age*, 15 March 1935

⁵⁶ *Countryman*, 15 March 1935

The meeting discussed at length Council's letter and whether the ruling of a 66 per cent approval of Central Council was required to join a new composite government.

Ultimately the moderates won the debate when they pointed out that as Argyle had not received a new commission there was no need for Council permission to continue in the coalition with the present UCP ministers.⁵⁷ An official communique on the decision was carefully worded stating that joining a composite (or national) ministry *to a further degree* (my emphasis) was constitutionally barred, so no action could be taken at this stage until a conference was arranged between Central Council and the parliamentary party to discuss the question.⁵⁸ As a result the current arrangement would continue until then. The statement did not refer to the Tunnecliffe offer and it may not have been formally considered but it was undoubtedly crucial to the discussions on that day. It would have suited Dunstan to keep the matter quiet so that he would not have his options compromised.

The meeting then conducted the ballot for the leadership. Bouchier's colourless and uninspiring leadership and his opportunities to display his abilities hampered somewhat by not being in cabinet did not assist his candidature which was backed by the conservative element. Dunstan had approached Hocking before the meeting for support which was given only because he was the least worst choice of the two candidates and despite his equivocal position on the central issue of composite governments. He had to be careful as it was unlikely that anyone who openly opposed composite governments would have attracted votes from the conservative bloc. Moreover, Hocking accepted that only two of those present from the Assembly, Dunstan and Allan, were holding portfolios which gave them status in dealing with the UAP. Cleverly, Dunstan, to lock in the radicals, was proposed and seconded by Bussau and Allnut, two of their number. Reportedly the election for the leadership was lively, with open hostility towards those who had not signed the pledge such as Harris.⁵⁹

Dunstan won the leadership ballot by the smallest of margins, 13:11, as all members of both houses voted. Lamb replacing Wettenhall had been crucial to his victory. Bouchier was elected deputy leader, effectively a reversal of their former positions.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Age*, 15 March 1935

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

Bourchier was most disappointed. A few days earlier the *Age* had boosted his expectations when it predicted he was likely to win as he had led the party to increased numbers and that Dunstan was likely to contest the seat of Bendigo when the federal redistribution was completed and the next election called.⁶⁰ After the leadership poll, Bourchier openly expressed his disbelief:

it was remarkable that a leader should be deposed after having led the party to a substantial victory in an election and during the course of his two years at the helm increased the number of UCP MPs from 15 to 20.⁶¹

Mackrell was re-elected party secretary and Old, who had just held on to his seat, defeating his independent opponent only on final absentee votes, was elected party whip. These four would form the parliamentary party executive.

Next day, Friday 15 March (the Ides of March), Dunstan accepted the deputy leadership from Argyle, an action which staggered many and angered some UCP MPs given the discussions at their meeting the previous day. For Labor, Dunstan's acceptance indicated to them that the UCP would reject their offer:

We predict an 'honourable' compromise will be arrived at ... and the UCP will be absorbed and the farmers lose out. Even if Central Council and the parliamentary party did agree to withdraw from the Coalition we would expect Dunstan to abide but Allan and Goudie to remain at Argyle's invitation.⁶²

Dunstan was quick to explain that no special significance could be attached to his appointment; he was still a member of the ministry and had simply accepted his promotion. He had clearly told the Premier that his acceptance had not committed his party to a new government to any further degree. The Premier indicated he would complete the ministry over the weekend and pursue the people's mandate to carry on.⁶³

Dunstan was clearly keeping his options open on his own behalf and that of his party and was in no haste for a combined meeting of the Central Council and the parliamentary party to take place, perhaps trying to delay it until the Ballarat Conference in three weeks time. The number crunching, if a special meeting did take place, was already being done with speculation that on the Central Council 14 of the 19

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 12 March 1935

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 15 March 1935

⁶² *Labor Call*, 21 March 1935

⁶³ *Age*, 16 March 1935

were reformers as were eight of the parliamentary party giving them a slender majority of 22 out of 42, but it was likely that the reformers would not request withdrawal from the ministry but refer the issue to the Conference.⁶⁴ Behind the scenes Hocking was determined to overcome Dunstan's stalling and after repeated efforts to contact him finally succeeded and urged him to call his party to an urgent meeting. Dunstan tried to cool matters by pointing out that parliament was meeting the following week and some members had prior engagements in their electorates such as the declaration of the polls. Undeterred, Hocking invoked the authority of president, contacted all the members and was assured that should a meeting be called they would be present. Dunstan responded that he remained reluctant as it might lead to failure if rushed. Hocking countered this by arguing that Central Council had the power to call such a meeting and was already exercising that by telegramming all MPs and Central Council members summoning them to a meeting on Tuesday 19 March.⁶⁵

The motives behind the different approaches reflected Dunstan's personal and political ambitions and Hocking's desire to preserve party unity while hopefully heading into a minority government. The interchanges were also competition between two powerful political players. If parliament met first it would be far less likely for MPs to cooperate with Central Council to gain the necessary majority to terminate the coalition, as the continuing composite government with the associated prestige of office and three ministers in place would have strengthened the stand of the anti-Labor MPs. To them crossing the floor while in a composite government could appear treacherous. Furthermore, the radical members in the party would most likely 'sit in the corner' and split from the parent body forming a rival organisation as Dunstan had in the 1920s. Argyle too was anxious over the likelihood of an early combined UCP Council and parliamentary party meeting predicting that the outcome would be UCP withdrawal from the ministry. This belief was underlined by Dunstan's acceptance of the deputy leadership and by the UCP MLC George Tuckett's deferral in accepting an honorary ministry. Accordingly, on hearing that the meeting would be held, the Premier did not fill all cabinet vacancies and decided to wait until after the UCP meeting.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 53

⁶⁶ *Age*, 18 March 1935

The combined UCP meeting opened at 11 am. While the atmosphere was tense, practicality over-rode bitterness and the leaders of both sections gave vigorous addresses, the objective being the necessity to decide in the best interests of the party. Dunstan remained non-committal allowing Goudie and Allan to put the case for continuation of the tie with the UAP. When questioned about the possibility of increased numbers in the ministry, Dunstan reported that Argyle had only promised an extra honorary position. Those present thought the ministry should be on an equally shared basis as their party had made several gains at the expense of the UAP since the last election. On being criticised for accepting the deputy premiership, Dunstan repeated that no significance should be attached to this and promised to abide loyally by the Conference decision.⁶⁷ The moderates supported the ministers pointing out the two parties had campaigned on the same platform and that it might be difficult to form a ministry from the smallest party in the house. A further danger was that any support from city interests might dry up in favour of the UAP. The reformers countered this saying the Country Party had gone to the people on a distinct rural policy and that the UAP would come to the rescue in times of difficulty as that party, fearing further losses, did not wish to face another election.⁶⁸ The debate concentrated on achieving measures but it was men who were to gain or lose most.

Dunstan and the two ministers left for a cabinet meeting during the talks and returned around 4 pm. At the cabinet meeting Dunstan advised Argyle of the possibility of holding the status quo if the Premier could give an assurance that the UAP would concede 50:50 representation in the ministry.⁶⁹ The Premier replied that he could not personally give such an assurance without fully consulting his party despite knowing the fate of his ministry was in the balance. Dunstan reported to his combined meeting in general terms but did not mention that Argyle had undertaken to explore his demand for a 50:50 partnership, preferring to urge those present to take a definite line of action and not side-track the issue.

When they broke for dinner at 6 pm only a few had spoken in support of the pro-composite line and the mood was slightly in favour of withdrawal especially when it

⁶⁷ *Countryman*, 22 March 1935

⁶⁸ *Age*, 20 March 1935

⁶⁹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 1935, p. 41

appeared from Dunstan's report that it was most unlikely they could increase their numbers in the current composite ministry. Over dinner those numbers strengthened before a secret ballot was taken at 9.45 pm on the motion moved by Bussau of the parliamentary party and Kelly of the Central Council 'that the present association of the United Country Party with the Argyle ministry be terminated.'⁷⁰ It was passed 27:14.

By 10 pm it was all over. Those present had participated in the most momentous and far-reaching decision ever made by a CP gathering,⁷¹ a decision that would lead to the installation of the first Country Party government in Australia's history. Dunstan's election to the leadership would not have occurred if Hocking had not engineered Wettenhall's defeat by an anti-coalitionist. Also with Bouchier still 'at the helm' the initial narrow majority for the vote on the future of the composite government may not have translated into the final outcome. After the meeting Hocking reported the decision and explained there was no provision for review and that the parliamentary party had accepted that decision. He acknowledged that this meant the forming of a UCP government. The Country Party's withdrawal caused a minor sensation since few ordinary newspaper readers seemed aware of the precarious footing on which the UAP-UCP alignment had stood.⁷²

The next day the parliamentary party reconvened and met several times discussing tactics, agreeing by a majority of two (the same majority by which Dunstan had gained the leadership) to immediately put forward a notice of no-confidence for the opening day of the parliamentary session next week. Early action would curtail debate on the re-jigged Governor's speech as soon as possible. Labor would second the motion consolidating its support. Afterwards Dunstan and the other two UCP ministers tendered their resignations while Tuckett formally refused the offer of an honorary ministry. Now that the momentous decision was made momentum had to be maintained to put it into practice. Those in the federal Country Party were not so enthusiastic. Paterson said the decision was 'regrettable' and he doubted that the Ballarat Conference would endorse it. This invited a response from Hocking that such condemnation was an

⁷⁰ *Countryman*, 22 March 1935

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 56

unwarranted reflection on the whole Victorian organisation.⁷³ This bitterness between the federal and state levels of the party would simmer and occasionally boil over for many years.

The Labor caucus also met that same day and, while critical of Tunnecliffe that he had not consulted the party, gave their support as they recognised it was the only way they could achieve some of their policies. Some even hoped that that the UAP in an act of deathbed repentance might join with the ALP in an electoral redistribution as a counter-measure.⁷⁴ Others predicted that an ‘honourable compromise’ would be arrived at between the conservatives because the UCP was controlled by men whose economic interests were diametrically opposed to those of the workers. Perhaps some UCP MPs such as Allan and Goudie might opt to remain with the Argyle government and later join the UAP if withdrawal went ahead, weakening the new minority government.⁷⁵ Later they would learn that these two men would remain loyal to the UCP.

Argyle was forced to make a hasty reconstruction of his now doomed cabinet and to rewrite the Governor’s speech. On reflection he would have regretted his incapacity to personally guarantee Dunstan a 50:50 cabinet for then the UCP’s decision ‘may have been of a different nature.’⁷⁶ The Young Nationalists were furious. Kent Hughes indirectly alluded to the UCP’s lack of talent to form a ministry alone and bemoaned the perfidy of a party that went with them to the polls and now would be dictated to by an outside body: ‘Never before in the history of parliament had members of a ministry been told to withdraw from a government by an outside conference. Hopefully they will withdraw that decision.’⁷⁷ The UAP’s claim to be free from outside influence was challenged as hypocritical by Labor:

Argyle will not be ‘free’ to choose his own Cabinet – we will see another ‘Shandygaff’ government as powers elsewhere shape a do-nothing ministry. Perhaps we need more committees to oversee legislation.⁷⁸

⁷³ *Countryman*, 22 March 1935

⁷⁴ *Age*, 21 March 1935

⁷⁵ *Labor Call*, 21 March 1935

⁷⁶ *Countryman*, 22 March 1935

⁷⁷ *Age*, 21 March 1935

⁷⁸ *Labor Call*, 16 March 1935

It would have been embarrassing then for Labor to acknowledge that another outside body, the Trades Hall Council, exerted similar powerful influence over its own MPs as allegedly did John Wren.

Contrary to the prediction of longevity for a UCP minority government predicted by *Truth*, the Murdoch *Herald* was angry, lambasting it in its editorial:

by combining with Labor whose socialisation and general political principles rural interests hold anathema ... it will be subject to Labor's permission and direction ... It might form a stop-gap government holding a weak pretence of power instead of reality.

It accused the breakaways of seeking personal political advantage and sacrificing policy for the price of a portfolio.⁷⁹ The next day after the decision of the UCP meeting the *Herald* carried a cartoon subtitled 'Beware the Ides of March' with Caesar (UAP) alongside Dunstan and Central Council approaching the parliament (the rotunda) with an accompanying article questioning what common political interest the ALP and UCP could possibly agree on given their opposing stances to date on road transport, government spending and taxation. The article concluded that a minority government playing one side off against another was not practical politics.⁸⁰

An opening of parliament is a mixture of ceremony and business. First, the elected members in their respective chambers were sworn in, the oath being administered by Justice Mann of the Supreme Court. The Assembly re-elected the Speaker, William Everard, then enjoyed a long lunch break before joining with the Legislative Council for the reading of the Governor's Speech. Lord Huntingfield – His Excellency Captain The Right Honourable William Charles Arcedeckne Vanneck Baron Huntingfield KCMG – had been very formal when meeting the members of the two chambers. Such ceremonies had their place and the Victorian parliament, as with all the colonies, had imported many of the practices of Westminster. The British government retained ultimate control over who was appointed as a Governor and the appointee was always

⁷⁹ *Herald*, 19 March 1935

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 20 March 1935

from the United Kingdom.⁸¹ Most states for some time had wanted to follow the Canadian practice and have one of their own appointed but the Crown would not agree until all the states agreed. The most recent attempt had been in 1925 but the odd one out was Victoria.⁸²

Between the official opening and the resumption of parliament a week later the public bickering among MPs continued. Allan indicated he would not be seeking a place in any UCP ministry. He had tried to prevent the breakaway happening declaring the UCP had swung away from conservatism which was natural for the land-holder and predicted that given a year they might be back as ‘there was a lot of bogholes on the road it has to track.’⁸³ The independents Bond, Hogan and McLachlan pledged their support to a Dunstan ministry, Hogan criticising Argyle for holding the election ‘three months early then wanting another – no way!’⁸⁴

The Labor caucus met and with some reluctance voted 14:4 to support the UCP no-confidence motion, the conditions being the abolition of the dole for the provision of full-time work. This was based on a recommendation from the Victorian ALP to demand full-time award rates for the unemployed and concurrently increase sustenance. The four who voted against the deal had argued that, like a Labor government, a UCP one would be hampered by financial institutions which were the real controllers, not a parliamentary government.⁸⁵ After the meeting, Dunstan met with the caucus executive to cement the arrangement and secure an immediate seconding for the motion. Asked how long Labor would support a UCP government, Tunnecliffe replied:

that it would last forever if it brings down legislation which is in the interests of the people as a whole instead of pursuing the interests of high finance regardless of the welfare of the people.⁸⁶

The UCP parliamentary party met and adopted Labor caucus rules of electing their own ministry by secret ballot as had been done in the Allan-Peacock government. Dunstan

⁸¹ A Twomey, *The Chameleon Crown: The Queen and Her Australian Governors*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 28

⁸² *ibid.*, p. 30

⁸³ *Age*, 25 March 1935

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Labor Call*, 4 April 1935

⁸⁶ *Herald*, 27 March 1935

would remain free to allocate the portfolios.⁸⁷ They then joined with the Labor caucus until five minutes before the house met to fully acknowledge their joint commitment. This was the first time many of the UCP members had mixed with Labor MPs at such close quarters. Lamb was later interviewed by the *Argus* about the arrangement, commenting that ‘The recent election had shown increased confidence in the UCP and that the onus of stable government would be on the other parties.’⁸⁸

On the conservative side Argyle had not given up yet and played his last card by getting his new cabinet to belatedly adopt a six-month full-time work policy. As Labor observed, suddenly it seemed that the essential Premiers’ Plan was not ‘inviolable’ and a range of policies were to be subsumed by the UAP.⁸⁹

The *Herald*, somewhat out of character, had become more interested in state politics and the day parliament resumed carried a picture of Dunstan with two newly elected UCP members, Bailey and Lamb, on the front steps of parliament with an accompanying article on the ‘expected new premier.’⁹⁰ As soon as practicable Dunstan moved the no-confidence motion, simply stated: ‘That the government does not possess the confidence of the House.’⁹¹ Strangely, it was John Cain who seconded the motion for the ALP rather than his leader, for Cain and several of his colleagues had opposed the alliance in the party room ‘as a complete betrayal of all their principles.’⁹²

The debate itself exposed the changing relationships between the three parties that saw a conservative coalition replaced by a minority government supported by Labor. In many ways it was a major upheaval in Victorian politics and MPs witnessed the unusual spectacle of hundreds of people in the public galleries, largely of the working class, crowding in and clamouring for admittance to hear the debate. The cross-fencing between members and uproar at times in the chamber was highly entertaining and amusing to the big crowd⁹³ who had come to see the Argyle government defeated.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Argus*, 27 March 1935

⁸⁹ *Labor Call*, 28 March 1935

⁹⁰ *Herald*, 26 March 1935

⁹¹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 27 March 1935, p. 41

⁹² Eggleston, Confidential notes, p. 16

⁹³ *Countryman*, 29 March 1935

Albert Dunstan, barely able to disguise the fact he was virtually Premier-elect, presented the case for replacing the Argyle government in a speech of restrained opportunism based 'on the will of the people' who had voted on similar but different election policies and who held in the country and in the workingmen's suburbs a hatred for the Young Nationalists best represented in the past by Menzies and still by Kent Hughes. He took the high ground arguing that he had the numbers, albeit the smallest in the house, because the people had spoken and 'any government exists only as a result of a decision by the electors and of the will of this House.' The 1932 election of the Argyle government had been 'only a temporary victory' demonstrated when a series of seats since then had transferred from the UAP to the UCP showing that the 'electors had recently pronounced judgment of a very unfavourable character regarding the party at present occupying the Treasury Benches.'⁹⁴ Dunstan displayed a high degree of political gymnastics when he explained that he had 'stood on two platforms ... but one cannot be in two parties.'⁹⁵ But then, as his academic biographer notes:

any man with a spark of integrity would have blanched at the thought of smashing a government whose policies he had constantly supported as a minister both in parliament and a month earlier in the electorate.⁹⁶

Probably Dunstan had been most honest when he stated the obvious: 'We are living today under the party system and it is only natural that any party will take advantage of the superiority of numbers.'⁹⁷

Dunstan could not pass up the opportunity to paint a dishonourable image of Argyle by claiming that various threats had been reported to bring the UCP back to reason and into coalition. He pointed to two recent statements in the press threatening a distribution of seats on the basis of 'one vote one value' and the possibility of an early election. Dunstan knew the threats were hollow as any such redistribution required Labor support. He ridiculed a third threat that 'in the event of the present government being defeated there would be a collapse of wheat prices.'⁹⁸ Finally and probably reluctantly, but at the urging of Labor's and the Progressives' expectations, Dunstan had turned at last to issues, to the several important and interwoven matters of unemployment and a

⁹⁴ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 27 March 1935, p. 29

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 30

⁹⁶ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 58

⁹⁷ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 27 March 1935, p. 30

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 35

government expanded works program, rural relief and a debt adjustment scheme. The 'Premier-elect' seemed to lack the passion on these matters that he had held when leading the CPP and denied himself on this occasion the opportunity to be quite radical. He would have been somewhat comforted by the thought that at least being in government rather than on the cross-benches or in coalition was now a chance to lead and get things done rather than simply to follow.

Argyle was first to reply in the debate. His delivery showed it was obvious that he was shaken and angry, felt betrayed, but hoping against all hope that matters might swing around at the last minute and 'reason prevail' restoring the natural order of things, himself as Premier and the conservatives to government. Argyle's contribution was seen as bitter, at times couched in the most extravagant and intemperate language.⁹⁹ Predictably he began by arguing that the UCP had been treacherous, illustrated when Dunstan had demanded that the pronoun 'I' be changed to 'the government' in the campaign policy speech so as to be inclusive rather than represent the UAP alone. Argyle then explored the 'conspiracy' behind the undoing of his government, blaming the deal between Labor and the UCP upon Dunstan and outsiders – the UCP executive and in particular upon the shoulders of Hocking 'who has a lot to say as to who will be in parliament as far as the Country Party is concerned.'¹⁰⁰

Argyle returned to the charge of perfidy pointing out that the new leader of the UCP had accepted the deputy premiership from him for the period Argyle would be overseas to attend the Congress of the Empire Parliamentary Association and to celebrate the anniversary of King George's ascension to the throne. He could not understand Dunstan accepting the deputy premiership and all the time helping to destroy the government.¹⁰¹

Knowing he was beaten, the Premier in conclusion repeated his party's position:

there is no possibility of an alliance between our party and Labor ... it has always been and is still ready to cooperate with the United Country Party in governing the State.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ *Countryman*, 29 March 1935

¹⁰⁰ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 27 March 1935, p. 44

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 41

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 52

He could have added that while Allan could be his deputy in such a government there would be no place for Dunstan and his supporters for he followed up that invitation with:

when I find a party in alliance with its political enemies for the destruction of its friends there is nothing for me to do but to fight that party and I am going to fight it – it will be war to the knife.¹⁰³

Lasting two hours, Argyle's speech would be the longest in the debate and delay the evening meal break until 6.30. Cain proved to be his usual moderate self and his delivery measured. With little baiting or harangue he concentrated on policy and the arrangements with the Country Party. For Cain the root cause of the differences between the UAP and Labor had been the Premiers' Plan and the rejection of Labor's alternatives which now had been belatedly and partly adopted by the UCP when the Premier saw 'office slipping from him ... and that he might again become the humble member for Toorak.'¹⁰⁴ Calling on moral superiority to explain the most unusual party relationship in the offing Cain claimed his party's unwavering stance on behalf of the poorer and working community had been justified and added that his party:

would continue to do the best for the community irrespective of whether the people voted for us or not ... I say our policy of divide and conquer is right ... I am offering no alliance ... we occupy today a position such as was occupied by the Leader of the Labor Party in the commonwealth parliament in 1908 and 1909 when our party exacted from a Tory government the Old Age Pension system which is in operation today.¹⁰⁵

Cain repeated that Labor's support was subject to the UCP delivering the goods.

Cain's speech had been short and to the point and when he sat down the vote could have been taken then and there for any further contribution would merely drag along and give members a further chance to vent their spleen. So it had turned out as members took the opportunity to express emotions and inner thoughts and more to square the ledger for the problems of the last five years or so than anything else. Certainly policies were mentioned, even explained, but used in the main to illustrate broken alliances and the

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 52

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 24

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 54

reason for new ones rather than their effect on the people's welfare. The UCP celebrated its newfound independence and freedom from playing second fiddle to the UAP. Repeatedly reference was made to the Premiers' Plan, the UAP asserting that it would never have got off the ground under Labor without their support when Labor split over it. The Premiers' Plan with its maintenance of high interest rates was central to all the differences across the spectrum. On the right the UAP was wedded to it. In the middle ground the UCP held varying opinions questioning its restrictions on creating credit and expansion to take up the slack yet acknowledging the conventional financial economics of balancing the budget. Labor had firstly split over the Plan but now any residual support was at best lukewarm. The question now was whether those progressives in the UCP, particularly those from the Wimmera and Mallee, would be strong enough to keep Dunstan on side and to honour the agreed Labor-UCP economic policies. It could well require a budget deficit, lower interest rates and expanded credit to deliver the programs of employment and rural relief. Would Dunstan embrace such an expansionary budget as being introduced elsewhere in the world?

The debate went on until late that night, the house not adjourning until 10.30. One of the late speakers had been Bouchier. He had stressed the oft repeated dictum 'if the primary producers are in a good financial position, then the city flourishes too' and emphasised the need for advancement on the 'two inter-related problems, rural rehabilitation and unemployment.'¹⁰⁶ Overall, Bouchier's contribution had been softened by being relieved of the leadership and essentially he stuck to his brief of distinguishing his speech at Shepparton from the Premier's at Malvern. He regretted his lost chance of being Premier himself, as it was by only a small margin, but the party changed leaders because they saw Bouchier as ineffective and not 100 per cent committed to falling out with the UAP.

Various excerpts from the debate summarise the positions adopted by and within the parties towards the Argyle government and the 'expected' Dunstan alternative. The progressives in the UCP from the north-west had held reservations about the coalition for some time. Bussau made this clear from the outset. He started by attacking the Young Nationalists who had crossed the floor to defeat their own party's Flour

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 58

Acquisition Bill, Grain Elevators Bill and Milk Board Bill because they said it regulated the free market for those products. He quoted Alfred Deakin who had once described the Young Nats as ‘like children dragged screaming from the tart shop.’¹⁰⁷

H S Bailey, the Member for Warrnambool, was referred to by the opposition as the baby of the Country Party because he had been only recently admitted. Was there any greater personal evidence of the strengthening link between Labor and the UCP than this former Labor MLA from western Victoria? Bailey acknowledged he had been successful because of Labor votes under the preferential system and he would honour that. In many ways Bailey appeared to strive for an ‘independent’ image rather than that of a party man and this could be due to the nature of his electorate. He had appealed to the small dairy farmers and townspeople in the Western District who had very much in common with the soldier settlers on their small blocks in the Mallee and on the need for a proper water supply from the Otway Ranges, a project dismissed by the Argyle government. Bailey, better than most, summarised the position in the parliament. It was all about numbers not morals. Relying on quotations from the *Age* he said that Dunstan could claim the right to govern even if the leader of the smallest party because he commanded the support of the majority in the Legislative Assembly. When Argyle interjected that the UCP had a majority based on seats not votes he responded saying was it not the Premier himself who as Chief Secretary had ‘bludgeoned through the House by the use of the Speaker’s casting vote a Bill which placed the constituencies in the position in which they are today.’¹⁰⁸

Albert Allnutt was even more outspoken. In his characteristically husky and slow voice, giving him the vocal appearance of a ‘country bumpkin,’ he proudly claimed to be one of those members accused by the UAP of having brought about the defeat of that government by a (revitalised) ‘Country Party under the control of an outside organisation assisted by certain members of the House,’ while denying that ‘the outside organisation which is the executive of the UCP dominated the position.’¹⁰⁹ He explained that the current organisation was the latest development of the Victorian Farmers’ Union started back in 1914 and which he had joined just two years later before he was

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 28 March 1935, p. 81

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 92

¹⁰⁹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 25 March 1935, p. 110

old enough to vote. In 1930 the party had extended membership to non-farmers including a number of metropolitan residents. This so-called 'outside' organisation carried on the original purpose of the VFU: to see that parliament was not controlled by a cabinet of 12 men, a system he considered most undemocratic, but that their elected representatives should be guided by the collective wisdom of many. During the last three years he and other members of his party in a minority objected to the system of weekly cabinet meetings held behind closed doors and then being expected to support their decisions. He had crossed the floor on occasions when he had been driven to it:

This democratically based 'outside' organisation lays down certain rules by which its representatives are to be guided under a Constitution which in many respects is on the same lines as the Labor Party ... and as long as I believe in the Constitution of the UCP, and see an ideal at which to aim, I shall abide by its decisions. This is my position today.¹¹⁰

It was well known that Allnutt wore his heart on his sleeve but it was most unusual for an MP to give a history lesson even if to justify his personal actions.

To emphasise the change in attitude by his party towards the coalition Allnutt said it had been determined by the voters in the electorates. Had he not in fact been faced by three pro-composite UCP candidates? Had not the successful candidates for Warrnambool and Ouyen also been opposed by UCP candidates? In Lowan the progressive candidate (Lamb) had defeated the former minister and pro-composite UCP member Marcus Wettenhall. The people had spoken. He appealed to idealism and individualism towards the end of his speech:

it was time to put an end to a system which encouraged members to take the line of least resistance. I realise the party system is well established and that we cannot get rid of it. The people are not interested enough in politics to change it. The only thing we can do is make the best of a bad job ... by having a third political unit in the House to hold the scales evenly. A UCP government supported by Labor is the only method of making the best of our party system. I have held these ideas ever since I have been a member of parliament.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 111

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 113

Feelings within the Labor Party were mixed. Not all members of the partner to the 'alliance' with the UCP had been enthusiastic about the arrangement. Education was one policy issue the parties held in common. W G McKenzie, the Labor MP from Wonthaggi, a coal mining area, said the scholarship system for secondary education would have been jeopardised if the 'progressives' in the UCP had not joined Labor to defeat the introduction of high school fees across the board. The aim of members of the Labor Party was to provide free education from the state school to the university.¹¹² Bill Slater, the Labor member for Dundas, attacked the government for its vendetta against the rebel Nationalist federal MPs who had opposed the Bruce-Page government's proposals to destroy the Commonwealth arbitration system. Slater's legal training moulded his case to show that the UAP was bound by 'the external, silent and secretive forces of wealth and privilege' just as rigidly as Labor and the UCP were bound even if no pledge was signed.¹¹³ He criticised the government's discrimination between the benefits for the town and country unemployed 'because living in the country was cheaper.' Turning to rural debts Slater said he believed it was necessary to follow the Roosevelt scheme in the United States which while it may be inflationary had stabilised prices and unemployed labour had been re-absorbed in industry, thus giving people effective purchasing power. An expansionary budget would be supported by Labor if the Dunstan government would run with it.¹¹⁴

Another Labor Member, J L Murphy from the working-class electorate of Port Melbourne, emphasised that Labor and the UCP were united against a common enemy – the UAP which represented Capitalism – the banking institutions, the insurance companies and other great financial bodies 'who hold in the hollow of their hands the farming community of Victoria.' He explained that one of the principal reasons why the farmers were in their present situation was the lack of purchasing power on the part of the workers: 'I have no love for the UCP but they have discovered that the interests of the farming community and the workers are interwoven.'¹¹⁵

Jack Holland, the Labor member for Flemington, reflecting the lack of enthusiasm he had signalled to Calwell when approached with the idea of an alliance with the UCP,

¹¹² *ibid.*, pp. 78-9

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 87

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 89

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, 28 March 1935, p. 96

likened the split between the UCP and the UAP to a ‘lovers’ quarrel’ but was astute enough to ‘recognise that they will kiss and make up at some distant date.’¹¹⁶ He repeated Murphy’s argument about the shared interests between country and city workers and acknowledged that the Hogan Labor government had relied upon the four ‘country progressives’ to get any decent policy through on sustenance and interest reductions – even though they had been small improvements. Now it was, as Slater had suggested, time to follow the expansionist policies of Canada and the United States, even that of Lloyd George in the United Kingdom. He thundered that ‘every Depression, is in a sense a crisis of Capitalism’ and that ‘the necessity of government action is to prop up the sagging foundations of the economic order.’ He concluded that ‘the people do not want Socialism or Communism, they want jobs, any sort of job, any sort of income.’¹¹⁷

After lunch, the former Labor Premier George Prendergast, now backbench member for the western suburb of Footscray at the age of 81, concentrated almost entirely on broader economic issues, many of them federal concerns, and particularly on the reduced purchasing power of the people. Starting with a decline in export earnings as the prices of Australia’s principal exports – wool, wheat, meat and butter – had decreased enormously he added that the increase in state income tax through the removal of the thresholds for individuals on low incomes had hurt hardest the poorest without regard to any capacity to pay. Prendergast did explain that Australia’s overseas indebtedness to Britain was the main reason for the Premiers’ Plan and expressed incredulity that while:

we had sent 400,000 volunteers to the Great War to help Britain, of whom 60,000 had died, they now ‘conscripted’ our wealth and maintained high interest rates on that debt while these same English Shylocks reduced the interest rates on the debts owed by Italy and France and repudiated their own debt to the United States.

Differing free markets abroad and price controls at home had to be rationalised for ‘the conditions which obtain under the capitalist system are detrimental to the welfare of the community, and they must disappear.’¹¹⁸ At the back of his mind would have been some

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 100

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 107

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 122

pleasure at the opportunity to reciprocate the support that the CPP had given to his minority government in the 1920s even if he did not have absolute faith in the Dunstan government delivering a ‘progressive’ budget. Would the common enemy, the UAP, be sufficient to maintain the glue of the arrangement?

Another Labor speaker to share Holland’s scepticism about the ‘deal’ was Ted Cotter, who had been pressured by John Wren to support the strategy. He ridiculed the conservatives’ ‘temporary bust-up’ and predicted that before Christmas ‘everything in the garden will be lovely again.’ His faith in the UCP rebels was low and he anticipated that their Conference in Ballarat in the following week would find a different Country Party when it realised fully it was in government. To him the UCP stood for ‘poddy calves and potatoes’ and the average ‘cockie’ represented paddocks. There were only two parties in parliament – those for and against Labor. In a showdown he preferred the enemy he knew – the UAP. He vowed to support the new government only while it carried out its intentions.¹¹⁹

Lt. Col. George Knox took over the baton for the conservatives arguing the UCP, as the smallest party, was an intermediate party and could not carry on government. Goaded by a few interjections¹²⁰ to draw him out on the split between the UCP and the UAP he defined two areas where the UCP was as one with his party and could not work with Labor – transport and private enterprise. There was no man who stood more for the rights of ownership by private enterprise and of property, and no man who was more independent in his outlook than the primary producer.¹²¹

The crowded galleries would have been captivated by the differing styles during the long, drawn out debate. The battlers and trade unionists in the UCP and Labor Party did not bother too much with analogies, finer phrases or classical references like the better educated in the UAP such as the lawyers who always enjoyed an audience and a platform. The former cut to the quick and were straight to the point even if they were a little repetitive and long winded. Other speakers resorted to quoting long passages from

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 124

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 152

¹²¹ *ibid.*, p. 153

local and metropolitan newspapers as if they were sources of the gospel. Former Rhodes Scholar Wilfrid Kent Hughes, employed the apposite quotation when explaining that:

the premier's heated reaction when betrayed by his own deputy premier was understandable ... like *Byron's Eagle* brought down by an arrow on the shaft of which were the feathers of its own fledgling.

'Keen were his pangs, but keener far to feel
He nursed the pinion which impelled the steel.'¹²²

It was almost 11 o'clock when the debate concluded and the vote was taken – a combined vote for the UCP and Labor of 40 against the 23 for the UAP.¹²³ Dunstan and the UCP were headed for government – or were they? The coming week would be demanding. First, Dunstan had to convince the Governor that the smallest party forming a minority government could deliver stable government and a program supported by Labor. Second, it would be most interesting whether demands from the general membership could be put into practice and whether those demands would be moderated by MPs now charged with the responsibility of sole rather than shared government. On the Conference floor at Ballarat in a few days time would be men disgusted that the link with the UAP had been broken, others delighted that the common ground with Labor had been forged, while most would want just to get on with the job. Hopefully, achieving government would heal the rift between the warring factions.

A parliamentary vote on government is one thing, installation is another depending on the monarch or, in the colonies, on the Governor. The following day Argyle tendered his resignation to Lord Huntingfield. There had been much speculation on what he might advise the Governor. Would he recommend dissolution and another election or request time to re-form another composite government? This latter option would depend upon the Governor accepting his advice not to call upon Dunstan immediately as Argyle 'clung McCawber-like for another poll.'¹²⁴ Selectively using *Hansard* he tried to persuade Huntingfield that Labor had no alliance with the UCP (as claimed by Cain) and that stable government could only come about between the UCP and the UAP.¹²⁵ The Governor was in a difficult position as he listened to Argyle for he felt obliged to

¹²² *ibid.*, p. 138

¹²³ *ibid.*, p. 161

¹²⁴ *Labor Call*, 4 April 1935

¹²⁵ *Age*, 30 March 1935

consider all possibilities realising it was the smallest party in the house which was seeking government. Then he called for Dunstan and after an hour's discussions during which Dunstan pointed out that Labor parliamentary support had been unanimous. Further, there was no need to promise withdrawal from the composite arrangement as this had already been approved according to the party rules by the joint meeting of the Central Council and the UCP parliamentary party. The Governor would not give an immediate decision then recalled Dunstan for a further 45 minutes session at the end of which he told Dunstan he could not grant him a commission until he had further considered the position.¹²⁶ It appears that Huntingfield was so surprised by the turn of events that he waited for a few days before offering the commission to Dunstan.¹²⁷

Lord Huntingfield took his orders and advice from the Colonial Office in London and would have been a keen observer of how the British parliament dealt with similar situations. From July 1933, a Governor was provided with papers explaining his role and his relationship with the British government. It was the responsibility of the King on the advice of his United Kingdom ministers to be satisfied that state Governors were performing their duties in a constitutional manner, and on occasions to advise them.¹²⁸ The Crown saw the advantages of having Governors from 'home' as they were not generally associated with party politics and not brought up within close confines of the political classes in the state capitals. The Crown thus saw their own as more objective and better equipped to fulfil both the political and social functions of the Governor.¹²⁹

Huntingfield surprisingly did not confer with Tunnecliffe until the Saturday despite the publicity given to the offer of the Labor Party and repeated during the debate and sealed by the vote of the Assembly. At the meeting Tunnecliffe repeated the verbal assurances to the Governor. Labor was angry that the unanimous support of both the UCP and Labor members, that is, His Majesty's current official opposition, had not been readily recognised by the Governor. Conspiracy theories abounded that he had been swayed by the conservative 'guile of Argyle' (read intrigue, bribery and corruption)¹³⁰ and that the

¹²⁶ *ibid.*

¹²⁷ G Blainey, *Our Side of the Country: The Story of Victoria*, Methuen Haynes, Sydney, 1984, p. 194

¹²⁸ Twomey, *op. cit.*, p. 43

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Labor Call*, 4 April 1935

conservative Britisher could not readily contemplate that a right-wing government was being pushed aside. This theory was boosted by his installation as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Victoria, the top position in Freemasonry, on the very night of the opening of parliament¹³¹ confirming Labor's suspicions that the anti-Catholic stance by the establishment against the Labor Party would prevail in some way.

Over the weekend John Allan made frantic efforts behind the scenes to form a composite ministry under his premiership supported by the UCP moderates. The wedge to be driven between the UCP factions would be the promise of half the portfolios and perhaps that Argyle be posted to London as Agent-General. Dunstan saw the Governor on Monday and again went away empty handed. The more reasonable among Labor who did not share the increasing suspicion of a plot were content to see the Governor's action as 'whether biased or advised or directed – it matters not – he must have discovered many reasons why he should hasten slowly.'¹³² Tunnecliffe himself would not speak out against the Governor but questioned the unnecessary delays, hesitancy, close examination of documents and deferring of decisions.¹³³ Later he had to suffer the indignity of reducing his verbal assurances to writing before having them accepted – a historic first required of an official opposition in a Commonwealth parliament. To convince the Governor he ironically scribbled his assurances on the title page of Bouchier's policy speech.¹³⁴ Perhaps the Governor was being extra careful because Tunnecliffe had not participated in the no-confidence debate 'as he did not wish to jeopardise any approach to the Governor'¹³⁵ and Cain had specifically said in his speech seconding the motion that Labor was 'offering no alliance.'¹³⁶

Dunstan finally received his commission on Tuesday 2 April and formed his government. One cynic accused him of engineering the delay and the demand for Tunnecliffe's signature as he did not wish to be installed on the Monday, April Fools Day, and be possibly caught out.¹³⁷ Maybe the *Herald* had been wrong in assuming that the UCP parliamentary party at a meeting less than a week earlier had elected their

¹³¹ *Age*, 21 March 1935

¹³² *Labor Call*, 4 April 1935

¹³³ *Age*, 1 April 1935

¹³⁴ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 59

¹³⁵ *Age*, 1 April 1935

¹³⁶ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 27 March 1935, p. 54

¹³⁷ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 59

ministry for it seems Dunstan selected his own men containing all the essential ingredients of a compromise.¹³⁸ The party rule adopted from Labor that the UCP members should elect their ministry was conveniently ignored by Dunstan. Notwithstanding the charge by the UAP that the UCP did not have the talent to form a ministry on its own, Dunstan was able to draw from several quarters. He could choose from those experienced in previous governments when in coalition or former Labor ministers including the ex-Premier Hogan. He would make concessions to one or two of his former CPP comrades and call upon two long-serving backbenchers with their valuable parliamentary experience. He also exploited to the full the custom that up to four members of the Legislative Council could be included. This elevated the ‘unofficial’ leader in the Council, Dr Harris, one of the few in the Country Party with a tertiary education. At that time Hamilton Lamb was the only UCP member in the Assembly with a university degree.¹³⁹ With Harris in the ministry bound by cabinet solidarity this also removed a critic known for his obstruction even towards his own party’s legislation. When turning this negative into a positive Dunstan raised the status of the new government in the Council with a telling presence despite the combination of Labor and UCP forming less than one-third of the members. Allan who had avowed he would not join a non-composite ministry had his wishes respected and retired to the backbench.

After being sworn in that Tuesday morning the new Premier and his ministry drove quickly to the Ballarat Conference where they made a triumphal entry to a standing ovation.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 60

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 236

¹⁴⁰ *Countryman*, 5 April 1935

CHAPTER 8

EARLY DAYS OF THE UCP-LABOR ARRANGEMENT

‘Alliances do not make for strength but for weakness and destruction.’

A L Bussau, UCP Geelong Conference, 1937

This chapter calls upon the early days of the UCP-Labor alliance to answer the question of whether such arrangements can deliver much of the platforms of the two parties in the face of a hostile upper house and an antagonistic federal coalition government. It explains why the United Australia Party, ousted from government in Victoria, used its majority in the Legislative Council to frustrate any state legislation sought by its ‘natural enemy,’ the Labor Party, now sitting on the cross-benches supporting a minority UCP government, the former coalition partner with the UAP. The motives for this resentment, along with a desire to support the federal non-Labor coalition, is explored along with the reasons for the increasing transfer of rural electoral support from the UAP to the UCP. The chapter also analyses the strains within the UCP and with the federal coalition as the party tried to cooperate with two partners from opposite sides of the political fence.

When the UCP gained office the UAP declared it would use the Legislative Council to defeat any legislation demanded by Labor as a condition for support. Trades Hall challenged the UCP to deliver or else. An angry UAP baited the Dunstan government, determined to bring it to an end, criticising its ministers as being poorly educated and none of them from the city, both factors considered essential for conventional government. Also the federal coalition government was a continuing major, external factor. The Victorian government was handicapped financially by the Lyons government’s allocation of funding based on need as measured by past budget performances. The federal nexus with the UAP did not deliver benefits at state level. Dunstan inherited balanced budgets whereas the NSW coalition benefited from Lang’s deficit stimulus to the economy. Dunstan would remain a low-spending Premier, by financial inheritance and nature, thus frustrating much of the Labor Party’s Keynesian-based social objectives, leading to some Labor MPs questioning the value of supporting his government.

Major problems arose in the relationship between the Victorian and federal Country Parties. Victorian UCP MHRs were placed in the invidious position of serving two masters –federal cabinet and Victorian Central Council. The UAP set up a Country and Liberal section of the party to attract disaffected country people but undermined its campaign when, while agreeing to support a referendum to improve federal marketing of farmers’ produce, worked hard to defeat it. The UCP made gains at both federal and state elections with the pro-Hocking Mallee radicals improving their numbers. When John McEwen accepted a ministry in the Lyons coalition he earned the wrath of Central Council. The major debate intensified within the UCP as to whether it could tolerate its MPs being in two cabinets, state and federal, supported by opposing political parties.

The UCP parliamentary backbenchers, along with the other delegates assembled at the Ballarat Conference, had listened in an atmosphere of excitement and enthusiasm to an excellent opening address by their president, A E Hocking. Debate was low key until the afternoon when the new Premier and his cabinet made a triumphal entry – the first purely Country Party ministry in Australia.¹

Premier Dunstan officially (re)opened the Conference at 4 pm and revelled in the celebrations – ‘We have never been so solid’ – and relished criticising Argyle, pointing out that the ex-Premier claimed there was no difference between the policy of the UAP and the UCP, yet as soon as the UCP formed a government he vowed to sit in opposition to it. If the coalition was as stable as Argyle claimed, why, Dunstan asked rhetorically, didn’t he offer a 50:50 ministry and why was he reluctant to resign after being defeated 23:40 in the vote of no-confidence? To emphasise the new state of affairs he boasted that *he* had secured support from Labor.²

The *Countryman* was earthier in its delight, reminding its readers that the VFU and the UCP had been formed in the first place because of the rank failure of the city-based governments – ‘Now, the first Country Party government in the world must rule for all’

¹ *Countryman*, 5 April 1935

² *ibid.*

– but cautioned that the enemy of today is the ally of tomorrow.³ This seemed unlikely in the short term as soon a very bitter Harold Cohen KC, an eloquent lawyer and leader of the UAP in the upper house, issued an ultimatum threatening to defeat any legislation which was seen as the price for Labor’s support and predicting disaster as this new government had ‘no members drawn from the city.’⁴

Religion too entered the fray, indirectly reflecting the concern conservative Protestant churches had about the political liaison between the UCP and the ‘Catholic’ Labor Party. The *Countryman* reported that rural Presbyterians were angry at their church’s newspaper, the *Messenger*, when it accused the UCP as ‘guilty of an act of gross immorality’ and ‘being traitors to the allies and false to the electors’ for cooperating with the Labor Party. Dunstan had accepted the deputy premiership then it had ‘denigrated political life and stabbed democratic government.’ It roared in conclusion: ‘we doubt whether there has been anything so lamentable in the history of Victoria.’⁵ Those offended church members, when denied any opportunity for rebuttal or back-down by the *Messenger*, resorted to the *Countryman* to attack the church paper as ‘unfair, ill-timed and inaccurate’ and that it was being used for political purposes.⁶

Labor Call was quite hopeful about the future working arrangements and its opportunities, harking back to how the young Labor Party had achieved age and invalid pensions through conditional support in the 1890s. Then a warning:

obviously for all practical purposes the Dunstan government owed its existence to the Labor Party although not one can said to be a Laborite true to the name or pledged to the Labor policy. The rationale was clearly the present day economic conditions which was making farmers and workers more impoverished through falling prices and demand.⁷

Then its hopes:

Labor has everything to gain and nothing to lose for supporting the government for the time being – and like anti-Labor our policies are firstly economic, not purely personal, racial or religious; we are in favour of the workers

³ *ibid.*, editorial

⁴ *ibid.*, 12 April 1935

⁵ *ibid.*, 3 May 1935

⁶ *ibid.*, 7 June 1935

⁷ *Labor Call*, 11 April 1935

uncompromisingly. Some in the UCP will oppose Labor's policies if they are seen as pro-workers, this is probably true but the economic factor is stronger, but like all men in politics they must be prepared to adapt or make way for others as Argyle had to do.⁸

Labor Call also echoed Trades Hall's contempt for the 'Collins Street manipulators and Flinders Street middlemen' who met in secret, determined prices while conveniently forgetting the principles of supply and demand and dictating to the UAP parliamentary party. It was time to call a conference between producers and consumers and a chance for Dunstan to prove his calibre.⁹ Then, a further challenge: 'Inaction by the Dunstan government cannot be tolerated – they must counteract monopoly and greed.'¹⁰

It did not take long for some UCP backbenchers to demonstrate the opportunities of being in government and, for some, a degree of independence now they were not yoked to the UAP. Some stressed their common beliefs with Labor. One new backbencher, Hamilton Lamb, supported Labor against the wishes of his leader and party within a few weeks of the resumption of parliament. It began with his maiden speech when he supported Labor's proposal to appoint a Select Committee to Inquire into the Monetary System, an idea which the Premier had dismissed as 'confusing' as it would lead to each state government acting independently. Naively, Lamb had responded by quoting the motto tessellated on the floor of the foyer of Parliament House – 'In the Multitude of Counsellors there is Safety' – arguing that the Commonwealth would be assisted by such an Australia-wide investigation.¹¹ While the motion he supported was defeated by the Assembly, the *Countryman* editorial¹² did quote him when he likened the world today to an 'economic madhouse.' The editorial commented that Lamb's words were slander and an insult to every madhouse in Australia. Noticeably, other than this extract there were no congratulations nor other references to his maiden speech in the general section of that paper, something normally extended to new members. Earlier that day Dunstan had reluctantly agreed that Lamb should be one of his party's two nominations

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*, 25 April 1935

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 9 May 1935

¹¹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 23 May 1935, p. 323

¹² *Countryman*, 14 June 1935

to serve on the Shorter Working Week Committee proposed by the Labor Party.¹³ Perhaps it would keep him occupied and out of the way and his Labor-inclined opinions would only be recommendations, not law.

Barely a month later Lamb went further and seconded a motion moved by another new member, Alexander McDonald from the neighbouring electorate of Stawell and Ararat, to establish a Select Committee to Inquire into the Question of Unemployed Youth, another concern of Labor's. The government compromised and successfully saw that this proposed committee was incorporated into the Shorter Working Week Committee. During this debate Lamb stressed that the economic problems were ones of depressed demand rather than the money supply,¹⁴ reflecting John Maynard Keynes' developing economic theories, and that the gap between wealth and poverty must be closed. In a later debate he would conclude with the Labor-like statement:

although I am a staunch member of the Country Party I would cooperate in any effort to benefit the State, no matter on which side of the House it was made.¹⁵

When parliament resumed after a long adjournment of nearly two months it appeared that the new government had difficulty in going beyond Bouchier's electoral statement and wrestled with the uncertainty as to what programs and policies it should introduce apart from the commitments to Labor. Hogan came to the rescue with the suggestion of resuscitating a Marketing Bill similar to the one passed with the support of the CPP in 1930 through the Assembly but 'not passed' by the Legislative Council.¹⁶ Indirectly, first blood would be to Labor and the eventual passage of the Marketing of Primary Products Act 1935 provided an example of the political framework which would dictate the political ambience in which the Dunstan government was to operate during its first term. Surprisingly, to a degree all parties supported it, the UAP now giving lip service to 'orderly marketing' whereas they had strongly attacked it when Labor was in government. Labor had remained 'collectivist' on the issue and supported the UCP in resisting the UAP's precondition of an agreement among a high percentage of producers before any such board could be established. Obviously 'cooperatives' and 'collectivism' were a connective economic approach shared by Labor and the Country Party,

¹³ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 23 May 1935, p. 325

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 30 May 1935, pp. 435-7

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 437

¹⁶ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 68

especially in reaction to perceived middlemen and interest rates at a time of economic hardship. UAP hardliners like Kent Hughes maintained their criticism of these cooperatives as monopolistic.¹⁷

The UAP majority in the Legislative Council was suspicious of Dunstan's agrarian socialism and regularly rejected and amended his legislation.¹⁸ The Council acted like a UAP government in exile, wielding its power to reject or amend legislation and exacting its vengeance on the 'traitorous' UCP. For example, to prevent competition with private enterprise, it completely excised a clause giving the right to marketing boards to establish factories to process any unmarketable supplies of a product.¹⁹ Furthermore, the Council refused a request for joint conferences of committees of both houses and subjected the Assembly to a prolonged, cumbersome and essentially one-sided procedure of Bill-shuffling between the chambers, hoping perhaps to stifle progress through exhaustion and exasperation. Inevitably, these tactics accelerated the drive by the government and Labor to reform the Legislative Council. The final marketing boards legislation, severely amended by the UAP, had been originally drafted along the lines of previous Labor legislation in Queensland. Now it was indifferently treated by the Country Party when Hogan introduced it and detested by Hocking over the inclusion of fruits (he had been an orchardist since 1914).²⁰ As J B Paul noted, the UCP government could well have been described as being less than honest in declaring the legislation its own.²¹ However, Labor had reason to rejoice.

The new government was initially very active on the policy front.²² A second and major area of legislation was the Loan (Farmers' Debts Adjustment) Bill, dear to the heart of the Country Party and one the party could rightly claim to be theirs and possibly their best legislation during their time in office. The scheme was designed to implement the federal Act of April 1935, legislated after the arrangement towards the end of the previous year between the federal and state governments. Essentially the Victorian Act would set special *moratoria* to protect farmers' assets through stay orders based on

¹⁷ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 30 May 1935, p. 436

¹⁸ Costar, 'Albert Dunstan', p. 220

¹⁹ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 72

²⁰ Hocking, *op. cit.*, p. 16

²¹ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 78

²² Costar, 'Albert Dunstan', p. 218

approved applications for relief. This had been the purpose of the Acts previously in place but world prices for primary products had not risen and the fight to rehabilitate farmers under supervision had been a losing battle. The rewritten provisions allowed for a new board to ‘stay’ creditors for up to five years during which it would guarantee interest payments up to 4 per cent.²³ This suited many creditors and encouraged many of them to come to the negotiating table whereas they might have received next to nothing at an inconvenient mortgage sale. The Victorian legislation differed markedly from that enacted in the other states as compulsory provisions were incorporated which could be invoked when voluntary action failed.²⁴ Again the Legislative Council proved to be uncompromising but then its efforts were attenuated by the acknowledged urgency of establishing the machinery and getting it working. Eventually a major compromise was reached to overcome the blockage on the matter of acceptable disclaimers and new debts (even the UCP was divided on this) based on the condition that the board could consider such applications if satisfied it was in the interests of both the farmers and creditors. Any new debts incurred after the Act would not come within its ambit.

The government included some who had been members of another party previously. Distaste by the opposition towards these men who ‘crossed the floor’ especially if it meant loss of government was obvious. Hamilton Lamb annoyed many members of the UAP and during debates they targeted him partly because he had been a former member of the Nationalists (but he denied having been in the Young Nationalists)²⁵ until a few years before entering parliament. During the Loan (Farmers’ Debts Adjustment) Bill, Knox rebuked the ‘know-all upstart’ Lamb for his manner of debate.²⁶ In some ways he was seen by the UAP as an out-of-place academic, so unlike other members of the UCP who had not enjoyed a tertiary education like many in the UAP.

Labor was more discreet in its comments on Lamb and said little about him. However, over the years he would be one of the very few UCP men to feature in *Labor Call*. In an indirect way they were welcoming him among their numbers in trying to achieve a better deal for the workers and men like him helped to justify their support for the UCP government. Around the time Knox and others were attacking Lamb in parliament,

²³ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 81

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 81

²⁵ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 23 July 1935, p. 1463

²⁶ *ibid.*, vol. 197, 13 August 1935, p. 1889

*Labor Call*²⁷ printed a photo of members of the Shorter Working Week Committee – Hamilton Lamb with the chairman (John Holland) and Arthur Calwell of the Victorian Treasury Department who had been appointed investigation officer. Dunstan was more than ready to sanction Calwell, currently president of the Victorian Labor Party, for the position depending as he did on Labor support for office. Calwell, the alleged ‘architect’ of the alignment, played an important continuing intermediary role between the two parties, a role not known to many. It was this Treasury clerk’s privilege to march in on the Premier once a week or so and deliver to him the Labor Party’s instructions if he was to retain that support.²⁸ Serving on the committee would have disguised the purpose of his presence in parliament house. Dunstan trusted Calwell, and Calwell in turn trusted Dunstan. This arrangement continued until Calwell was elected to federal parliament in September 1940 and for a while afterwards until Labor broke the alignment immediately prior to Curtin assuming office in October 1941.²⁹

The same issue of *Labor Call*³⁰ summarised Labor’s support for its former enemy countering Labor MP Frank Keane’s accusation that the Dunstan government was weak and inept. Keane’s criticisms suggested regret at choosing the UCP over the UAP but ‘while progress may be slow it is in the right direction.’³¹ The editorial argued that no anti-Labor government should be expected to do any more for the workers than it was forced to do: ‘The Dunstan government is simply better than an Argyle government. It will do more for the workers and the unemployed. It has honoured Labor’s expectations to date.’³² *Labor Call* claimed that Labor had backed the UCP, not because it believed that Labor’s objectives would be achieved, but for tactical reasons, that Labor had more to gain personally and for its country constituents. Realistically, Labor and the UAP would agree on little else other than a redistribution of electorates to overcome the rural bias. They were enemies on most legislation.

Dunstan’s apparent lack of interest in the inquiries into the Shorter Working Week, Youth Unemployment and the Monetary System may have been due to his

²⁷ *Labor Call*, 18 July 1935

²⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 15 August 1952

²⁹ *ibid.*, 7 October 1941

³⁰ *Labor Call*, 18 July 1935

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

preoccupation with his new office and its attendant demands, particularly the forthcoming budget, rather than his lack of desire to do more than the minimum to honour his party's 'treaty' with Labor. He was facing obstacles at the federal level on the economic front, his colleagues in the conservative coalition adamantly adhering to the traditional approach under the overall plan of the Loan Council under the direction of Professor Copland. The Loan Council was more concerned with harmony in the money market than with the welfare of workers and farmers, so it was unlikely that Dunstan would get the money he needed even for a mildly reflationary budget despite strongly arguing in Canberra for 'community and decency.' He was defeated by 'the formula' which concentrated on repaying past debts.

Lang as NSW Premier had borrowed to implement his expansionary budget and the state had been consequently favoured by the Loan Council to repay them while the parsimonious, restrictive policies of the Argyle government rewarded Victoria with a lower share of the loans as they had lower debts. This irony of economic management meant Dunstan received four million pounds instead of the five and a half million he sought and he announced that he would have to abandon the plan to provide full-time work for all married unemployed men in Victoria at award rates. Labor acknowledged Dunstan's courage and sincerity in his fight and blamed the suspension of the employment plan on their traditional enemy: 'because Victoria had adopted the Premiers' Plan and the people suffered most, it is now rewarded with more suffering.'³³

The Victorian budget of 1935 was a cautious financial statement given the short time the UCP had been in government and with a few moderate changes virtually following that of its predecessors without irritating Labor. The initiatives included a 10 per cent cut in water rates and the restoration of pensions and public service salaries, including those of teachers. Dunstan rejected the call by the Chamber of Commerce to reduce tax. Alex Wilson, a member of the UCP Central Council and soon headed for the federal parliament, explained that the demand would simply reduce social services and curtail assistance to primary industries.³⁴ Virtually unnoticed, given the glare of the spotlight on the budget, was Dunstan's appointment of Hocking to the board of the State Savings

³³ *ibid.*, 6 June 1935

³⁴ *Countryman*, 2 August 1935

Bank. While the appointment was favourably viewed within the Country Party³⁵ no-one could predict the furore it would later engender within the party organisation.

The work of committees affords members more freedom than debates in the house, encouraging them to listen and discuss issues rather than simply debate them along set party lines. One interesting example was the Report on the Forty Hour Week scheduled to be finalised before parliament rose. Predictably, the Labor-chaired committee came down in favour of a 40-hour week and recommended that if asked by the federal government to ratify the Geneva Convention's 40-hour week, the Victorian government should do so.³⁶ The Chamber of Commerce and the Victorian Employers' Federation had declined to appear before the committee but the Trades Hall Council gave full cooperation. The committee acknowledged that the need for a shorter week without reduction in pay was based on the need to raise community demand to ease glutted markets. Lamb played a major balancing role on the committee by drafting clauses and officially moving most of them in the report. The voting on various clauses showed that only on one occasion did he join with the conservatives and that otherwise he voted with Labor to oppose them. Ian Macfarlan of the UAP displayed his individuality by often voting against the conservatives prefacing the action he would take a few months later of leaving the UAP to form the break-away Country-Liberal Party with seven others and to sit on the corner benches on the opposition side of the parliament.

Labor might not have realised all its objectives under the deal with the UCP but it recognised that progress had been made on many fronts. There was more work, sustenance payments had risen and more relief works had been started. A Workers' Compensation Board had been established along with the rural debts scheme and marketing boards. Public service salaries were being gradually restored and the government had supported Labor's Bill to enable public servants to stand for parliament without having to resign from the service, a consequence of which had led to the loss of their employment benefits. *Labor Call* summed up Labor's position: 'Labor can

³⁵ *ibid.*, 9 August 1935

³⁶ *Progress Report of the Select Committee on the Shorter Working Week, Unemployment Insurance and Other Industrial Matters*, Victorian Government Printer, Melbourne, 1935

congratulate the Dunstan minority government upon its first session in parliament. Labor's action in occupying the government corner benches has been amply justified.³⁷

Labor Call's feeling of successful cooperation was strengthened when the *Countryman* reported Labor's above message word for word on the front page of its first issue the next year. Dunstan's self-congratulations were relegated to the editorial on page 6. Perhaps this was a reflection of the change of ownership when the *Countryman* was purchased by the UCP organisation during 1935. Shortly there would be a new board of management and Hocking would be its chairman. The general membership of the UCP, particularly in the north-west, was growing. The UCP MPs toured their electorates to strengthen the confidence in the new government. In Lowan, Lamb told members that when he had entered parliament he held a good opinion of Dunstan, an opinion greatly amplified over the last year. He predicted the Country Party would be in for the long term and were duty bound to reward the Labor Party which had helped them to assume control. Then he warned the members that they needed to guard against becoming too conservative, a tendency of any party that is in power for too long.³⁸ His warning would prove accurate but his regard for Dunstan would change.

In March the Allandale by-election illustrated the movements in political support over the previous year. Labor won when they received more than 40 per cent of UCP preferences, the people virtually endorsing the political affiliation between the two parties. During the campaign Dunstan taunted the UAP, commenting that while the opposition said it agreed with 90 per cent of the government's policies and promised to support the Country Party should Labor renege on its support why did it then remain in opposition?:

Personal consideration provides the answer – they are jealous we occupy the Treasury benches; angry, as the *Age* says, because they believe they have a divine right to govern ... the old guard of Conservatism is using the Legislative Council to destroy or emasculate our legislation in the interests of the privileged class.³⁹

³⁷ *Labor Call*, 26 December 1935

³⁸ *Horsham Times*, 18 February 1936

³⁹ *Countryman*, 13 March 1936

Dunstan had thrown down the gauntlet for reform of the upper house and set out to make this the major objective of the year ahead.

Over a thousand delegates, the biggest attendance ever at a Country Party Conference, assembled in Bendigo on Dunstan's home turf. He led the choreographed entry from the rear of the hall and on reaching the platform was cheered to the rooftops. Dunstan claimed that more had been achieved by the minority UCP government than by composite, coalition or fusion governments. He said that it pointed the way for more successes, but the *Countryman* asked whether it could ever happen at federal level under Page. *Truth* was also ecstatic, saying the UCP was emerging as a middle-class party, something between industrial extremism and rapacious conservatism, 'a blend of all that is best in Labor and rural policies – to delight every liberal minded citizen.'⁴⁰ Even the *Age* was quietly congratulatory declaring that the UCP drew a dividing line between forces working for progress and reform and those contending for the conservation of power and undue privilege.⁴¹ The *Argus* searched desperately for a point of criticism and found it – 'a lack of culture and a premier who would not grow up beyond the boy he was' – or rather that the ministry contained 'no representative of higher education.'⁴² The paper may have been pandering to its readership for at that time higher education was only for the brilliant or the well-to-do. The article conveniently overlooked that Dr Harris MLC, a medical graduate from Melbourne University, was in the ministry.

Six weeks after the Conference the UCP Central Council met to propose a new federal Country Party body. This was an idea born out of the frustration they experienced at the hands of the federal organisation's opposition to the Victorian party's rules on endorsement and the platform applying to federal as well as state MPs.⁴³ The Victorians reaffirmed that their rules applied at both levels. The Australian Country Party Association (ACPA) persisted with its opposition and went on the attack using the front page of its organ to alienate other states from Victoria, on the grounds that the Victorian party wanted an alliance with Labor in Canberra. The *Countryman* stated that the ACPA erroneously claimed that nationally the ACP had remained 'independent' despite the

⁴⁰ *Truth*, 4 April 1936

⁴¹ *Age*, March 1936

⁴² As quoted in *Countryman*, editorial, 9 April 1936

⁴³ *ibid.*, 29 May 1936

evidence of alliances, composite deals and pacts with the UAP.⁴⁴ The *Countryman* responded – Victoria would never forget that the Bruce-Page pact had been knocked together behind closed doors in Toorak, the centre of the establishment, nor the way Percy Stewart had been isolated then allowed to withdraw from the composite government when his campaign for an independent ACP was thwarted. Dunstan's earlier claims that more could be done by a minority government with Labor support than tied to the UAP was proof enough that this was the preferable course at federal level.⁴⁵ The imminent federal electoral redistribution and the need to endorse candidates for the new seats would be an opportunity for the UCP Central Council to press for national allegiance to their rules.

Another area of difference was tariffs. Victoria was mainly concerned with wheat and wool. Some members felt that under the Ottawa Agreement small farmers and wool growers had been sacrificed to British interests when restrictions on trade with Japan were introduced. The East was one of Australia's few profitable markets and when Japan retaliated by restricting imports, the UCP saw the policy as 'provocative to a friendly power and a good customer nation.'⁴⁶ Alex Wilson on the Central Council was particularly outspoken, this issue firming his resolve to enter federal politics. Copland too was ruffled by the fundamental changes in tariff policies and trade restrictions, somewhat peeved by, as he saw it, the thorough and impartial investigations and recommendations of the Tariff Board being 'impaired by politics.'⁴⁷ With the Lyons government in control, Page relegated to a lesser role as Minister for Agriculture following the establishment of the Australian Agricultural Council, and the Country Party shackled by the composite ministry, the economic policies had shifted further away from free trade. The Empire Free Trade Agreement was perceived by Labor and some in the UCP as tied to defence and they criticised the federal government's policy as being more in Britain's interests than those of Australia where South-East Asia was concerned.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 12 June 1936

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 3 July 1936

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 10 July 1936

⁴⁸ *Labor Call*, 1 October 1936

The resumption of the Victorian parliament in June brought with it the government's second budget and the legislation to reform the upper house. The so-called 'recovery budget' reduced state taxation, brought a reduction in the costs to farmers of rural rail transport and weed control, further progress towards the full restoration of public servants' salaries and state pensions, and increased provision for education and hospital services.⁴⁹ Labor murmured that progressive taxes should be maintained and complained there was no provision for slum clearance but gave the budget its full support and much praise.⁵⁰

In the absence of Dunstan who was suffering from a bout of quinsy (suppurative tonsillitis), in October Harris introduced the Council Reform Bill designed to redistribute the 33-year-old boundaries along with reforms to the Melbourne City Council. While these measures had tripartite support in the Assembly, Council members balked at the requirement that they should have to seek re-election on the new boundaries. When the Council refused to budge Labor urged further changes. Now Dunstan's new reforms included lowering the age of candidates for the Council and abolishing plural voting. Labor wanted abolition of the Council itself, as had been achieved in Queensland, but would have been delighted if the Victorian upper house was even as democratic as the Senate.

With the support of the new Country and Liberal section of the UAP the Redistribution Bill was overwhelmingly supported in the Assembly with only seven out of 65 voting against it, showing unanimity to an unheard of degree. It achieved only a bare majority (14:12) in the Council, insufficient to meet the president's requirement of an absolute majority of 18 to change the constitution. His ruling was despite James Balfour, who had won the by-election for Gippsland province for the UCP, not having yet been sworn in. Finally, the Redistribution Bill was passed just prior to Christmas but the chances of the Council agreeing to the Reform Bill were at longer odds than Wotan who won the Melbourne Cup that year at 100 to 1. The Reform Bill was set aside with the threat of an

⁴⁹ J B Paul, 'Albert Dunstan and the Victorian government' in C Hazlehurst (ed.), *Australian Conservatism: Essays in Twentieth Century Political History*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1979, pp. 183-5

⁵⁰ *Labor Call*, 6 August 1936

election if it was not passed after a reasonable time interval. It remained forever unexercised.⁵¹

It was unusual for a Country Party member to speak out on city issues. Again Lamb's contributions in parliament featured in *Labor Call*, a rare event for a UCP member, giving him the status almost of a de facto member of the Labor cause. The paper pointed out he was one of a very few non-Labor MPs to mention the need for slum clearance: 'Improvement of housing conditions is required in the country districts as well as in the metropolis.'⁵² On the next occasion Lamb gained a head-line on an inner page – 'Girl Worker's Death Stirs Mr Lamb' – reporting his speech in parliament when he blamed modern industrial methods for the immense toll of death and accidents and in particular for the death of an 18-year-old girl in a factory fire. *Labor Call* quoted him directly when he criticised lesser wages for women than men: 'She was a martyr to economic industrialisation. This is worse than slavery; it is unchristian, inhuman, satanic. May the death of this girl not be in vain.'⁵³ Links on policy between Labor and the UCP as expressed through MPs such as Lamb worked to strengthen the rationale of the alliance but they would also exasperate the conservatives in the UCP.

Around this time the first indications of future strife between individuals within the UCP organisation started to emerge. When Hocking sought assistance on matters relating to his sand businesses at Plenty and Cranbourne he asked Lamb to put certain questions on notice. Hocking may not have agreed with Lamb on land tax/rental economic matters but their mutual hatred for usury and demand for fairness in business matters were assisting in developing a close working relationship. The debt Lamb had to Hocking in entering parliament provided further flux. Hocking believed he had been unfairly treated over his tender to supply sand from Plenty to the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board and asked Lamb to question whether the contract awarded had been influenced by the board's chairman being a relative of the successful tenderer and whether the quality of his sand had been 'inferior' when the price was lower. After a week's delay Lamb was asked to re-submit the question and then to be told, no preference of the sort alleged had been involved and that the unsuccessful

⁵¹ P Strangio, 'Victorian Labor and reform of the Legislative Council 1950-2003', *Labour History*, no. 86, 2004

⁵² *Labor Call*, 9 July 1936

⁵³ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 200, 10 November 1936, p. 2758

tenderer (Hocking) had been unable to deliver the sand for 20 weeks.⁵⁴ Unsatisfied, Hocking pressed Lamb to inquire further as to why inter alia eight local councils, the Harbour Trust, Country Roads Board and Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works all used Plenty sand but the Tramways Board did not. The response was simply that for the work undertaken by the Tramways the sand was 'unsatisfactory' not 'unsuitable.'⁵⁵ One can only speculate and this was a minor issue, but perhaps it was an indicator that Dunstan and his ministry were starting to tire of the 'sniping' by the member for Lowan, and Dunstan was starting to distance himself from any obligation he might have felt he owed Hocking for being Premier.

The government persisted in trying to reform the uncooperative Legislative Council. If the Council was successful in rejecting the reforms through further obstruction, the Premier threatened an election and on re-election when the rejected Bills again passed the Assembly they could be proclaimed as law by the Governor without needing to go again through the Council.⁵⁶ But it was not to be. While agreeing finally to the Redistribution of the Provinces Bill the Council rejected any alteration to its constitutional power over the legislative process and further offended the farmers when it opposed assistance to Mallee settlers.

Not all in the UCP wanted to face the electors on this issue, after less than two years in office. Neither did some in the Labor Party. Playing on this concern *Labor Call*⁵⁷ exposed a 'plot' to back conservative UCP ministers Frank Old and Albert Lind to displace Dunstan should the Premier carry out his threat to seek a dissolution of the Assembly employing rejection of the Legislative Council Reform Bill. If the Governor refused, Dunstan would resign and the UAP would be called for as the biggest party. Argyle would be obliged to refuse as he could not depend on ALP support and he in turn would suggest to the Governor that Old, now deputy leader, be called to form a new minority UCP government. This would in turn lead to a new composite ministry including Allnutt as Attorney-General, his price for being part of the alleged conspiracy. On the other hand, if the Governor agreed with Dunstan, then Dunstan was to be deposed immediately after the election with the same outcome as before. This scenario

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 2704

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 15 December 1936, p. 3906

⁵⁶ *Countryman*, 6 November 1936

⁵⁷ *Labor Call*, 5 November 1936

seemed unlikely as Allnutt was currently government whip and obliged to carry out the parliamentary party's decisions. Moreover, he was not trained in the law. Perhaps the whole 'plot' was Labor fiction or designed by UCP conservatives to split the 'Mallee Hens,' but in the event no such 'plot' took place. In light of the alleged conspiracy the UCP parliamentary party pledged loyalty to Dunstan and wished him luck on his trip next year to the coronation of King George VI. The rumoured 'plot' to shatter the internal trust of the UCP had actually strengthened it. No mention of any such plot appeared in the *Countryman*.

Over the almost two years since the 1935 election the three political parties reassessed their positions. The creation of the Country and Liberal section of the UAP was brought about by rural MPs experiencing frustration due to the obstructive and conservative stance of the city-based leaders and those leaders not directly feeling the resentment held by their rural constituents. When the UAP refused to contemplate a rural section within the party the breakaway section was formed. Recently elected MP Tom Maltby went so far as to claim (before the split) that if Labor found reason to kick out Dunstan his own party would most likely support the Dunstan government..⁵⁸ However it was confidently predicted by most UAP members that the Labor-UCP agreement would not hold together very long.⁵⁹ The *Countryman* went on to observe that the new UAP rural policy was a virtual lift of the Country Party policy and that the UAP was 'losing its superiority complex as cold logic demonstrates there was no divine right to rule.' This was not necessarily true as Argyle was still fighting 'war to the knife' and the softened rural policy did not prevent the breakaway by the rural bloc. Kent Hughes and some others still carried the baton for the ultra-conservative Young Nationalists.

Dunstan had not shown himself to this point to be openly dictatorial as leader. He had tolerated some independence within the parliamentary party on policies outside the party platform as witnessed by his wary acceptance of Lamb's stance on issues in the house. Building on this the *Countryman* now supported a role for independent thought within the UCP:

To attract men of note to enter parliament, party politics had to be less dictatorial. Many will not subordinate their independent views to collective

⁵⁸ *Countryman*, 15 May 1936

⁵⁹ Paul, 'Albert Dunstan', p. 106

decisions of the party. It is amongst such men that leaders are found. A rigid party system narrows rather than broadens the outlook and is not conducive to great leaders. The mid-way minority government was successful because both extremist major parties backed it. So the farmer needs to travel the socialist path of the supporter – cooperatives and a mixed economy.⁶⁰

The pen behind this editorial has the hallmarks of Hocking, reflecting his time in local government which was not overtly party political, and who from the time he joined the Country Party in 1929 had advocated a wider and more economically educated membership base. As if in recognition of the call by the editorial, the former Labor Premier Hogan was elevated to Minister for Labour and Chief Secretary while Allnutt had become party whip after the death of Edward Cleary. This slight move to the left was somewhat offset or balanced by the election of the conservative Francis Old as deputy leader following Bouchier's appointment as Agent-General in London.

The Labor Party continued to accept that its deal with the Country Party was delivering some progress and at least even to the purists among them a Dunstan government was to be preferred to one led by Argyle. *Labor Call* summarised their feeling:

In some ways Labor has been successful in urging the Dunstan government along progressive lines. Most of Mr Dunstan's working class legislation emanated from Labor sources, for the Premier and one or two of his ministers are progressively minded men.⁶¹

In short, by the end of the year the Dunstan government was 'the next best thing' to a Labor government.⁶² One man behind the scenes, John Wren, was also content. While the Legislative Council had failed to pass the Legislative Council Reform Bill by three votes it had passed the Night Trotting Bill.

The Privy Council decision in the James Case (Dried Fruits Case) had forced the federal government to hold a referendum to change the constitution. The High Court had determined that under Section 92 there could be no control by the states or the Commonwealth over acquisition or quantities to be sold interstate, diminishing the

⁶⁰ *Countryman*, editorial, 5 June 1936

⁶¹ *Labor Call*, 26 November 1936

⁶² *ibid.*, 3 December 1936

control states had over this industry. The High Court decision had nullified the right to set a home price for primary products such as butter and wheat and invalidated a range of marketing schemes. If the referendum was successful the new Section 92 would allow also for federal control over civil aviation, something not envisaged in the original document, the imposition of excise duty and provide for orderly marketing through approved collectives and cooperatives.⁶³

Outwardly support seemed to come from all quarters. John Maynard Keynes during his January visit to Australia supported the ‘yes’ case as ‘planning for stability’ and declared that those arguing for the ‘no’ case on the grounds that the customer should be free to choose were really giving more power to those manipulating supply and marketing.⁶⁴ Constitutional expert Sir Robert Garran supported the ‘yes’ case as validating the original intentions of the framers of the constitution. Indeed, he said that the High Court in 1920 had upheld orderly marketing as it had no effect on the freedom of interstate trade. Labor at state and federal levels, particularly Premier Forgan Smith in Queensland and leader Tunnecliffe in Victoria along with Scullin at federal level, sold the campaign ‘as the only way to go.’⁶⁵ It would appear there was an unofficial national coalition for change.

However, while Robert Menzies, the federal Attorney-General, had compiled the ‘yes’ case and distributed 4.2 million copies, the various state UAP parties were unenthusiastic. The Victorian section was particularly silent because, as the UCP saw it, ‘financiers and middle-men were behind the strings.’⁶⁶ The electorate, suspicious of greater centralised power, was persuaded that a government seeking extra powers could not be trusted especially a Lyons government.⁶⁷ The referendum was in two parts, one to put aviation under Commonwealth control, the other to confirm the marketing arrangements in place prior to the James Case. Both failed. Federal control of marketing was defeated in all states and nationally, reflecting the historically negative attitude of the Australian people towards changes to the constitution. In Victoria, despite the Labor country conference in Geelong supporting the referendum, it was only in some country

⁶³ Page, *op. cit.*, pp. 274-6

⁶⁴ *Countryman*, 22 January 1937

⁶⁵ *Labor Call*, 25 February 1937

⁶⁶ *Countryman*, 12 March 1937

⁶⁷ *Labor Call*, 11 March 1937

areas including the Wimmera that the marketing referendum was supported. Noticeably the dairying areas were strongly opposed.⁶⁸ The wheat farmers and their radical MPs had campaigned for it but the dairy farmers, aligned with the conservative members of the UAP, did not support it. Now it would be necessary to coordinate state legislation to achieve the desired outcome of nation-wide orderly marketing – a seemingly impossible task. The aviation referendum passed in Queensland and Victoria only, the two states also contributing to a majority for the Commonwealth as a whole.⁶⁹

Several factors determined that the Victorian parliament would remain in recess for more than half the year. Dunstan would be overseas for several months while he attended the coronation and visited some dominion parliaments. The frustration caused by the upper house obstructionism had dulled the zeal of introducing any contentious legislation and plans to outmanoeuvre the Council on the Reform Bill process were still being worked on. Also, the Labor Party was not pushing any urgent legislation and the few continuing inquiries such as those into the slums would take some time.

The conservative element of the UCP in Victoria was abating a little more as their collective attitude to economic remedies and marketing became more radical in the face of personal experience and the continued resistance by the UAP. Unheard of at the time of the early days of the Depression, and now under the direct influence of Hocking, the *Countryman* now spoke out criticising the architects of the Premiers' Plan:

One of Australia's worst dreams followed Otto Niemeyer's visit to Australia – he is a monetary dictator – and left Australia with a deflationary policy which contributed to world-wide bankruptcy and compelled the introduction of Debt Adjustment Schemes. Now he is imposing similar policies on other agricultural economies and trying to control international and money relativities.⁷⁰

This message was reiterated at the 1937 Geelong Conference of the Country Party by the president R R Skeat in his opening address when he underlined the need for the party to be distinct and to maintain certain ideals separate from other parties. He regretted the people's negative attitude to the recent referendums and bemoaned their

⁶⁸ *Horsham Times*, 9 March 1937

⁶⁹ *Australian Parliamentary Handbook*, p. 732

⁷⁰ *Countryman*, 9 April 1937

lack of interest in Australian politics in contrast to their knowledge of what was happening in Germany and Italy. He supported the League of Nations in its difficult task and attacked Fascism. Then he emphasised the need for government to act for the social and economic benefit of all people through better housing, education, nourishment and health including a general compulsory contributions scheme: 'We need to reduce working hours as opposed to greater taxation in order to support the dole and unemployment. The commonwealth government has been most unhelpful on these matters.'⁷¹ Such an address would have received a standing ovation at a Labor Party conference held in Trades Hall. When Brigadier Rankin DSO became president the contrast between Skeat and this conservative gentleman who campaigned for the presidency with a photograph in full military uniform and medals would not have gone unnoticed.

The debate on composite ministries generated more heat at the Conference with the Attorney-General Bussau stating that 'alliances do not make for strength but for weakness and destruction,' and that there should be no future fusion at state level as this had destroyed the Country Party in South Australia.⁷² Delegates agreed that at federal level cooperation could be accepted in times of national emergencies as long as equal partnership through equal portfolios preserved the entity of the Country Party. Tom Paterson MHR countered this saying that if Victorian rules bound the federal members then they would be isolated from any composite ministry. Furthermore, he continued, the reality must be recognised that at federal level the party did not enjoy the advantage of the rural quotas as in Victoria. He added that even if it won every rural seat in Australia it could not govern alone nor with the support of Labor while the Lang section held so much influence in the caucus.⁷³

The Mallee radicals were quick to rise to their feet, with Wilson blaming the loss of wheat and wool markets on the UAP decision to blackball Japan under the Ottawa Agreement. Then Allnutt argued that the Country Party 'went down in all composite governments' and that they could achieve more in Canberra from the corner. What was true of the Lang group in caucus was also true for the Country Party in company with

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 16 April 1937

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ *ibid.*, 23 April 1937

the UCP. These two received strong support from Hocking and McEwen although the latter did concede that adherence to Victorian rules would lead inevitably to a split in the federal parliamentary ranks and that they should learn from the Labor-Langite split.⁷⁴ How very true this statement would prove to be.

The early attitude of the four Mallee Hens towards the position that the Country Party found itself in when supported by Labor to form minority government gives some clues as to the personal and political differences within the UCP. Their position was exemplified when Lamb explained to the Natimuk branch in the Wimmera that he had stood for Lowan in 1935 with the view of making the Country Party an independent party:

Much has been said about an alliance between the UCP and Labor but there is no such thing. The Labor Party had given conditional support and we have honoured that, but any alliance was between Tunnecliffe and Lord Huntingfield. If we could secure that same independence of Country Party men in the federal House, the primary producers of Australia would be in a much better position.⁷⁵

An academic observer would have noticed Lamb's subtle differentiation between de facto coalitions and minoritarian minority governments. Yes, he had argued for the end to the formal coalition with Argyle but supported a conditional arrangement between Labor and Dunstan as tendered to the Governor. He was careful to separate those conditions from his party even if he himself argued in the parliament that the government should deliver some of Labor's policies and programs. His address to the Natimuk branch also gives a hint that the Mallee Hens may have been discussing amongst themselves the possibility of one or more of them seeking candidature for federal parliament. Certainly Wilson would have a chance in Wimmera. Lamb told the branch that over the last session alone, 10 Bills had been passed, a record for more than 30 years, and that in his opinion the Debts Adjustment Scheme was one of the greatest pieces of legislation to go through the Victorian parliament. Transport was a difficult and complex matter:

If we give road transport an open go then people will pay higher taxes for interest on the railways debt. We need to keep the railways asset intact but road

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 7 May 1937

transport has come to stay and we need to coordinate the two services to the best advantage of the people.⁷⁶

Remarkably, Lamb was echoing almost the same words used by Wettenhall before the election in 1935. Even opponents can share common objectives and principles.

Economic policy was further cementing the bond between Labor and the UCP. The change in thinking by Australia's leading economists, now sharing the view expressed by Skeat at the UCP Conference, showed that the 'Age of Niemeyer' had passed. The Chief Justice of the Arbitration Court, when considering the wage case in May, demanded that the unions prove their case. W B Reddaway, a research fellow in economics at Melbourne University, supported the unions' case by explaining Keynesian expansionary economics and sought restoration of the wage to the 1929 level 'plus a few shillings.' Giblin, Copland and Wood now all supported him in his argument that demand and consumption were equally important as payment for production. Reddaway's U-turn from the Premiers' Plan position could be explained as he was a student during Niemeyer's heyday and was not then aware of Keynes' developing theories, but his supporters at the Arbitration Court would have been hard pressed explaining their change of thinking had it been them in the witness box.⁷⁷

The new session of parliament was approaching. The Legislative Council's obstructionism would be put to the test with Dunstan's threat of a new poll should the Reform Bill be rejected. Tunnecliffe agreed, pointing out that the Council was one of the few second chambers not to be reformed in line with developing democracy. Labor too, he added, had had enough of this small coterie of the establishment who had been the real rulers of Victoria, frustrating the will of the people over more than 80 years.⁷⁸ When Labor was last in office the Council rejected 40 Bills, the UAP over a similar period of three years saw only eight minor Bills defeated and now, in just over one year, the UCP government had seen eight Bills defeated.⁷⁹

Dunstan returned from his lengthy overseas trip. After the coronation he had travelled to North America visiting the Canadian wheat belt, the area from which so much of the

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 23 April 1937

⁷⁷ *Labor Call*, 20 and 27 May 1937

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 27 May 1937

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

early VFU policy and organisation had originated. After visiting the Winnipeg ‘wheat pit’ where buyers and sellers gambled on the wheat price he was more convinced than ever that orderly marketing was best for growers and consumers.⁸⁰ Local issues were soon on his mind. Dunstan found that the election held in his absence for the Legislative Council on the new boundaries had only marginally improved his party’s position in that chamber. The election itself had been far from being the usual sedate affair in the style of its predecessors, the question of reform adding vigour and the new boundaries adding complexity where in more than one instance sitting MLCs from the same party found themselves opposing each other.⁸¹ The trend overall favoured the reformers and the UCP gained three seats and Labor one, while the UAP lost three, the overall majority for the UAP now being now 20:14. The Reform Bill was reintroduced into the Assembly and the unamended Bill then forwarded to the Legislative Council. The second reading gained the necessary absolute majority, indicating the change at the poll, shifting the balance in favour of reformers within the UAP, but on the final reading the majority in favour did not meet the required absolute majority. The die-hards had twisted enough arms and again the Bill lapsed

The tension between the federal and state Country Party organisations continued. Central Council urged the adoption of proportional representation for the Senate elections as this would enable them to run their own ticket, but while all federal parties agreed with the proposal in theory, the UAP maintained that the time was not right. Central Council also reaffirmed that federal MPs must comply with the Geelong Conference requirements and be ‘true’ UCP candidates and representatives. It rejected the draft ACPA constitution and stuck to the principle that the conditions for a Victorian composite ministry should apply at federal level. Over the two years since he had entered the federal parliament McEwen’s experience in Canberra had weakened his loyalty to the Central Council position. He earned the wrath of some members when he and Paterson failed to advise the ACPA that they could not bind themselves to the new draft constitution but could only report to Central Council. An argument over the use of private letters by Hocking allegedly imputing dishonourable motives to McEwen over his emerging ‘new’ stance surfaced in the *Countryman*, and soured their relationship. Another federal issue facing the party was the problem of preselection when Alex

⁸⁰ *Countryman*, 16 July 1937

⁸¹ Paul, *The premierships of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 124

Wilson and sitting MP Hugh McClelland both nominated for Wimmera. The existing 'let the people decide' policy of fielding all UCP candidates had come unstuck at the recent Benalla by-election where five UCP candidates had been beaten by an independent. A choice had to be made for Wimmera. Ultimately the Wimmera electorate council on a vote of 90:21 decided on a preselection which was won by Wilson.

The developing fiery federal scene virtually evaporated the day after the Council rejected the Reform Bill. Dunstan interrupted the debate on the budget in the Assembly to announce that he had sought and been granted a dissolution of the lower house by the Lt. Governor Sir Frederick Mann. The rumoured 'plot' to displace him would be tested and the people given the chance to evaluate the performance of their first-ever Country Party government. Now too, Labor would need to thoroughly assess the advantages of continuing the current arrangements with the UCP.

In the rural areas the UAP campaigned strongly against the alliance between Labor and the UCP attempting to taint the Dunstan government with the accusation they had become too radical. This gave some life to an election made somewhat weak on policy details when the over-riding issue was reform of the Legislative Council. For example, in Lowan the deputy leader of the UAP, Kent Hughes, said the Dunstan policy was 'coated with the red dust of Labor.'⁸² The attack was supported by country newspapers in a number of north-western electorates running the rumour:

that some person who was bright scarlet in a political sense had made his appearance in the closing week of the contest, supposedly to assist the sitting UCP member who knew nothing of him. His arrival however was in time to provide the UAP candidate with the opportunity to warn the people of these alleged UCP associations.⁸³

For the UCP the propaganda fortunately failed and the electors registered their disapproval at the ballot box. The city organisation behind the rumour anticipated that this would assist the UAP but the reverse was just as severe. For example, in Lowan Lamb polled two votes to the one polled by his opponent.⁸⁴

⁸² *Countryman*, 8 October 1937

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

The policy speeches were low key, Dunstan concentrating on a 'steady as she goes' platform, the details hardly reportable compared to his attacks on the opposition for their resistance to upper house reform more than 25 years after the example set by the Parliament of Westminster which removed from the House of Lords all powers of veto over money Bills.⁸⁵ Labor repeated its claims that the credit for the years of progressive legislation really was with them and that the last two and a half years had been fruitful thanks to the decision to support the minority government against the UAP: 'It has been a bargain price for the State.'⁸⁶ The conservatives largely concentrated in a negative fashion upon the socialist inroads made upon the UCP and the need to replace them.

The outcome of the rushed election saw the UAP lose three seats, two to Labor and one to an independent, while the UCP remained steady. There was a slight swing to Labor and in some city seats the UAP candidates increased their majorities. Any public interest in the lacklustre election was hijacked during the campaign when Prime Minister Lyons announced a federal election would be held three weeks later. Wettenhall immediately announced his intention to run as an independent for the half-Senate election to be held at the same time.

Hocking campaigned strongly for Wilson in Wimmera declaring at Wycheproof that his outspoken, independent-minded candidate was a second Percy Stewart who would not be part of a composite government in contrast to his opponent McClelland who was now an 'apologist for the Lyons government.'⁸⁷ Lyons held onto office but Labor made some gains. Wilson defeated McClelland, and Rankin won Bendigo for the first time for the Country Party. The Mallee Hens had increased by one. The coalition government would continue in Canberra but not before the new ministry caused a major upheaval among members of the Country Party in Victoria.

When state parliament resumed there were some significant changes in the Labor Party. John Cain was now leader with H M Cremean as deputy. Wren had retained his contacts at the top level, albeit through the deputy leadership as Cain had always distanced himself from the connection and through Tunnecliffe who would be supported by the

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 17 September 1937

⁸⁶ *Labor Call*, 16 September 1937

⁸⁷ *Countryman*, 22 October 1937

UCP for the speakership. A few months later a slight shift towards conservatism in the UCP ministry would occur when Bussau went to London as Agent-General to replace Bouchier who had died in mid-December. Another bombshell was the disclosure by Macfarlan that he had been pressured by Collins Street interests, if not to 'pledge' himself to their platform, to at least 'toe-the-line' or lose his endorsement. He was also expected to disown the Country and Liberal section of the party because of its support for the Dunstan government. He had refused but when his colleague Harold Drew (MLA for Albert Park) responded in like fashion he had been successfully targeted.⁸⁸

Indirectly the majority for Dunstan increased with the election of an independent, Ivy Weber, for Nunawading, formerly a UAP seat and once held by R G Menzies. She was only the second woman to be elected to the Victorian parliament, the first having been Lady Millie Peacock who was elected unopposed at a by-election in November 1933 following the death of her husband, Sir Alexander Peacock. Weber was a member of the Country Party Women's Association and the Australian Women's Movement against Socialism and not unexpectedly usually supported the Dunstan government.⁸⁹ Lamb, one of the few who recognised women as being equals with men and having a right to be in parliament as well as voting for it, immediately worked to cement the political relationship and was featured by the *Argus* in a double photo article playing tennis with her on the parliamentary courts.

The Legislative Council Reform Bill, 'designed primarily to deal with deadlocks between the two Houses,'⁹⁰ was passed on 26 October by the Assembly for the third time in three years. This time the Council, still with the conservatives in the majority, realised that they had more to gain from initiating compromise changes through a free conference between the houses rather than through straight-out opposition. Council approved of minor reforms on voting qualifications but rejected the Dunstan double-dissolution proposal.⁹¹ Just prior to the Christmas break a new deadlock solution was constructed where, if the scenario just experienced was repeated and the Council again rejected the Bill(s) in question, the Governor could dissolve the Council. If, after the

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 19 November 1937

⁸⁹ Browne, *Biographical Register*, p. 220

⁹⁰ Victorian Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 202, 26 October 1937, p. 91

⁹¹ R Wright, *A People's Counsel: A History of the Parliament of Victoria 1856-1990*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 171-2

dissolution, a new Council again rejected the Bill the Governor might convene a joint sitting of the houses and the Bill(s) could be passed by a simple majority. This cumbersome solution to deadlocks was so tortuous that it was never used,⁹² although it stayed in place for almost 65 years. Dunstan's reputation grew from the exercise, thanks to sympathetic media coverage, his government's alignment with Labor now being accepted as 'a genuine front of Centre and Left guided and tempered by an unimpeachable leader.'⁹³ Dunstan's close relations with the leader-writer on state politics with the *Age*, who detested Argyle, assured that his victory over the Council shone brightly putting his concessions to Labor in the public shade.⁹⁴

When John McEwen accepted a portfolio in the Lyons composite government this was interpreted as displaying lack of loyalty to fellow endorsed UCP candidates and the rank and file. The Central Council, voting 4:3 with two absent on 6 December, immediately cancelled his membership as a penalty for his contravention of party rules and in payback for the reversal of his outspoken acceptance of those rules at the Geelong Conference and his signing the nomination form. He was seen as putting the man above measures. McEwen maintained that delegates at Geelong had adopted his amendment to the party's constitution for the specific purpose of permitting Victorian federal members to act in unity with CP members from the other states on the matter of entry to or withdrawal from composite ministries without consulting Central Council.⁹⁵ Later some councillors regretted the Council's hasty action and admitted that it might have been better if he had been asked to resign before expelling him so giving him a chance to defend himself. McEwen was acknowledged as a bright, exceptionally good MP who was widely respected in his new electorate. But his 'turn around' was seen as duplicitous and totally unacceptable to Hocking and Skeat who had campaigned strongly for him in the past especially when McEwen had opposed on principle Coyle's endorsement for the state seat of Waranga. This new clash was also interpreted as a competition for power and influence between personalities. To reinforce the situation Rankin was forced to resign from the position of president against his will now he was an MP despite his arguing that the rules allowed him to continue until the next Conference. He was replaced by the immediate past president Skeat, confirming in the

⁹² Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 138

⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 139

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 139-41

⁹⁵ *Australian Country Party Monthly Journal*, January 1938, p. 6

eyes of the *Argus* that the radical section of Central Council – Skeat, Hocking and H L Simpson – ruled the UCP bringing a strong Labor influence on the Victorian ministry which had to be checked.⁹⁶ With all the heat generated over the aftermath of the federal election the reversing of the Ottawa Agreement went almost unnoticed.

The storm clouds were gathering for an intensification of the battle between the federal and state levels of the UCP, amongst the rank and file, on the Central Council and among the parliamentary representatives. Questions of cooperation with other parties in the parliaments were at the centre of the maelstrom. Dunstan would have been concerned too that some checks should be placed on the Skeat-Hocking-Simpson axis of influence and their supporters to preserve the state-federal connection. He would not have forgotten the barb delivered at him by Kent Hughes during the no-confidence debate that led to him becoming Premier: ‘Whelan the wrecker of democracy, accuses me of Fascism. He is controlled by an outside junta; Hitler-Hocking controls him.’⁹⁷

Dunstan would need to demonstrate his independence and leadership. Concurrently, he recognised that the existing working relationship with Labor in Victoria, on which his own position, leadership and the premiership rested, was the only way to go. However, it also depended on individuals such as the Mallee Hens and men such as Hocking and Skeat to infuse the movement with left-of-centre ideals to consolidate the relationship and to resist the overtures from the UAP which would be constantly at the ready to swamp him to regain government.

⁹⁶ *Countryman*, 17 December 1937

⁹⁷ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 196, 28 March 1935, p. 141

CHAPTER 9

STEADY AS SHE GOES – THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

‘You cannot support measures without supporting men.’

A A Dunstan, 20 July 1938

This chapter addresses the continuing debate within the UCP about the relative benefits of minority and coalition governments and the clash between the federal and state parliamentary bodies which led to a split in the Victorian branch. It argues that the UCP was the only state Country Party hostile to coalitions because of the unique realities in Victoria of electoral malapportionment and a weak Labor Party. It shows that the basis for the split and the establishment of the Liberal Country Party (LCP) was the pro-coalitionists’ attitude to the two major leaders within the UCP, Dunstan and Hocking. The reasons for the division over coalitions lay in the historic source of membership which was still internally divided over sympathy towards Labor or UAP ideals.

The UAP and conservatives in the UCP started to campaign strongly to weaken the solidarity of the UCP by targeting the self-appointed leader of the rank and file – A E Hocking. Their aim was to restore a Victorian coalition with Labor in opposition and so reduce the conflict between the Victorian and national bodies. The catalyst for their attack was the expulsion from the UCP of John McEwen who had accepted a ministry in the federal coalition. Although there was opposition by some federal coalition MPs in other states to coalition legislation, such as the National Insurance Bill, Victoria remained the only state out of line, continuing to oppose a coalition with the UAP federally or at state level. Matters worsened when a new party, the Liberal Country Party, led by McEwen and his supporters was formed from members of the UCP – another split not unlike that of the 1920s. Initial demands by the LCP for reunion required the (elected) Hocking to be removed from all influential positions. They also wanted the South Australian LCP model adopted in Victoria. Fusion and removal of the separate Country Party would remove Dunstan as well. Another reason for Victoria being the odd man out was because it was the only Country Party which saw commonality with Labor on such issues as wheat pools and controls over wealth as well as men for the war effort.

In April 1939 Prime Minister Lyons died in office and R G Menzies succeeded him. Earle Page led his party out of the coalition and sat on the cross-benches. Earlier, at Lyons' funeral, he had rejected a personal offer from Curtin for Labor to support a federal minority Country Party government for the remainder of the parliamentary term. When war broke out, the federal coalition was re-formed.

The first indirect signs of the undermining of Hocking's reputation were the constant external attacks on him and others on the Central Council for being appointed by the Premier and his cabinet to several boards, such as Hocking to the State Savings Bank, H L Simpson to the Farmers' Debts Adjustment Board, C A Phayer to the Melbourne Harbour Trust and A W Fairley to the State Electricity Commission. Hocking felt obliged to answer these criticisms through a third party, the *Countryman*, defending the right of senior UCP Council and Conference members to be appointed on merit to positions of public responsibility and trust. In fact, it was argued, the UCP provided a balance of country and city interests.¹ The conservative metropolitan press also used such attacks to try to divide the Country Party. The *Argus* challenged whether members of the Central Council represented the UCP, Collins House or business and called for a plebiscite of the rank and file on the questions of composite governments and McEwen's expulsion. Again the editorial in the *Countryman* set out step by step the logic behind the decision and pointed out that a 14:4 decision was hardly a test between radicals and moderates.² Feeling obliged to answer the 'charges' by the press, the Central Council re-examined the affair resulting in a slight shift of two members in favour of McEwen but reaffirming the expulsion.

The attack by the press and the federal party on the Victorian section and the intolerance of the latter was largely due to divergent rural groupings in Victoria compared to the relative uniformity of the other states. The Wimmera farmers' stubbornness grew from their failure to recognise that the regional radicalism of the Mallee, Loddon and Wimmera had no counterpart outside Victoria, apart from some empathy in other wheat districts – the Southern Riverina and parts of South Australia and Western Australia.

¹ *Countryman*, 14 January 1938

² *ibid.*, 28 January 1938

Now with their tight control over the Central Council, their uncompromising attitude left little room for understanding the problems of rural interests in other states, let alone compromise.³ One could ask what deep understanding would any wheat ‘cockies’ have with growers of potatoes and onions in the south of Victoria or dairying in Gippsland let alone cane farmers in Queensland or why South Australian wheat farmers did not support a compulsory wheat pool.⁴ Archie Cameron argued that, given their smaller parliamentary numbers nationally, relative to those in Victoria, the only road to influence for the Country Party at federal level was through the larger non-Labor party as Labor itself was seen as their enemy on tariffs. Conveniently he appears to have overlooked that it was the city-based interests who owned the industries employing the unions which also had repeatedly frustrated Page’s anti-tariff policies.

In South Australia attitudes towards the non-Labor parties varied. Cameron had to work hard to maintain fusion between the Country Party element and the anti-Labor MPs in Adelaide. Late the previous year the ‘pure’ Country Party group had made substantial electoral gains federally at the expense of the Liberal Country Party.⁵ This centre group was a ‘continuing Country Party supported by the Country Taxpayers’ Association and the South Australian Wheatgrowers’ Federation and was under the covert patronage of the Victorian Country Party.’⁶ Now the centre group was hopeful for their candidate in Wakefield at the by-election brought about by the tragic death of Charles Hawker MHR, a respected and popular local member, who died when the plane *Kyeema* crashed into Mount Dandenong in Melbourne’s outer east.⁷ Wakefield included the German-settled Barossa Valley and its primary industries besides wine were wheat and wool, a virtual continuation across the border of the Mallee-Wimmera regions in topography, produce and social relationships. Cameron would not have been happy that the UAP candidate lost to Labor on preferences when the conservative vote split. He himself had won Barker in a similar fashion as a pure-CP man but had later accepted the actuality of composite ministries. This came hard on the heels of the Victorian by-election in the

³ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 205

⁴ *Countryman*, 23 April 1937

⁵ *ibid.*, 25 March 1938

⁶ D Jaensch, ‘South Australia and the Northern Territory’ in B Costar and D Woodward (eds), *Country to National*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, pp. 121-2

⁷ *Countryman*, 9 December 1938

Gippsland North province won by Alex Borthwick of the UCP defeating the LCP and independent Labor candidates.

This sequence of events showed that the gulf between Victorian Country Party electoral successes and an understanding of the differences between the states and at federal level was deep rooted. Moreover, many non-Victorian Country Party ministers were wedded to the composite concept as they had been part of one for years under the successful Bruce-Page coalition. Their target was limited to increasing their numbers, securing more influential portfolios or gaining small advantages for their supporters in policy decisions. For them, minority government or sitting on the cross-benches was inappropriate and unrealistic. Paterson had been one of those who pushed this argument and now McEwen had absorbed the rationale, angering those who had engineered the Victorian minority ministry and who believed their success was a political model for the Australian rural community at large. These critics accused McEwen and others of falling for the lure of personal advancement. Contrary to this, Premier Dunstan, networking through the Premiers' Conferences and other avenues, was one who more than most realised that a minority government approach was a rare opportunity with the Victorian experience probably unique in Australia. He also had to work with the Victorian MHRs and kept a low profile on the expulsion of McEwen, leaving the issue to Central Council and biding his time to see how the confrontation might develop. More than anyone else in his party he understood and enjoyed the personal satisfaction and rewards of recognition that came with being Premier of a government whether it was minority or composite.

Unable to acknowledge the practicalities of the federal arrangements and saddled with the memory of McEwen's outspoken support for the revised pledge before transferring to the electorate of Indi, the Victorian critics centred their attack on the allegedly squalid personal ambitions of these 'turncoats.'⁸ An attendant objective was to guide and support Alex Wilson, one of their own number, who was yet to prove himself in federal parliament. Would he be another Percy Stewart or would he follow in McEwen's footsteps? The strength of the attack was no doubt fanned by the embarrassment felt by the Victorian UCP government and Central Council in seeing

⁸ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 208

their federal ministry controlled by a political party which was in official opposition to the Country Party government in Victoria⁹ – a position not easily explained to the electorate. One consequence of being in coalition federally was that harmony between the states and Canberra was best achieved by such coalitions existing at all levels.

Some other personal ambitions were behind the heightened animosity between the federal and Victorian MPs. Dunstan had harboured federal ambitions only to see Rankin take his coveted Bendigo and a younger McEwen gallop past him. McEwen himself appeared to think the worst and had poured petrol on the political fire after his expulsion by charging those appointed ‘to high positions as servants of the Crown in Victoria’ as men who ‘could not fail to realise that the decision to expel a parliamentary representative was a serious one.’¹⁰ Now he challenged Dunstan to consider whether these men they had appointed to those high offices should be able to decide the future of governments. This accusation gained substance when UCP president Skeat admitted that Central Council had appointed a committee to find if legislation could be reviewed by a section of the Central Council before presentation to parliament.¹¹ Dunstan responded, strongly supporting Council, denying there was any foundation to the accusation that it dictated to the ministry.¹² He would not wish that the people suspected he was not in control as Premier. The seeds of doubt had been sown, however, even if he repeated his support for Council at the Ballarat Conference a few months later.

Those seeds would germinate and sprout over the years ahead leading to an internal political and personal battle no-one could have predicted and a battle which would profoundly affect the political life of some UCP parliamentarians. The regional split on the McEwen expulsion manifested itself as UCP branches in the north-west supported Central Council’s position while those in the north-east supported McEwen, their local member. Hocking was a target for attacks on Central Council, and Hamilton Lamb jumped to his defence in a lengthy joint letter to the *Countryman*¹³ a few weeks before the Ballarat Conference, co-signed by Mick Mibus and two others, where they explored the history and argument behind the decision to expel McEwen. They attempted to

⁹ UCP Central Council Minutes, 28 July 1937

¹⁰ *Argus*, 15 December 1937

¹¹ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 214

¹² *Argus*, 15 December 1937

¹³ *Countryman*, 4 March 1938

neutralise the effect of a ‘Canberra Correspondent’ who had written to several newspapers in the Wimmera. These papers, which were owned by connections of Page, had printed the Canberra ‘planted’ letter claiming McEwen was a logical successor to Stewart and was in a far better position to know what was going on. Lamb et al. asserted sentimental propaganda did not match up to the ‘commonsense’ of loyalty to the organisation and that ‘majority decisions came before personal ambitions of the individual.’ They criticised McEwen for turning his back on the very body which put him in parliament and for reversing his opposition to composite ministries. They asked rhetorically could not this political martyr on 1,750 pounds a year have followed several other courses such as sitting on the cross-benches as did Stewart or accept a position in the ministry on the condition that the coalition partners were 50:50 rather than simply accepting the prize of a portfolio and its salary? Is he saying, they questioned, that he is bigger than the party and posing as a martyr to throw the odium of his disloyalty on to Hocking and Co?¹⁴

The Ballarat Conference was the ‘boxing ring’ for the combatants – the pro-composites versus pure-Country Party governments. Dunstan threw the first punch in support of his own independent ministry:

there were no right or left wingers in our parliamentary party or cabinet, that we accept the majority decision and we appreciate the backing of the rank and file, Conference and Council gives us to exercise that independence ... If any of us go under and forget the movement is higher than the individual we will be thrown to the mercy of those who treat us with contempt.¹⁵

These words from a Premier who saw himself at the top and in control were directed straight at Tom Paterson.

There was no debate on the reinstatement of McEwen as the Dimboola branch in Lowan had successfully moved the removal of the item from the agenda. Paterson immediately announced his resignation from the party, walking out with almost 100 delegates to set up the LCP outside the hall, the new title to be the same as that in South Australia.¹⁶ Some argued the walkout was not spontaneous but planned weeks earlier as evidenced

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 4 March 1938

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 1 April 1938

¹⁶ *ibid.*

by Ian Macfarlan being a speaker at the break-away group outside the hall. Another speaker was McEwen. Critics within the UCP saw it as part of a plan to smash the Dunstan government and that the LCP would need to be financed by the UAP to survive, just as in South Australia.¹⁷ Back in the hall Wilson deplored the new group's attacks on the UCP.

Over the next two months the *Countryman*, under the influence of its chairman Hocking and its sympathetic editor, continued its criticism of McEwen, on one occasion under a front page banner 'Inconsistencies of the Leader of the Malcontents' asserting that if McEwen had stuck to his principles so stoutly fought for only six months earlier before the federal election he could have prevented conflict within the UCP.¹⁸ The article also claimed he had 'used the party and his friends and now ruthlessly spurns them.' Hocking made it personal, claiming that when Council had stood by him in Waranga in the face of the Paterson opponents, McEwen had rushed across the Conference platform and shaken his hand saying loudly, 'I'll never forget this AE.' Also in that issue appeared a photo of Hamilton Lamb with the caption: 'who it is anticipated will be appointed Government Whip.' It appeared that Dunstan had indicated to Lamb that promotion was imminent, later perhaps even a portfolio, and that Lamb in turn had shared this confidence with Hocking. The news item would prove to be a 'kiss of death' as it could be interpreted as Hocking being in control of the party and Dunstan complying if such a promotion occurred.

The next week's *Countryman* reported that the conditions proposed by the LCP for healing the split included the removal of Hocking as chairman of the paper and from Central Council (despite his being elected to both positions by good majorities), along with radical changes to the UCP constitution. Hocking started to build up his support and defences. He used Lamb's knowledge from recent visits to South Australia and Western Australia, and afforded him all of page four in the *Countryman* to put his case. Lamb began¹⁹ by pointing out that the federal members of the Country Party in Western Australia, J H Prowse (Forrest) and Henry Gregory (Swan), abided by their state organisation's pledge and that the ACPA constitution was not universal enough to

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 8 April 1938; *Australian Country Party Monthly Journal*, April 1939, pp. 8, 9

¹⁸ *Countryman*, 29 April 1938

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 6 May 1938

meets the needs of all Country Party men. No federal member could logically pretend to be representing the Country Party in the ministry – merely a ‘free-lance job hunter.’ Any attempts for a rapprochement with Paterson and McEwen had been hampered by their less than conciliatory organisation of a rival party. Putting his reputation on the line, Lamb admitted his bias, declaring that uncompromising independence of the party and personalities could not be kept out of the discussion. Then he exposed a degree of egocentricity:

I am probably seen as the MP least prepared to compromise on the question of independence and its relations to composite ministries. Breaking the party pledge was reprehensible – (I unseated a sitting CP member in Lowan only because I was a member of the Country Party) – they are not sorry that re-affiliation with the ACPA failed as they don’t want any restraint – they seek to dictate to the whole organisation as ‘pocket Hitlers’ ... The UCP could walk away from federal matters if it was not for Brigadier Rankin and Mr Wilson who have remained loyal to the UCP and its constitution – and the matter of tariffs, trade treaties and other matters affecting the farmers in this State.²⁰

Lamb’s main criticism of the ACPA was that it did not directly represent primary producers as three states did not have properly constituted Country Parties and in others no distinction was made between industrial and political wings:

In Victoria the UCP is elected from the rank and file up and we want to see similar annual conferences in all States. Like Archie Cameron who boasts he won’t be bound by anybody, the ACPA is simply a body of MHRs and Senators. Cameron told me that after the election it was left to him and Hawker which party room to enter – ‘Hawker went to the UAP so I went to the CP.’ By the composite door both could reach the ministry – Neat work! Tasmania has no Country Party organisation so it is represented on the ACPA by former Victorian Senator Elliott. In the past Queensland met with the Nationalists to select candidates – imagine the uproar if we met with the Trades Hall for a preselection ballot for Indi?²¹

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

Lamb then set out the eight points necessary for Victoria to accept a national body: ‘the first is *sine qua non*, a federal organisation along the lines of the UCP, the remainder open to debate and to compromise.’ Finally, he vowed to oppose composite ministries but accepted the Geelong Conference compromise, and was confident that a two-thirds majority for such a ministry would be met if a ‘national emergency’ was experienced. War was in the wings, everyone knew that.

The pressure to maintain cohesion at the federal level intensified when the coalition government was defeated (37:25) in the House of Representatives, the dissidents in the UAP and the ACP voting with Labor against the gag so that they might continue to publicly voice their concerns over the National Insurance Bill. Lyons responded by threatening a double dissolution, something which had happened only once before in 1914, if the Bill was not passed before the new Senate was installed on 1 July. Immediacy was paramount for then the strength of the UAP in the Senate would be greatly reduced from 32 to 19 and if Labor’s nomination for a Senate vacancy, J M Sheahan, was elected by the Victorian parliament that majority would be further reduced from three to two. In July the Senate could not be trusted to be totally compliant to cabinet.

The UAP and the pro-coalition MHRs, through their whips and the threat of a double dissolution, applied further pressure on those Victorian, Western Australian and Queensland Country Party men who remained loyal to their parent state bodies which opposed the Bill, forcing them to comply even if they were unhappy with aspects and the predicted impact of the National Insurance legislation. It appeared to disregard the claims of the primary producers²² and Wilson stood fast and opposed it, wanting the exclusion of small producers and small businesses from contributing payments ‘on behalf of employers.’²³ Like Labor, the opponents thought the Bill would also remove pensions and place the responsibility of welfare on the private sector. Others thought it would be the death knell for the popular Friendly Societies, those non-profit cooperatives so hated by private business as ‘unfair competitors.’²⁴ The pressure prevailed and the National Health and Pensions Insurance Act, a cornerstone of the

²² *ibid.*, 24 June 1938

²³ *ibid.*, 17 June 1939

²⁴ *Labor Call*, 23 June 1939

Lyons 1937 election policy, passed through both houses on 30 June, the very last day before the new Senate came into being. It was intended to be gradually phased in but a reassessment by the private sector over the next couple of years about the cost and difficulty in implementing the legislation saw to it that it was never enacted.²⁵

At state level the so-called ‘plot’ to divide the UCP and bring down Dunstan continued to feature, especially the attempt to divide Gippsland and the north-east (moderates) against the Mallee and Wimmera (radicals). However this failed when ‘prejudices backing McEwen and Paterson could not overcome unusual loyalty to the UCP organisation,’ according to the Hocking group.²⁶ There were hints too that Keith Murdoch, the press baron based in South Australia, was behind it all, hoping to extend the South Australian LCP model to Victoria. This rumour gathered credibility especially when two UCP members of the Legislative Council, Percy Inchbold and William Macaulay, resigned from the UCP in the weeks leading up to the resumption of parliament, and later joined the LCP. One or two in the Assembly also had threatened to leave the UCP a few weeks earlier, including Norman Martin who had won Gunbower in a by-election in 1934 as an independent against the endorsed UCP candidate. While refused re-admission to the party by the Central Council he had been welcomed back into the parliamentary party. He was persuaded to remain only by Dunstan appointing him party whip. By Dunstan putting survival over commitment, the *Countryman* prediction that Lamb was due for promotion came to nought. Dunstan would keep Martin on side for five years by rewarding him with a Ministry without Portfolio until he made him Minister for Agriculture in 1943 in a composite government.

During all this the Labor Party stood back, not commenting on the ‘plot,’ but observant for it might have affected the balance in the house. Their minds were concentrated on the deaths of two long-serving Labor MPs, Senator John Barnes who would be replaced by a joint sitting of the Victorian parliament and William Brownbill, whose widow Fanny had been preselected to contest the by-election in Geelong. John Cain said he had known for years the UAP would do anything to dismember the UCP – and now that the UCP had split, he would treat the LCP as even less desirable than the UAP. The Labor Party, he added, would remain independent even from the UCP, which it supported in

²⁵ White, *Joseph Lyons*, p. 174

²⁶ *Countryman*, 3 June 1938

government, 'as his party had had a rural policy for years before the current alignments.'²⁷

The attitude of the UAP towards women in parliament and in the home was exemplified by R G Casey (MHR for Corio) who had (carelessly) criticised Fanny Brownbill's candidature when he reflected poorly on the 'capabilities of women.'²⁸ Now his own seat which included the state electorate of Geelong could be threatened as the people of that city resented his words. Exploiting the situation, Frank Forde, deputy leader of the federal Labor Party, said 'Attacking her as a woman, not her policies, was mean.'²⁹ Casey's ill chosen words and a reported statement by Cameron that 'women should stay at home' would rebound against the UAP at a not too distant by-election in Corio.

Until now all parties had almost always ignored the voters' choice of party at the previous election of a deceased senator who was to be replaced and used the opportunity to increase their own numbers (historically Nationalist/UAP, Labor and UCP), but now the LCP made its bid. When it came to the vote many eyes were on UCP MLA J R Paton from Benambra in the north-east. He had deliberately absented himself from the UCP parliamentary party meeting which had met, amongst other things, to take a vote of confidence in their parent organisation. His excuse was on the grounds that 'he would not be associated with the resolution of loyalty.'³⁰ The UCP could not entertain opposing the Labor nomination even if it meant another coalition vote lost at federal level as this would have threatened the minority government in Victoria. Further, given the split in their ranks and the consequent hostility between the two Country Parties, helping to elect a LCP senator was unthinkable. The UAP and the LCP, knowing they could not win, put up a sham fight of unity as that 'principle was not in danger,' and nominated their own LCP candidate. Labor's J M Sheahan was elected 62:35 by the joint sitting to fill the vacancy.

The first hint that Dunstan was sufficiently annoyed by Lamb's siding with Hocking and his lack of practicality in matters political was when Lamb, in an idealistic speech,³¹

²⁷ *ibid.*, 10 June 1938

²⁸ *Labor Call*, 9 June 1938

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *Countryman*, 15 July 1938

³¹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 204, 20 July 1938, p. 330

supported Labor's campaign for a fairer redistribution of seats prior to the next election. When Lamb said that 'the present state of affairs is unjust and undemocratic' and 'the Country Party has nothing to fear from a redistribution of seats,' Dunstan interjected: 'The Honourable Member for Lowan will be among the missing if a redistribution scheme is passed before the next elections.'³² Kent Hughes, fully aware of the UCP internal divisions and of Dunstan's gradual distancing from Lamb and his like-minded Mallee Hens, jumped in: 'Is that a threat or a promise?' Dunstan replied: 'It may be both.' It is not clear from this interchange whether Lamb was an idealist only or partly a realist. He would have observed the fairer federal distributions where the Country Party fared well. Labor's redistribution proposals in Victoria were based on federal electorates. He perhaps hoped that the UCP could make the Victorian electoral system more equitable without suffering widespread losses through abolition of electorates or defeat at the polls on the new boundaries. When Lamb continued that he would only support an Electoral Bill introduced by his own party, Dunstan relaxed a little: 'I think the Honourable Member is entirely safe.'³³ Kent Hughes followed Lamb in the debate and expressed his disappointment that the principled member for Lowan had qualified his redistribution beliefs by limiting them to the UCP, concluding cynically: 'I thought the policy of the UCP was to support measures not men.' Dunstan gave another clue to his survival when he immediately interjected, 'You cannot support measures without supporting men.'³⁴ Both Dunstan and Lamb would have reason to recall that repartee in less than two years time. Dunstan had in mind his own safety rather than Lamb's in Lowan particularly as he had no intention of altering the biggest factor working for him and keeping the Country Party in government – the current distribution of electorates. Nor would he permit personal rivalry such as that from Hocking to threaten his premiership.

The breakaway LCP had now produced a rival publication to the *Countryman*, a newspaper called the *Liberal Country Times*, and in its second issue targeted Lamb for 'flying a kite' during this debate – a reconnaissance for his leader: 'If redistribution was the price of Labor's support it was important that the UCP did not merely fade away.'³⁵ McEwen, who dominated the columns of the new paper, was pinpointing Hocking and

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 331

³⁵ *Liberal Country Times*, 29 July 1938

the ‘radicals’ to illustrate that the aim of the UCP was to get rid of all moderates. He also emphasised that minority governments had to compromise and ‘deal’ with the party on the cross-benches in the same way that coalition partners had to deal with each other.

Over the next four years the LCP would continue to use the *Liberal Country Times* to justify its position and ‘expose’ the non-national attitude of the UCP in Victoria. It claimed its quarrel was only with Central Council which would not accept majority rule federally and whose stance resulted in ‘Wilson sitting alone, isolated and undermining the effectiveness of the Country Party in coalition.’³⁶ The paper claimed the federal composite governments had never been questioned until 1934 when Hocking, the new autocratic president, used the state rules to break affiliation with the ACPA and imposed the pledge – ‘an outrage on conscience.’ ‘The old CPPs are now firmly in control but they are hypocritical in accepting support for a minority government while declaring a no-coalition stance.’³⁷

One *Liberal Country Times* editorial claimed the minor party in coalition had more independence than a minority government relying on a covert understanding with another party. The *Countryman* retaliated by giving prominence to a letter to the editor from Lamb’s Henry Georgist friend and founding member of the VFU, S A Johnson, who declared that Hocking was not a dictator but had given ‘great service when he led the independent group which brought about the Dunstan government – using no other power but his compelling personality as a leader.’ The editorial pointed out that the CPPs had stood for independence long before Hocking came on the scene.³⁸

At the close of the year the two Victorian parties in parliamentary alignment reviewed the value of their arrangement. Labor shared Dunstan’s disappointment that again the UAP’s adoption of the Premiers’ Plan in the early 1930s had led to the Loan Council’s repeated disproportionate allocations favouring New South Wales to the disadvantage of Victoria. While Labor supported the state budget, including the 6 per cent reduction in the unemployment tax, they believed it should have stayed at that level or the exemption threshold raised as the money was still essential to reduce unemployment. Overall the

³⁶ *ibid.*, 12 August 1938

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *Countryman*, 14 October 1938

budget had been favourable and the Slum Reclamation Housing Bill had at last been introduced.³⁹ Labor considered the UCP to be ‘the lesser of two evils’ and that, as silent partners, it was they who could claim credit for the good legislation of the UCP. Looking ahead they promised the UCP could remain safe as long as it remained progressive.⁴⁰ Dunstan and his government had every reason to be self-congratulatory at the conclusion of a ‘fruitful session’ for primary producers and country people.⁴¹

The year 1939 would prove to be incendiary on many fronts – bushfires at home, shellfire in Europe and casualties from friendly fire within the ranks of the UCP and the federal coalition. Black Friday, 13 January 1939, was a day always to be remembered in Victoria’s history. The Wimmera was dry with the rainfall the previous year being the lowest on record. Temperatures were already well over 116 F (46 C). The seaside did not afford much respite, Melbourne suffered its hottest days on record, and fires broke out along the bay at Frankston and Dromana and in the Dandenongs east of Melbourne. The Grampians were ablaze. These record temperatures scorched south-eastern Australia and the worst bushfires in Australia’s history to that time claimed more than 70 lives and countless houses and stock.

Premier Dunstan acted quickly, completing a 400 mile tour of the fire devastated areas, the worst affected being around Walhalla, Erica and Noojee in Gippsland. Simple stories of unselfish service and self-sacrificing endeavour were manifest along with incredible strokes of luck. This was life in the bush, and ‘unbelievable’ reports in the metropolitan press were not always fully appreciated by city folk. Noojee, for example, had been devastated twice in 13 years yet on each occasion the local pub remained intact. Within a fortnight the Premier had appointed Judge L E B Stretton to head the Royal Commission into the bushfires. Stretton took evidence almost every day until mid-April, presenting his findings a few weeks later, blaming ‘human agency’ as the prime cause of the fires and was severely critical of the overlapping responsibilities of different government departments and the resultant inaction that caused greater loss of

³⁹ *Labor Call*, 11 August 1938

⁴⁰ *Horsham Times*, 1 November 1938

⁴¹ *Countryman*, 16 December 1938

life and property than should have occurred. He recommended a ‘paramount fire authority in non-urban areas.’⁴²

Water conservation in Victoria’s north-east was an ongoing major issue, a concern heightened by the continuing drought. The Wimmera River which flowed inland through Horsham to Lake Hindmarsh was a limited resource but the ocean-bound Glenelg could be stored. Lamb had raised his concerns earlier and of the possibility of erecting a dam wall and reservoir at the Rifle Butts near Balmoral where that river flowed through a gorge:

At about one-third of the cost per acre-foot of reservoirs elsewhere, this 50 year dream could be a reality built on sustenance. The fear of drought conditions in the Wimmera and Mallee could be relieved.⁴³

He resolved to step up his campaign to complete the new reservoir. The Rifle Butts scheme now was vital, not only for irrigation but for fire-fighting resources as well.⁴⁴

The Mallee Hens were busy locally on other matters also, with Allnutt, Lamb and Dodgshun, along with Rodda and Wilson, all attending the wheat growers’ branch meeting and dinner at Nhill with over 400 people present, then on to Horsham for the wheat conference itself a week later.⁴⁵ At the conference Wilson was received with applause being recognised as largely responsible for the growers obtaining a home consumption price of an extra shilling per bushel.⁴⁶ The Labor Party was active too, with new branches established at Nhill, Kaniva and Dimboola, reflecting that country people were perhaps becoming increasingly anti-UAP.⁴⁷ The Labor country conference was held at Hamilton, a convenient location to again broadcast the message that it was Labor, either in government as in Queensland or behind government as in Victoria, that produced the best outcomes for primary producers.⁴⁸

The LCP kept up the criticism of the UCP revealing a veiled threat to Dunstan about a rumoured telegram sent to him: ‘don’t nominate for Bendigo; we have the Rankin file.’

⁴² S Johnston and L Nation, *Australia 1939*, NSWU Press, Sydney, 1989, p. 53

⁴³ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 204, 25 August 1938, pp. 1042-3

⁴⁴ *Horsham Times*, 14 March 1939

⁴⁵ *Countryman*, 17 and 24 March 1939

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 31 March 1939

⁴⁷ *Labor Call*, 23 February 1939

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 16 March 1939

There was no explanation. The open attack on the Premier was to charge that the original UCP motto ‘measures before men’ had been replaced by ‘measures subordinated to men,’ as the Central Council’s control over MPs ‘followed the Labor model.’⁴⁹ The attacks continued at the LCP’s first Annual Conference in Melbourne.⁵⁰

The UCP Conference at Bendigo (no longer Sandhurst but ‘Quartzopolis’ according to the *Countryman*) was low key and uncontroversial with the conservative element absent. Simpson was re-elected for a second term and Conference celebrated four years with Dunstan as leader of a UCP government.⁵¹ One reportable statement was Dunstan’s attack on land taxes as ‘a tax on working capital – we need rural population to stop the drift to the cities but we can’t do that on a land-locked policy.’⁵² Dunstan also had a tilt at the LCP, summarily dismissing their leader’s assurances that they had no quarrel with the state government, only with Central Council. He rejected the accusation by McEwen during a radio broadcast that ‘State government appointments to various bodies were perilously close to Tammany Hall politics.’⁵³ Dunstan responded that cabinet would not allow any man’s politics to influence its decisions and that Central Council was cooperative rather than exerting any undue pressure on the government.⁵⁴ Beneath the public veneer lay an increasing competition for kudos and influence between the Premier and leading figures on Central Council, particularly Hocking. Undoubtedly Dunstan felt he had to do something to prove to his party locally and nationally and to the public that he was in charge. Perhaps being seen to actively rebut the LCP attack on government appointments was a clue as to how to act.

Concurrently, the state-federal fight was relegated to a side-show by the federal coalition. For them the only concern was national. Matters also were not so harmonious, disruption breaking out into enmity later when Menzies resigned from the ministry followed a few weeks later by the death of Prime Minister Lyons. The concerns which had mounted over the apparent non-leadership of the coalition by Lyons, especially in the face of impending war in Europe and Asia, had continued on into the next year after

⁴⁹ *Liberal Country Times*, 24 February 1939

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 6 April 1939

⁵¹ *Countryman*, 31 March 1939

⁵² *Horsham Times*, 31 March 1939

⁵³ Quoted in *Countryman*, 31 March 1939

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

the end of the last parliamentary session. Debate over the National Insurance Bill had exposed the ominous cracks in the fabric of the government. Individual ambitions, antagonisms and political disagreements, all held together by the forces determined to see the Bill through the parliament, now erupted into chaos.⁵⁵

Menzies had returned from Europe fully briefed on the situation there, convinced that war would not happen as Germany did not want it. He supported Chamberlain's concessions to Germany over the Sudetenland and remained relatively pro-German himself even after the Munich crisis, telling a meeting of the Old Scotch Collegians Association in Melbourne that a milder form of fascism could well be emulated in Australia.⁵⁶ This strained the relationship with Lyons who was at heart a pacifist and did not support the increasing demand for compulsory military training. This lack of support for military training, let alone conscription, saw T W White walk out of cabinet on the issue threatening to resign, an act which could force the government to an election and defeat. White was persuaded to return but the price Lyons paid for that was to accede to an immediate policy announcement of an enlistment drive for the armed forces.⁵⁷ Lyons hung on but those who hoped to benefit from his retirement or defeat, such as Menzies, vied for the take-over bid. The formation of a National Service Group within the government and increased backing for Menzies by Keith Murdoch – who claimed of Lyons: 'I put him there and I'll put him out'⁵⁸ – fouled the air of cooperation. Page, who returned from London about the same time as Menzies, after negotiating a revision of the Ottawa Agreement, a step already achieved by Canada and New Zealand, was convinced that war was inevitable, putting him at odds with Menzies on the issue. Page was in some doubt whether his party could afford to continue in partnership with a party so clearly split on a multitude of issues, personal as well as political.⁵⁹ Any change in relationship with the UAP federally would have flow-on effects with the Victorian connection.

⁵⁵ Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 235

⁵⁶ White, *Joseph Lyons*, p. 176

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 179

⁵⁸ G Serle, 'Murdoch, Sir Keith Arthur', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 10, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 622-7

⁵⁹ Page, *op. cit.*, p. 304

Why did Page not acknowledge the dissension in his own party over attitudes to the federal coalition, particularly in Victoria, as well as strains in the coalition between the partners? This political myopia destroyed his own chance to be Prime Minister in a minority Country Party government. With Lyons' death so soon after Menzies' resignation, the UAP was without a leader and a deputy leader. On the suggestion of the Attorney-General Billy Hughes and with the concurrence of senior ministers, Page, as Deputy Prime Minister, sought an interview with the Governor-General and was appointed Prime Minister with an unchanged cabinet. Page announced to the reassembled cabinet on 7 April that he would resign as Prime Minister as soon as the UAP elected a new leader and also resign from cabinet if that leader was Robert Gordon Menzies.⁶⁰ Eleven days later his parliamentary party unanimously agreed not to serve in a government with Menzies as Prime Minister. They also, to a man, supported Page's approach to S M Bruce to return to Australia and form a government.⁶¹

Members of the LCP were uncomfortable with Page's ultimatum. Had not Page been elected by a joint Nationalist-Country Party meeting? If they could work with Lyons why not with Menzies?⁶² It seems they did not consider personality clashes in the equation. They were also confused as to why the *Age* opposed Page as Prime Minister but supported Dunstan and the UCP. The answer could only be that Page stood for low tariffs and the UCP was neutral on the issue because of Labor's connection.⁶³ Tariffs were a federal issue anyway. Page failed to convince Bruce and failed to blackmail the UAP who elected Menzies over Hughes by a narrow majority after three ballots.

Page took his objection to Menzies into the parliament, detailing why neither he nor members of his party would serve in a Menzies government: 'He doesn't have the leadership ... he was disloyal to Lyons just before his death ... and declining to join up in the Great War disqualifies him from being prime minister.'⁶⁴ Page himself had served with the Army Medical Corps in the Middle East and on the Western front. Commitment to Great Britain and to the defence of Australia was paramount in his considerations. Two years later he would tell the parliament that despite those strong

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 308-9

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 315

⁶² *Liberal Country Times*, 5 May 1939

⁶³ *ibid.*, 12 June 1939

⁶⁴ Australia, House of Representatives, *Debates*, vol. 159, 20 April 1939, pp. 14-18

feelings expressed in April 1939 he now believed that Menzies had shown judgement and courage in visiting Britain and the scenes of active warfare and that he deserved the wholehearted support of the nation. No-one else had spoken in Menzies' defence.⁶⁵

Incredibly, at Lyons' funeral, Curtin, who only a fortnight earlier had refused on principle to be part of a three-party National government, offered Labor's support for a Page-led Country Party minority government along the lines in Victoria for the remaining 18 months of the current parliament. The only condition was not to introduce conscription. Page had an instinctive aversion to being head or part of a minority government as he believed it would be entirely at the mercy of outside support and be subject to intolerable demands by pressure groups.⁶⁶ What is not known is whether, apart from his aversion to conferring with Dunstan and his colleagues, Page explored the offer with his federal MPs. Curtin may have been motivated by the success claimed by Labor in Victoria under the alignment there but his only comment to Page at the time was that in his opinion, the only thing worse than a government composed of two parties was one composed of three.⁶⁷ It would appear that Page's rejection of Curtin's offer was based on his known animosity towards Menzies and a desire not to offend his Victorian ministers, Paterson and McEwen, who had been expelled from the Victorian Country Party. It seemed to Page to be a matter of 'men not measures,' although it must be acknowledged he saw another avenue open under a leader other than Menzies. He was completely convinced of the necessity of a National government and determined to seek a leader who could weld political forces together and 'inevitably I turned to S M Bruce.'⁶⁸

When Menzies secured the UAP leadership, Page and his party declined to be part of any Menzies government. Page says the minutes of the parliamentary party meeting which took that decision indicate a full attendance but the names of Wilson and Cameron are not listed in his diaries. Neither does he indicate whether he briefed his colleagues on Curtin's offer.⁶⁹ Page then proposed a National government headed by a leader agreed upon by the three parties. Behind the scenes he was still trying to persuade

⁶⁵ Page, *op. cit.*, p. 341

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 310

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 314

Bruce to accept the position. Curtin again rejected this emphatically and when Page handed in his commission he advised the Governor-General to see Curtin as leader of the largest party numerically in the house before calling for Menzies to form a government.⁷⁰ If the Governor-General had done this would Curtin have repeated his offer of support for a Page minority government as Tunnecliffe had done four years earlier in Victoria? Then if the Governor-General had called Page in for further discussions would he have reconsidered Curtin's offer? Probably not, as Page had not abandoned the hope that Bruce might return to Australia.⁷¹

On the other hand it is most unlikely that, in any effort to prevent Menzies becoming Prime Minister, Page would have been able to convince himself and then the Governor-General that his party would support a Labor minority government as had the UCP in Victoria in the late 1920s. It is surprising that Page did not accept that Curtin's offer would lead to steady support for a Page minority government as it had in Victoria under Dunstan. He preferred this state of affairs given his own prediction that in a Menzies government 'the elements of trouble will be enormous' and that 'the UAP with only 26 MPs in the House would have only one more than a quorum.'⁷² Then again, a minority Country Party government could face defeat on some questions at the hands of a hostile Senate. On the question of Labor support, perhaps Page was concerned that the Langites could not be trusted despite the fact that Curtin had suffered only one serious defeat in caucus since their reinstatement in 1936. That loss was over tactics associated with the National Insurance Bill. On this occasion it appears to be a 'matter of men *and* measures.' Labor in Victoria simply said that the Country Party acceptance of a Menzies government was preferable to a federal election – an option too bleak.⁷³ With no consideration of a Country Party minority government option being canvassed in this *Labor Call* article, this suggests Curtin may have floated his personal offer to Page in early April without prior discussion with his party or intended to delay discussion until Page had indicated positive interest.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 318

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 319

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ *Labor Call*, 4 May 1939

The reaction from the states to the Australian Country Party's decision and the prospect of a Menzies government was mixed. Page records that the Country Party in Western Australia telegraphed to say the farmers there would prefer that the party sat on the cross-benches supporting any sound legislation, a view endorsed by the that state's Primary Producers' Organization. The NSW Country Party's Central Council held a similar view adding support for a National government. Queensland, however took a different tack. Two of their MHRs, A W Fadden and B H Corser, had resigned from the parliamentary party over Page's decision not to serve under Menzies. They decided to sit as independent members of the Queensland Country Party. The Queensland Central Council supported Page but maintained that those two MPs should be invited back into the parliamentary party. Those two were later joined by T J Collins of NSW and A O Boardman of South Australia. Page's memoirs do not mention any reaction from the Victorian Central Council or indeed if he sought it. It was left to his secretary Ulrich Ellis to record that the Central Council, in the throes of its bitter fight with federal members and continuous criticism of the Lyons composite government along with having little time for Menzies, reserved its verdict until federal parliament resumed. The Council viewed with contempt that 'a government was destroyed by personal animosities between ministers rather than grounds of political difference' but 'views with satisfaction the termination of the federal composite government.'⁷⁴ Council also asked Rankin to cease meeting with the federal parliamentary party as had Wilson, although from Page's observations recorded in his diary it appears Rankin had not attended the meeting which supported Page's proposals.

With Menzies as Prime Minister, the conservatives in the parliaments increased their demand for civil conscription as part of the defence policy. In Victoria, the radicals through Lamb argued that:

if there was to be conscription of life then there must be conscription of property also so that there would not be piled up a huge debt to be a burden to future generations.

He called for 'a register of property and resources so that every man could be called upon to make his sacrifice.'⁷⁵ In Canberra Wilson voted against the Compulsory Registration of Manpower Bill for the same reason in that it excluded wealth: 'There

⁷⁴ Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 243

⁷⁵ *Countryman*, 14 April 1939

must be complete equality of sacrifice in military matters.⁷⁶ The labour movement split on the National Registration Act when the Australian Council of Trade Unions recommended lifting the boycott on it. Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales did so but the Victorian Trades Hall dug in its heels refusing to endorse the move.⁷⁷ Those who had opposed conscription in the Great War were still in control.

Another major federal issue showing the close connection between the UCP and Labor was the home price of wheat. The flour tax which was earmarked for farmers had proved to be an inadequate scheme. In the Wimmera the Country Party MPs joined 500 farmers packed in to the Horsham Town Hall demanding the Commonwealth assume responsibility for stabilisation of the wheat price.⁷⁸ Lamb had put this position strongly the previous week in parliament arguing that ‘the stabilisation of the wheat industry should be the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government.’⁷⁹ As the Commonwealth gained the income from the tariffs and this hurt the farmer through higher costs of production and loss of markets then that level of government should provide a higher home price and do so through the government-owned Commonwealth Bank. Lamb pointed out that Curtin agreed with this course but if he was able to try that avenue (that is, in government) he would have had to face a hostile Senate.

Labor was critical of how the Australian Country Party had forced their members to support the coalition’s stance on an issue so dear to the hearts of their constituents. A few months later, hoping to gain rural votes but not alienate UCP support, Labor admitted that their threat to force the UAP to the polls over wheat prices was mere ‘shadow boxing’ but it did provide the opportunity to stand up for the man on the land, yet only Wilson and Rankin from Victoria supported Labor, the others voting for ‘postponement.’⁸⁰ Labor claimed that 1939 proved to primary producers, particularly the small man, that the federal Country Party were only a group of ‘political flunkeys’ and that farmers could only retain their properties by electing a Labor government.⁸¹

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 9 June 1939

⁷⁷ *Labor Call*, 3 August 1939

⁷⁸ *Horsham Times*, 22 August 1939

⁷⁹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 207, 15 August 1939, pp. 815-18

⁸⁰ *Labor Call*, 4 January 1940

⁸¹ *ibid.*

The federal sphere dominated Australian politics more than ever and interest in Victorian politics was for most people ‘off the agenda’ except when it related to state-federal relations in commerce, trade and defence. In Spring Street the focus was turning from ‘measures to men.’ The LCP continued to attack the Dunstan government on such issues as reform of the Legislative Council, ‘the last bulwark of landowners against Labor’s socialisation of land.’ The breakaway of the LCP, so denying Dunstan the numbers on all his reforms, was claimed as ‘a blessing in disguise – a protection of property and economic rights.’⁸² The LCP also claimed that the domestic price for wheat was due to a composite government, not due to Country Party pressure from the cross-benches.⁸³

The LCP took the opportunity again to explain to its supporters why being in coalition was preferable to holding the balance of power. Paterson pointed out that it effectively returned the parliament to a two-party system, Labor and non-Labor, as when Page was leader. The danger of hanging on to office was a furphy – had not all the ACP MPs resigned from the ministry in solidarity with Page? If other states followed the Victorian model the ACP would be reduced to a lot of ‘futile little groups’ each controlled by their state executive, with no cohesion and a laughing stock in parliament. The corner position was often the ‘timid road.’⁸⁴ They pointed to the NSW Country Party whose president Abbott was against composite ministries at state level but left it to the federal party to decide that question federally.⁸⁵ The LCP made it clear they did not oppose the Dunstan government but hinted that the ‘Labor and UCP arrangement to get rid of the LCP was not unlike an electoral pact.’⁸⁶

The LCP likened a composite government to a companionate marriage: ‘the open nature denotes absence of nefarious design,’ whereas ‘minority government had the characteristic of a dictatorship, shielding all the arrangements between leaders and outside influences.’⁸⁷ This may have more closely bonded supporters, like a religious revivalist organisation, but probably did nothing to attract new adherents to the cause.

⁸² *Liberal Country Times*, 2 June 1939

⁸³ *ibid.*, 30 June 1939

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 11 August 1939

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

Quite independently the NSW FSA conference removed their anti-coalition rule but underlined their belief in a separate identity for their party with no electoral pacts. Queensland followed suit soon afterwards.

On 3 September 1939 Britain declared war on Germany and Menzies did likewise, without consulting his cabinet, announcing over the wireless, broadcast from the cabinet room at 9.15 pm, the now famous words:

It is my melancholy duty to inform you officially that, in consequence of a persistence by Germany and her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her and that, as a result, Australia is also at war. No harder task can fall to the lot of a democratic leader than to make such an announcement.⁸⁸

Some saw it as the way of a one-man band. Menzies was criticised for his lack of consultation, with constitutional lawyer and former UAP senator Tom Brennan stating he had acted ‘unconstitutionally’: the Statute of Westminster had been passed in 1931 and Australia should enact its own legislation to enter the war.⁸⁹ Brennan may have been correct in principle but Menzies had not acted unconstitutionally as the Statute of Westminster,⁹⁰ while outlining the agreements reached at the 1926 and 1930 Imperial Conferences, was not ratified and adopted until 9 October 1942 by the Curtin Labor government.⁹¹ However, Labor did not argue against the entry into the war, Curtin stating ‘We give our allegiance to the British Commonwealth’⁹² and ‘Labor would not contribute to the defeat of the British Commonwealth.’⁹³

A cooperative situation regarding the war was in place between Labor and the coalition but the biggest difference between them would be whether Britain or Australia controlled the Australian forces.

⁸⁸ G Freudenberg, *Churchill and Australia*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 2008, p. 204

⁸⁹ *Labor Call*, 12 October 1939

⁹⁰ Assented to on 11 December 1931

⁹¹ Statute of Westminster Adoption Act No 56 of 1942 (assented to on 9 October 1942)

⁹² *Labor Call*, 26 October 1939

⁹³ *ibid.*, 23 November 1939

CHAPTER 10
A CLASH BETWEEN LEADERS OF THE UCP –
PRINCIPLE OR PRACTICE?

‘The primeval passions of hate, jealousy and revenge –
all those ignoble feelings that discolour human relationships
when old friends and associates quarrel.’

T D Oldham

This chapter reveals the importance of competing leadership and personalities in political arrangements regardless of unity on policies and how and why Premier Dunstan campaigned against members of his own caucus, seemingly impervious to consequences. It argues that Dunstan’s complex personality and capacity for intrigue shaped Victoria’s politics for a decade. He would not tolerate those who resisted him on any matter, leading him to be dismissive of those who opposed him. This also partly explains why his government was seen as a ‘do-nothing government’ as does his obsession with survival rather than policy innovation.

Dunstan decided it was time to establish his control over the party ‘from the top down.’ He was determined that his perceived competitor for leadership, A E Hocking, must be reduced in status and influence. The Premier had been annoyed that his own son had been denied UCP endorsement for the seat of Bulla-Dalhousie and quietly sanctioned a rumour that those opposing him were hatching a ‘plot’ to replace his minority government with a coalition. Dunstan’s legislated sacking of Hocking as a commissioner of the State Savings Bank, on debatable legal grounds, created a furore in the party. This was questioned by the radical Mallee Hens. Dunstan, annoyed and feeling threatened, used the imminent federal election as a cover and called an early state election running his own candidates against those ‘rebels’ who opposed him. He failed to defeat his opponents and the issue was referred to the state Conference. This Conference was a win and loss for Dunstan: Hocking withdrew his challenge preventing a walkout by the Premier but delegates elected two ‘rebels’ over Dunstan’s nominees onto the Central Council. Overall, Dunstan had established himself as the key powerbroker in the UCP. There would be no threat to the minority government while he

remained Premier and received support from Labor, provided there was no change to the electoral distribution.

In late September 1939 the seeds for a major controversy within the Victorian UCP were being sown over the preselection for the state seat of Bulla-Dalhousie. It was a confusing preselection in which the Premier's son, Arthur Dunstan, withdrew from a three-way contest before a vote was taken but then renominated after the others withdrew. They had done so after learning at the meeting that he reserved the right, if unsuccessful, to contest as an unendorsed candidate. The electorate council recommended that Arthur Dunstan seek endorsement by Central Council. While this scenario was arguably within the constitution of the party, the tactics were not appreciated at the local level. It took several weeks for the issue to be considered by Central Council but it was finally agreed to defer endorsement until after a meeting between the senior party officers and the candidate as Council considered that the spirit and the letter of the party's constitution had been infringed in the preselection process.

It appears that, in the period leading up to this decision, Hocking was of a mind that endorsement was not to be set aside for family patronage nor could the good name of the UCP organisation be mocked by 'bending' the rules. The Premier was not forthcoming on the issue in general discussions with Central Council and stood aloof from Hocking during the talks, erecting almost a wall of silence on a range of matters. Hocking suspected that as Bulla-Dalhousie was not a UCP seat and their candidate usually ran third, a 'deal' had been struck between the Premier and Labor for Labor not to field a candidate against his son. This would be the same way as Dunstan had secured Labor's withdrawal from most seats held by the UCP. In this way the UCP-Labor alignment would gain another seat at the expense of the UAP. If this was true Hocking would have felt that Central Council had been snubbed and that the Premier felt he no longer needed its support.¹

¹ Paul, The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan, pp. 222-3

Such resentment by Hocking and the feeling of dominance by Dunstan had grown over the years. Dunstan had become irritated by the general undercurrent acknowledgement that he owed his high office to Hocking's time as president and its continuation to Central Council. Now Hocking sensed the Bulla-Dalhousie incident showed that Dunstan believed that with two election victories behind him he could rely on Cain and the Labor Party regardless of whatever Hocking and Council did. For him, their time of influence was over. While one was a politician and his arena parliament and the other an organisation man with the rank and file as his power base, the two wanted the same objective of a UCP government but they competed for recognition. Over the years in government Dunstan now thought the cabinet and the parliamentary party should be responsible for policy whereas Hocking argued that Central Council had a role of responsibility to see that the policy of the rank and file was delivered, an approach not dissimilar to that of the Labor Party. The regular meetings of the Central Council with the parliamentary party were meant to achieve this but had become infrequent as Dunstan stood strategically apart. Hocking was totally against composite governments at state and federal levels whereas Dunstan had become persuaded somewhat that composite governments were a reality without alternatives at federal level. The changing situation following the death of Lyons had demonstrated that apart from politics, Hocking had another grievance. He did not feel comfortable about Dunstan's association with John Wren.²

The discontinuance of Hocking's company's sand supply contracts with government without adequate explanation and a lack of response to questions on notice in parliament on the matter along with the dispute over the Bulla-Dalhousie preselection fuelled Hocking's suspicions. When the attacks by the media and the LCP members over UCP appointments to various state bodies re-emerged his suspicions seemed confirmed. Hocking felt targeted. Likewise, after Central Council finally made its prolonged decision to defer endorsement for Bulla-Dalhousie, Dunstan's family connection interpreted this as a personal criticism of the Premier. Dunstan decided to take the offensive and to exploit the public attacks on his government's appointments as a means to break the deadlock or even win the war of supremacy between the two men.

² Hocking, *op. cit.*, p. 99

Dunstan summoned the chairman of the State Savings Bank (SSB) away from an important meeting of the commissioners to see him on a matter of urgency, and told him that some doubts had been cast on the legality of the appointment and functions of three of the bank's commissioners including Hocking. The chairman in turn informed his fellow commissioners of the Premier's concerns that no person was eligible to sit as a commissioner if he was a director or manager of any company which had as one of its objects the lending of money on the security of freehold or leasehold property in Victoria, and that these three commissioners appeared to contravene that provision. The Premier then interviewed the three commissioners separately, handing each a copy of the Crown Solicitor's opinion on their status. Dunstan assured them no action would be taken until they had obtained their own counsel but a day later he advised that he proposed to suspend them.³ Hocking immediately sought legal advice from J C Gorman KC. It appeared that one of the objects of his sand companies had been to lend money on security of land – one of the companies about which he had got Lamb to ask questions in the parliament late the previous year. The next day after dinner Hocking conferred at Parliament House with Lamb, who had studied law subjects at Melbourne University, and members of Central Council until late in the evening.⁴ Again Hocking asked Lamb to fire his bullets in parliament.

In January 1940 Lamb addressed the Wimmera District Council of the UCP in Dimboola and briefed them on the events of late 1939. First, Lamb had gone to Dunstan and advised him to desist from suspending Hocking, as such action would split the party. The Premier was non-committal so Lamb told him he would raise the matter in the house. Dunstan angrily retorted that if Lamb did so he would not be in the party after the next election.⁵ Hocking and Lamb met again in the late afternoon at Parliament House to discuss the Premier's response.⁶ Undeterred by the Premier's threat, that evening Lamb raised the matter of the alleged contravention of the Act under which three important public officials were liable to suspension from office. When he said that the current wording of the Act made it difficult to make future appointments without a similar implication, the Premier interrupted: 'Who has briefed you?' Lamb replied: 'No-

³ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 224

⁴ Hocking, *op. cit.*, p. 99

⁵ *Horsham Times*, 26 January 1940

⁶ Hocking, *op. cit.*, p. 99

one, but I do ask the premier to withhold action, if suspensions are recommended by his advisers, until the House has had the opportunity to discuss the matter.’⁷

The *Age* interpreted this incident as a ‘preliminary skirmish’ in response to some members of the government wishing to end the alignment with Labor and to form a composite government with the UAP.⁸ How this could be so concluded is fascinating unless the story was planted by pro-Dunstanites to weaken Hocking’s standing in the party⁹ or to pressure him into withdrawing his demands that the Bulla-Dalhousie preselection be carried out strictly in accordance with party rules. In the UCP parliamentary room Dunstan increased the pressure on his MPs to lock in support. They agreed to support the Bill validating the actions of the commissioners provided that Hocking was reappointed afterwards. However in cabinet soon after that meeting the ministers submitted to Dunstan and changed their minds regarding the proviso. To Hamilton Lamb this was ‘a gross betrayal and an act of political perfidy.’¹⁰ He said he would maintain the fight and place himself in the hands of the rank and file on the matter and was prepared to take the consequences.

During November the UAP-dominated Legislative Council acted to exploit the ongoing ‘scandal’ of appointing party members to government bodies, creating a Select Committee of Privilege to investigate the allegations relating to membership of the Milk Board. In this way the UAP hoped to settle the score with the Dunstan government when an earlier case of legal technicality involving MPs whose private firms had contracts with any government instrumentality had led to the unnecessary and precipitous resignation from parliament of one of their own, Sir George Wales, before the legislation had been clarified. Sir John Harris (UCP) on the other hand, who had not resigned, had had his actions validated as the legislation retrospectively exonerated any oversights by the two men. On another occasion when it was discovered some men had been illegally elected to the Egg Board, an Act was passed validating their election and tenure of office. These precedents held no sway for the UAP MLCs on this third occasion, the Milk Board case, as the political prize was greater. They possibly hoped to expose the Dunstan government of an illegality which could bring it down as it also

⁷ Victorian Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 208, 1 November 1939, p. 1934

⁸ *Age*, 4 November 1939

⁹ Paul, *The premierships of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 225

¹⁰ *Horsham Times*, 26 January 1940

involved Labor Party MPs. Likewise Dunstan could have followed a similar course of action as had been taken with the Egg Board, by retrospectively removing any doubts about the tenure of the SSB commissioners, but then Hocking would have escaped the net. With enemies both inside and outside his party, Hocking appeared to be doomed.

The UCP Central Council was frustrated in its work on the two matters, Bulla-Dalhousie and the SSB commissioners, as the parliamentary party refused to include them on the agenda at any joint meetings. Ministers could not discuss affairs of state with such a body and the Bulla-Dalhousie preselection was regarded purely as a constitutional question and therefore a matter entirely for Central Council.¹¹ The issues were thus separated to Dunstan's advantage.

The two other SSB commissioners whose legality had been questioned, Sir W Leitch and J C Gates, petitioned the Supreme Court to determine their position. The Chief Justice, Sir Frederick Mann, decided they had been validly appointed but were not entitled to sit and act as commissioners. He found the current legislation was 'inconclusive' and 'unsatisfactory' and appealed to the legislature to sort out the tangle.¹² This judgement was handed down the day before the Select Committee of the Legislative Council resumed its hearings and the UCP Central Council met to discuss the refusal by the parliamentary party to meet with it and discuss certain agenda items. An immediate attempt to arrange another joint meeting received a determined rebuff. Without the extra information they sought, the Central Council refused endorsement to Arthur Dunstan for Bulla-Dalhousie. The Premier moved against the UAP by announcing a Royal Commission to investigate the very charges the Select Committee was investigating. Accordingly the Legislative Council felt obliged to terminate its inquiry as they perceived (wrongly) the Royal Commission to be paramount.

Leitch and Gates resigned their appointments to the SSB which left Hocking to make up the essential quorum required for the Bank to continue its business. He had not resigned for he believed that having resigned his directorships of his companies he was legally permitted, according to Justice Mann's decision, to continue to sit on the SSB board. This was supported by the legal advice he had obtained from Gorman KC. The day after

¹¹ UCP Central Council Minutes, 21 November 1939

¹² Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 228

receiving this advice, Hocking conferred with Lamb in the late afternoon and continued to meet with his legal advisers while they sought further information from the Crown Solicitor's office. A whole week went by before the Crown Solicitor advised that Hocking was ineligible.¹³ Dunstan acted promptly again, ensuring the advice reached Hocking's lawyers late the same evening before he introduced into the Assembly the State Savings Bank (Commissioners) Bill, ostensibly to correct the anomalies disclosed by Justice Mann, but also to declare Hocking's position vacant by actually naming him in the legislation, an action virtually without precedent in the history of British parliamentary practice. Sir Stanley Argyle took the opportunity to marry the vindictive legislative action to the Central Council's decision on the Bulla-Dalhousie preselection, hoping to exploit the opportunity to embarrass Dunstan as well as the government. John Cain was a little more open, defending Labor's past appointments of party men as had other parties, as not being in itself a disqualification.

Lamb and Allnutt took up the fight for Hocking, their actions securing the personal vituperation of the Premier and a determination by him to see them both out of parliament. He was not persuaded otherwise by the memory that Allnutt had been an original member of his Country Progressive Party nor that Lamb had been instrumental in the votes leading up to his installation as Premier. Lamb gave a lengthy, erudite and legally-informed speech in the Legislative Assembly drawing upon the opinions of the Chief Justice and that given by Gorman KC to Hocking, arguing against the need to actually name any commissioner, by saying the Premier had created a hurdle that did not exist:

I suggest now that the only reason there could be for the premier refusing to allow the sub-clause to be deleted would be a personal desire to get rid of Mr Hocking for some reason not associated with the Bill and having nothing to do with Mr Hocking's ability or integrity on the Commission.¹⁴

T D Oldham (UAP) spoke next, declaring that 'in the background of the Bill lurk the primeval passions of hate, jealousy and revenge – all those ignoble feelings that discolour human relationships when old friends and associates quarrel.'¹⁵

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 226

¹⁴ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 208, 5 December 1939, p. 2441

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 2443

Allnutt was angry because Dunstan would have known of the directorships and the articles of those companies at the time he appointed Hocking to the SSB board. Allnutt blamed the Premier for the situation.¹⁶ Contributions to the debate were few but UAP members Hollway and Kent Hughes spoke against it and voted accordingly, to continue the embarrassment of the Premier. Lamb and Alnutt voted for the second reading indicating they believed the debate should continue. F A Cameron was the only government member to speak in support of the Bill, some concluding he was inspired by an anxious desire to impress the Premier with his loyalty.¹⁷ He later joined the Mallee Hens, for when he returned to his electorate he encountered the wrath of the rank and file towards Dunstan.

Lamb moved the deletion of the Hocking sub-clause and when this was defeated sought Hocking's reinstatement immediately after the commencement of the Act as had been demanded by his parliamentary party but disowned by the cabinet under pressure from the Premier. This too was defeated. The defeat of Lamb's second amendment confirmed that the Bill was about personal discrimination, not about removing a statutory anomaly. Around midnight during the debates on Lamb's amendments, Kent Hughes sought a break rather than resumption on the next day for, as he put it, 'the dead of night is a very suitable hour for doing work of this nature.'¹⁸

One prominent Labor member of the Assembly told the *Countryman* that while he was bound by caucus to support the Bill, had it been to remove a Labor-appointed commissioner in the same circumstances it would have had little chance of being passed. Readers would not have missed the criticism of disloyalty within the UCP. Moreover, in the upper house all MPs with a legal background believed the Bill was in direct conflict with the decision of the Chief Justice but those on the conservative side voted for it anyway. After it was passed and quickly assented to by the Governor, cabinet reaffirmed by a majority decision not to reappoint Hocking contrary to the decision by their parliamentary party. Dunstan justified this because parliament had voted against Hocking's reinstatement when Lamb's amendment to delete the sub-clause dealing with his exclusion was lost on the voices. Had this move by Hocking's

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 2446

¹⁷ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 237

¹⁸ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 208, 5 December 1939, p. 2451

supporters been too clever by half? Central Council had predicted this, fearing that such a move was retaliation for Hocking's stand on the Bulla-Dalhousie endorsement, and on a 17:2 vote had requested that the government take no action which could be interpreted as victimisation.¹⁹

One law firm, Dugdale, Simons and Stevens, wrote to the *Countryman* explaining that 'Justice Mann's decision meant that Mr Hocking was now legally able to sit and act as a Commissioner.'²⁰ Hocking, as chairman of its board, was obviously using the party's newspaper to support his case, for a fortnight later, giving the excuse that this same firm had requested that Gorman's legal opinion be printed in the *Countryman*, the paper printed that advice in full.²¹ Dunstan's supporters then complained about the partisanship displayed by the newspaper: 'For whose benefit is this paper printed when so much attention is given to the Hocking-SSB matter and none to the sixteen bills dealt with by the Legislative Council?'²²

For some UCP members, their disappointment in the handling of the issue increased when one of the two new commissioners announced immediately after the Bill became law was Professor Copland of Melbourne University. Copland had not earned friends in the UCP when he championed the Premiers' Plan. The Wimmera district council immediately branded the appointment as 'the UCP handing over to the enemy.'²³ The *Countryman* was not amused either, questioning whether the professor had the time for these duties as he was often in Canberra in his role as federal Price Commissioner in addition to his university duties. Then the paper commented that the UCP in the past had challenged Copland's views as being less than impartial towards primary industries.²⁴ Neither did Labor welcome him – 'a mentor of the Premiers' Plan which was a setback to every worker in the state.'²⁵ Labor saw him as a friend of the bankers, rich employers, reactionaries, wealthy investors and the affluent. *Labor Call*²⁶ questioned whether the appointment was a display of partisanship on the behalf of

¹⁹ *Countryman*, 22 December 1939

²⁰ *ibid.*, 24 November 1939

²¹ *ibid.*, 8 December 1939

²² *ibid.*, 15 December 1939

²³ *ibid.*, 9 February 1940

²⁴ *ibid.*, 22 December 1935

²⁵ *Labor Call*, 11 January 1940

²⁶ *ibid.*

Collins Street-UAP, but where it asked was the support for Labor who kept Dunstan in office?: ‘Why not consult? His selection is bad! If this happens again in appointing another conservative, relentless opponent of Labor, we will reconsider our support for the Dunstan Ministry.’ The threat was to no avail as in the New Year Cain, determined to keep the UAP out of office in Victoria, would indicate that the Dunstan government had his full support.

Dunstan had the backing of his ministry, now almost totally dominated by him, as were aspirants on the backbench. His long parliamentary experience, his shrewd perception of character, his ability to choose ministers as compared to an election by a Labor caucus along with opportunities to appoint conservative and radical questioners to overseas posts put him in an unchallengeable position. Given the small size of his parliamentary party, when ministries and positions such as Speaker and whip were to be allocated, there were few with the courage or disposition to challenge his authority. Rather they were anxious to curry favour. After the SSB affair, Allnutt and Lamb, already seen as rebels, were joined by Cameron and Dodgshun, all from the Wimmera, Mallee and Loddon areas, over their misgivings and growing personal antagonism towards Dunstan. Back in their electorates the branches and district councils shared their resistance to his domination, particularly now that Hocking, ‘champion of the rank and file,’ had been politically neutered.

The branches and district councils passed motions deploring the Premier’s conduct, and letters and articles supporting Hocking, Allnutt and Lamb appeared regularly in the *Countryman*. Dunstan moved to counter this, his support in the metropolitan papers having little or no influence in rural areas where distrust of ‘city interests’ was high. He secured the assistance of the former Senator R D Elliott, still close to Page, who controlled a chain of country newspapers circulating in the traditional, radical UCP strongholds to put his viewpoint.²⁷

During the internal fight within the UCP over the Hocking affair, Labor merely looked on with detached interest. Also, Labor had not expressed any personal admiration for either Dunstan or Hocking over the years. So it was a surprise when Cain put forward

²⁷ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 246

an ultimatum – retaining Dunstan as leader was a primary condition for Labor support of the ministry. This earned him the rejoinder from Hocking that Labor should not dictate who should lead the Country Party minority government: ‘he would be offended if the reverse happened. Cain’s ultimatum must be rejected.’²⁸ The support for the UCP was a means of Labor keeping the UAP out of office and using leverage to achieve some of its own platform. Clearly the relationship between the UCP and Labor was one of measures not men but this also required recognition of which men were best to deliver those measures. Labor saw the Hocking dismissal, although appearing to be personal in its origin and purpose, as the outcome of a trial of strength which had been going on for some time between the more and the less conservative sections of the UCP.

The fight would continue after Hocking’s dismissal. The more conservative UCP group was seen to be more inclined towards the UAP, its natural ally, while the less conservative leaned towards Labor, also its natural ally.²⁹ *Labor Call* attempted to harden the cleavage by indirectly indicating which section Labor hoped would prevail on policy when it promoted one of that second group, Hamilton Lamb, who was one of the very few UCP members who had appeared several times in that paper.³⁰ To promote the pro-Labor, anti-UAP stance, it quoted passages from his speech during the Adjournment Debate³¹ when he had argued that during war all must contribute:

Broken Hill Pty. Ltd. has been able to distribute what were previously considered un-distributable profits, and 64 bonus shares have been issued for every 100 shares held in that company. This action was taken at the beginning of the war.

Lamb had argued it was wrong for the federal government to accuse farmers of being disloyal when seeking an increase in the home price for their wheat when it did not criticise BHP for making profits: ‘Indeed, the government guaranteed in legislation their cost of production and more than that.’³² For Lamb what was good enough for secondary industries (armament manufacturers) was good enough for the primary industries (food producers). This was Labor’s line too.

²⁸ *Countryman*, 26 January 1940

²⁹ *Labor Call*, 1 February 1940

³⁰ *ibid.*, 16 November 1939

³¹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 208, 31 October 1939, pp. 1857-8

³² *ibid.*, p. 1858

The LCP was vitally interested in the contest, seeing it as a clash of political ambitions followed by a rapid intrusion of personalities: ‘The degeneration of the UCP under the Dunstan-Hocking *regime* is now culminating in disintegration with recriminations all around.’³³ The LCP now turned their political binoculars to the contest between these two men and how they would act at the polls due the next year. Other observers saw the tussle for UCP leadership, as did Dunstan, as between the champions of the ‘rank and file’ and the democratically elected MPs who made up the parliamentary party and the ministry.³⁴ Control over the ministry by the party had been a major criticism by the conservatives against the Labor Party since Federation. Now it was levelled at a historically anti-Labor party and for mixed reasons.

The UCP branches in the north-west were anxious to hear from their local member the ‘inside story’ on the Dunstan-Hocking faction fight they had heard and read about through the media. Lamb began his regular early tour of the branches starting with the Wimmera district council in Dimboola. He told them he had been staggered by the city press idea that it was all a plot to restore a composite government when the whole affair had been started by the Premier himself when he questioned Hocking’s position on the Bank board: ‘Hocking’s legal position is correct. The UCP is greater than the man – even Dunstan.’³⁵ He went on: ‘There is no plot against the government. It was all started by Dunstan. Hocking’s position was legally sound.’³⁶

The campaign to push the ‘pro UCP-UAP coalition plot’ strengthened in the New Year, *Truth* taking up the myth fostered earlier by the *Age*.³⁷ *Truth* labelled the campaign against Dunstan over the non-reappointment of Hocking as really a campaign to dislodge the UCP in favour of the UAP with the doubtful support of a few disgruntled members of the Country Party. With the *Countryman* apparently in favour of the Hocking faction, the Dunstanites had turned to employing ostensibly independent papers such as the *Truth* and the Elliott-owned rural papers to push their side of the

³³ *Liberal Country Times*, 22 December 1939

³⁴ *Truth*, 13 January 1940

³⁵ *Horsham Times*, 26 January 1940.

³⁶ *Countryman*, 9 February 1940

³⁷ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 243

affair. Those who sided with Dunstan asked whether the Hocking group was trying to force the Premier's resignation hoping this would neutralise the argument against a composite government, even though the challenges to Dunstan on the issue 'make a great paradox of the hatred for composite ministries.' They pointed out that with two exceptions the entire parliamentary Country Party had confirmed their allegiance to the government upon the very issue at stake. The decision by cabinet was unanimous and not by Dunstan alone, as confirmed by Deputy Premier Lind. This was as it should be in the face of a man who had threatened to use his much over-rated political power to destroy it if it did not deny its duty and do his will.³⁸ This article, from Lamb's point of view, ignored the unanimous decision of the UCP caucus to restore Hocking and blamed the wrong group of MPs for the continuing battle.

Truth followed this line over the next weeks saying it hoped the UCP branches would not lend themselves to 'the scheme being promoted' to destroy the Dunstan government and put a UAP-led composite ministry in its place. It said the campaign to restore Hocking to the Bank board was futile and that moves were being made to bind branches and delegates on the issue to defeat Dunstan. Adopting the position of Dunstan's spokesperson, *Truth* warned: 'Be wise, wait until the matter is discussed.'³⁹ In an open letter to Hocking the editor roared:

It was trivial of you to boast that you made this government in 1935 – it was really due to the Labor Party. You didn't even pave the way – the UCP goes back to 1915, Dunstan to 1920, while you were a recent convert from the Nationalist Party.⁴⁰

It announced that Dunstan would go on a country tour to argue who would govern Victoria – parliament through the government or Hocking and his 'tart shop lamenters'? Then in a hint as to who had been behind the articles, it leaked that 'an election on the issue is distinctly in the offing.'⁴¹

On the sidelines the LCP stated that 'the ruckus' justified its breakaway and that 'the dictatorial attitude of Central Council was to be condemned ... reducing our legislators

³⁸ *Truth*, 13 January 1940

³⁹ *ibid.*, 20 January 1940

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 27 January 1940

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 3 February 1940

to factional puppets and bringing our parliamentary institutions into disrepute.’⁴² Lamb was not a puppet – he was intent on pursuing legal principles – but his actions were used to political advantage by Hocking.

For Dunstan the timing of an election was crucial if he was to maximise his party’s chances as well as neutralise or even eliminate the Mallee Hens before the next party Conference. Feedback from the electorates convinced him that the Conference would be severely critical over the Hocking affair and likely to pass a motion of censure. If so, the Hocking group might well feel confident enough to stand their own candidates at the election later in the year in opposition to his supporters leading to his own defeat in the party room if they were successful. Better to get in first. His opportunity came when Richard Casey was appointed Australian minister in Washington and resigned from federal parliament. This necessitated a by-election in his seat of Corio in early March. Sensing the war and federal issues dominated the political landscape and that the federal by-election would greatly overshadow a state election, Dunstan called an election for 16 March. He entrenched himself as leader even more firmly when again he painlessly extracted a declaration from Cain that Labor would not support a Country Party government unless Dunstan was its leader.⁴³

Truth explained the Premier was justified in going three or four months early as he faced an open declaration by the junta (Central Council) that they intended to subject the government to their will at the next party Conference. It ‘exposed’ that the junta had appointed a committee of five to put the case through a motion of obligation for MPs to abide by the coming Conference decisions before the parliamentary party decided to the contrary. This ‘star chamber’ was virtually asking the government to be handed over to this junta. The Premier had no option but to seek the verdict of the people:

Now the election has been called, forget the Hocking issue; it is about who is best able to run the government. Now it is about a middle party supported on matters of progressive, social importance by the Labor Party. Before that the peoples’ will was cheated by a political arrangement based on expediency,

⁴² *Liberal Country Times*, 26 January 1940

⁴³ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 252

chicanery and greed for office. The people can now express their disapproval of this Tammany Hall stunt which is appearing in our politics.⁴⁴

One of Dunstan's staff could well have written the material so favourable was it towards his side of the debate.

On the announcement of the election the 'rebels' were ready. Lamb went public on the threats Dunstan had levelled at him at the end of October that he would run his own candidates against those who would not be his puppets. Dunstan should be renamed 'Dunstalin' whereas he, Lamb, stood for the democratic control of the party by the rank and file.⁴⁵ A week later at the Nhill branch of the UCP, Hocking joined Lamb and the two criticised Dunstan. Lamb recalled that at his first election he had stood for the independence of the Country Party and withdrawal from composite ministries. He had been opposed then and was ready to fight again. His support for Hocking 'was over principle and what he saw as a shameful, personal attack on Mr Hocking.'⁴⁶

Central Council moved quickly to prevent the factional fight extending to the ballot box. The Lowan electorate council re-endorsed Lamb over a challenger, Winton Turnbull, who said he had decided nine months earlier to seek endorsement and denied he was being set up by the Premier. Turnbull then announced he would stand as an independent UCP candidate. This was followed by Dunstan advertising support for him, convincing local party members that his candidature was indeed a set-up. Lamb responded that a victory for Turnbull would be dictatorship for Dunstan. Wettenhall, seeing his chance to profit from the 'split' and return to politics in his old seat by beating the man who had displaced him, said he would stand as an independent 'to heal the rifts.'⁴⁷ The federal member for Wimmera, Alex Wilson, immediately threw his support behind his friend Hammy, 'a true and faithful servant of the UCP'⁴⁸ – 'I regret that Dunstan will campaign against certain UCP MPs such as Hammy Lamb.'⁴⁹ In support of Dunstan the Labor executive decided not to run against any of the UCP ministers. The UCP declared that this was not an electoral pact as Labor might oppose backbenchers and any pact

⁴⁴ *Truth*, 17 February 1940

⁴⁵ *Horsham Times*, 16 February 1940

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 20 February 1940

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 1 March 1940

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 5 March 1940

⁴⁹ *Countryman*, 23 February 1940

would be against the UCP constitution anyway.⁵⁰ If any proof was needed, Labor gave their preferences to the LCP over Hocking, the UCP candidate in Allendale.

Hocking was determined to take the fight up to Dunstan and, if he could enter parliament, he could challenge the Premier on his own ground. He nominated for Allendale, claiming it was at the request of branches in that electorate.⁵¹ Logic suggests revenge had got the better of him as the seat had never been held by the Country Party. Dunstan challenged Hocking to stand up and be counted in Dunstan's own seat of Korong and Eaglehawk: 'Let the people decide.' The UCP was divided as to whether their preferences should go to Labor.⁵²

When John Dedman won Corio from the UAP it was Labor's fifth successive federal by-election win in recent months. The huge 10,000 vote majority showed that the electorate was moving towards Labor nationally and away from Menzies. Labor saw this would put further pressure on the federal composite government and give extra leverage to Archie Cameron's claim for the top spot over Menzies.⁵³ It now remained to be seen whether it would have any flow-on effects to the Victorian election.

Dunstan's policy speech, delivered in Bendigo at the Eaglehawk Town Hall, explained: the early election was necessary because of the war situation and because of attempts which had been made by a small and irresponsible *junta* to subject the government to outside and illegal domination.⁵⁴

Truth tried to strengthen this questionable argument with a pointed reference aimed at the Hocking supporters when it said that the 'white-ant' movement had been carried out under a certain cloak of radicalism. Cain had often referred to these 'thinly veiled conservatives masquerading as radicals.' Where was the proof? Hocking was seeking to unseat Labor in Allendale, and others of his group were soliciting second preferences from the UAP, confirming 'reports of a closer UAP-UCP alliance objective.'⁵⁵ The *Countryman* dismissed attempts to link the four rebels with moves for a composite

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 1 March 1940

⁵² *Labor Call*, 22 February 1940

⁵³ *ibid.*, 7 March 1940

⁵⁴ *Truth*, 2 March 1940

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

ministry as the ‘joke of the week.’⁵⁶ Given the Mallee Hens’ attitude to Labor and the UAP, it saw any suggestion of a plot in this regard as farcical.

When Cain opened Labor’s campaign at the Northcote Town Hall he made it clear that his party was not greatly concerned as to why Dunstan had sought the dissolution of parliament – that was an internal matter for the UCP. Anyway it was only a few months early and Cain welcomed the opportunity to tackle the greater social work needed. The terms of the agreement entered into between Labor and the UCP had been honoured by both.⁵⁷ Anxious for Labor to claim any kudos for progressive legislation he repeated his claim that ‘the five years of a good record of the Dunstan Ministry was undeniably due to the inspiration and support of the Labor Party.’ While he hoped to win, realistically he was confronted by the continuing notorious electoral distribution heavily loaded against Labor, ‘so we leave open the option of conditionally supporting a Dunstan Ministry.’⁵⁸

In his opening address of the campaign for Lowan, electors heard Hamilton Lamb claim his overwhelming majority over Winton Turnbull at the preselection was due to his stand on behalf of the rank and file against the domination of the Premier and those parliamentarians who placed themselves and their personal interests above those of the party they were pledged to serve. He made it clear he was not a member of any faction and that his support for Hocking was based on the principles of British justice. Lamb then disclosed publicly for the first time the events behind the scenes when the breakaway from the party occurred two years earlier and the conservative element (about 5 per cent) formed the LCP:

I was sent for from hospital by Mr Dunstan to support the premier in the party room against those reactionary members who wanted to smash the government. The leader of that reactionary group (Mr Martin) had, to use the premier’s words at the time, been ‘bought over’ with a position in the ministry. I agreed to stand aside so that the Dunstan government could be held together by the purchase of this support. Now I am rewarded by the same premier touring my electorate

⁵⁶ *Countryman*, 15 March 1940

⁵⁷ *Labor Call*, 22 February 1940

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 29 February 1940

against me the selected candidate, and all because I refused to support him in his attempt to victimise a man in a public position.⁵⁹

Dunstan was determined to deliver his threat to displace the ‘rebels’ and personally opposed the Mallee Hens by campaigning in Mildura, Lowan, Ouyen and Kara Kara-Borong. With the *Countryman* favouring Hocking, Dunstan depended greatly on Elliott’s newspapers in those electorates such as the *Sunraysia Daily* in Mildura and the *Ouyen and North West Express*. At the Horsham Town Hall a fiery meeting went on until almost midnight during which Dunstan, on Lamb’s home turf, attacked the local member for his non-representation of his electorate. He was repeating an accusation he had made the previous month in Allnutt’s electorate that the Mallee had been effectively disenfranchised through the personal differences known to exist between the Premier and Allnutt.⁶⁰ Lamb gained much support from the crowd with his friend Mick Mibus clashing with the Premier.⁶¹ The *Horsham Times* in the same issue as this report carried a full page advertisement for Turnbull, authorised by Lamb’s parliamentary colleague, L R Rodda MLC. There was no doubt this election was about men not measures.

Transport had always been an important issue to the farmers and Dunstan attempted to use it against the Mallee Hens. The origins of the promise in his election speech to give sick leave to railway employees was rooted in what was possibly the most interesting feature of the whole campaign – his bitter vendetta against the four Assembly members who stood by Central Council.⁶² In seeking to undermine their campaign, Dunstan promised the secretary of the Railways Union – a body very much opposed to him at most times – that sick leave would be introduced if the union would run a campaign against the sitting members in that area. The railwaymen and other workers normally supported the UCP in the absence of Labor candidates. Only Labor’s self-denying and self-defeating withdrawal from all but three of the seats held by the UCP allowed the government this priceless luxury of internecine conflict during an election.⁶³ The union cooperated with Dunstan despite Lamb’s recorded endeavours to secure better conditions for its members. Ever since his time on the Select Committee of Parliament

⁵⁹ *Horsham Times*, 5 March 1940

⁶⁰ *Sunraysia Daily*, 19 January 1940

⁶¹ *Horsham Times*, 12 March 1940

⁶² Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 255

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 256

on Working Hours he had cooperated closely with the Railways Union to secure legislation giving permanent employment to thousands of temporary employees, particularly supernumerary locomotive drivers.⁶⁴ Indeed he had been one of only two members in the house to speak on the Bill and had always been a strong advocate of sick pay for daily paid workers.

Only the sitting UCP members' local efforts and networking promoting their achievements countered the union campaign and the Premier's accusation of 'non-representation.' Others asked why were the four MPs – Dodgshun, Allnutt, Lamb and Cameron – being victimised as 'rebels' when they had consistently, almost without exception, voted for the government since it was formed?⁶⁵ Country voters held a deep loyalty for a local member who made himself known for his success in securing public works and similar development for his electorate. How often had people dismissed all MPs in degrading terms only to add that their local country member was an exception because 'they knew him'? As J B Paul summarised: in the last resort the factor which counted was the individual member himself.⁶⁶

The *Ouyen and North West Express* distributed a special edition in each of the rebels' electorates on the Friday before election day. This newspaper campaign by Dunstan was full-blooded. Lamb successfully brought an action for political libel against the *Express* when it also misrepresented his loyalty to the government and the Premier, alluding it was general when in fact he withdrew his support only on the SSB Commissioners Bill. The court awarded Lamb one hundred pounds damages and costs.⁶⁷

The pro-Dunstan campaign kept up the pressure right to the end. Rodda said the attitude taken by Lamb et al. was not so much a matter of legislation as one to embarrass the ministry.⁶⁸ On the day of the election itself *Truth* warned:

It would be a bad day for government if Hocking was elected in Allendale for if he wins he will be a natural leader for any of the other 'rebel' Country Party candidates returned to parliament. Even if Dunstan retains the leadership, the

⁶⁴ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 203, 9 December 1937, pp. 1386-7

⁶⁵ *Countryman*, 8 March 1940

⁶⁶ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 256

⁶⁷ *Age*, 22 August 1940

⁶⁸ *Countryman*, 29 March 1940

continuing white-anting of the premier could mean the beginning of the end of this government which has served Victoria so well.⁶⁹

Lamb was easily returned in Lowan, scoring two-thirds of the vote in his home town of Horsham and a further increase in his overall majority which had trebled since his first victory five years earlier. Wottenhall received less than 7 per cent of the vote. The election result state-wide left the party alignments virtually unchanged but now the UAP had been reduced to the smallest party in the Assembly. Dunstan was firmly in office but to his intense annoyance all four Mallee Hens had been returned, three defeating his candidates and Cameron defeating an independent. Cameron had sided with the Mallee Hens at the last minute, too late for Dunstan to get a UCP candidate against him.

In a post-election statement Lamb said the failure to dislodge 'the four' raised several issues which must be settled at the coming Conference:

My victory is a victory for the rank and file of the UCP against the attempt by the premier to dominate the party. The premier's outbursts at Nhill, Horsham and Dimboola were in the worst possible taste and his abuse and misrepresentation disgusted many. The word 'rebel' would be more aptly described to himself. His appeal to now set all disputes aside is the squeal of the defeated. The people of these electorates have voted for clean policies. Let's concentrate on the major problems facing the nation and the Empire today.⁷⁰

The UCP Conference he had feared lay ahead for Dunstan, although his leadership was safe even if a negative vote on the Hocking issue tarnished the brilliance of his third successive win for a Country Party government. In a carefully crafted speech he said Labor's support had been without secret pacts, alliances or entanglements – not bargaining or bantering but simply the merits of the measures submitted: 'I claim just one-twelfth of the credit – it is due to the whole ministry. We are now the largest party in the Legislative Assembly.'⁷¹

⁶⁹ *Truth*, 16 March 1940

⁷⁰ *Countryman*, 29 March 1940

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 5 April 1940

In early April the Country Party Conference assembled in Geelong. In contrast to the standing ovation Dunstan had received when he led the first Australian Country Party government onto the stage in Ballarat back in 1935, the applause on this occasion was relatively muted. However, when the four ‘rebels’ appeared at the end of the line the Conference erupted into prolonged cheering which lasted several minutes.⁷² Silence resumed, the contrast in mood continuing throughout chief president Simpson’s conciliatory address. Fervour broke out again when debate began on a motion to remove contentious resolutions from the agenda, including those dealing with the State Savings Bank issue. One resolution even called for Dunstan’s removal.⁷³ The Premier seized the initiative: ‘If you think I have done anything wrong, then expel me. Otherwise stand behind the government.’⁷⁴ The city press predicted at the end of the day, after the vote was taken but not counted, that any adverse vote announced next morning would see Dunstan carry out his threat to lead his cabinet out of the Conference.

Next morning Simpson announced that the motion for deletion had been defeated indicating that debate on the Hocking issue could continue but before anyone could react, held up his hand adding that Hocking had a statement to make. A wildly enthusiastic Conference saw and heard Hocking fall on his sword in a magnanimous speech when he told delegates he would sacrifice his right to state his case if it meant complete unity and accord within the Country Party movement. He was not prepared to provide an opportunity to smash the party.⁷⁵ Then to a standing ovation he walked over and shook hands with the Premier before leaving the platform. The applause increased and Hocking’s supporters realised that for them to emphasise his point they also should not take the opportunity to debate the matter. Apparently over the previous evening he had been persuaded by senior colleagues that he had earned the full respect of the rank and file through the vote and this support would be sealed with that conciliatory gesture. Burying the hatchet would put party above personal feelings.⁷⁶ Faced with Dunstan’s ultimatum to walk out of the Conference, Hocking had been persuaded to back down.⁷⁷ The alternative was to fight a continuing battle, one he could never win, with the

⁷² *Horsham Times*, 12 April 1940

⁷³ Minutes of UCP Annual Conference, 5 April 1940, p. 21

⁷⁴ *Countryman*, 12 April 1940

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Sunraysia Daily*, 26 April 1940

⁷⁷ Costar, ‘Albert Dunstan’, p. 223

Premier. The handshake would also suggest a truce rather than defeat and undermine any claim of total victory by Dunstan. Dunstan could not refuse as this may have had undesirable consequences for him. A stalemate was the best outcome. In reality ‘Artful Albert’ had triumphed again.⁷⁸

Dunstan’s men played their second card to cement their power, moving a motion to give voting rights to those parliamentary members who were on Central Council, Dunstan supporting it on the floor. Lamb opposed the motion and when the vote was taken he won hands down. Dunstan nominated and actively campaigned for his two nominees Bailey and Bennett to be on Central Council against the rank and file nominees Lamb and Allnutt. Again victory went to the Mallee Hens. Lamb told the Conference that he would ensure that the parliamentary representatives on Central Council were seen as ‘liaison officers’ as control by the rank and file was essential. He also supported biannual conferences between the Central Council and the parliamentary party, something he had tried to achieve the previous year but had been defeated in the ‘caucus.’ Unfortunately that defeat had meant the Premier had not met with Central Council for more than 13 weeks in the previous year.⁷⁹ Dunstan would not have been amused, probably embarrassed, when in another tight debate Lamb saved his hide with a timely amendment, saying at the end of his speech while looking directly at the Premier: ‘no ill feelings!’ Clearly the ‘rebels’ were seen as the champions of the rank and file.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Countryman*, 12 April 1940

⁸⁰ *Horsham Times*, 12 April 1940

CHAPTER 11

WARTIME COALITIONS AT HOME AND ABROAD

‘There is only one thing worse than fighting
with allies and that is fighting without them.’

Winston Churchill

This chapter explains how the increasing hostilities of the Second World War drew the political focus away from state politics to the national and international arenas and how the wily Dunstan exploited this to further cloak his policy inertia. Political developments in Canberra exerted considerable influence on the course of Victorian politics. The impact on the Victorian government when Labor withdrew its support, now it was in government federally, and the replacement of that support by the UAP is analysed to explain why Dunstan, despite the lack of majority support of Central Council, disagreed with uniform taxation at the 1942 Premiers’ Conference and opposed it in the High Court despite the anti-Labor controlled Senate agreeing to it.

The state governments, regardless of their political hue, followed the example of the Curtin Labor opposition and pledged their cooperation with the federal coalition as part of the war effort. Labor refused to copy its British counterpart which had joined a National government but did finally agree to participate in an Australian Advisory War Council. Menzies was criticised for submitting too easily to Churchill’s demands and putting Britain ahead of Australia’s interests, an unfair criticism given Churchill demonstrated he had ‘no conception of the British Dominions as separate entities.’¹ This public perception increased a swing to Labor at the federal election in September 1940, following which the Menzies’ coalition was reliant on two independents, both of whom initially favoured the non-Labor parties. Labor gave full cooperation to the minority coalition but continued to refuse to join a National government even when Menzies offered the prime ministership to Curtin. Menzies eventually resigned in August 1941 when his party slipped further in the polls (at a by-election) and ACP leader Artie Fadden assumed the prime ministership. The two independents became disillusioned with the coalition and voted the Labor opposition into government. Six weeks later

¹ Menzies to cabinet, June 1941, quoted in G Freudenberg, *Churchill and Australia*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 2008, p. 6

Curtin's fears of invasion heightened when Japan entered the Pacific War against the United States. Curtin turned to the US for an 'alliance of defence.'

The changes at federal level had repercussions for the Victorian government and the UCP. Labor on the cross-benches felt increasingly uneasy supporting the Dunstan government when the ACP and UAP were in opposition to federal Labor, even though it was Labor's choice to govern alone and the opposition fully supported the war effort. Dunstan sought an all-party government despite knowing this was against Labor policy. Federal Labor's legislation to introduce uniform taxation across Australia gave further reason for Labor to withdraw support from Dunstan who challenged it in the High Court. However, the Premier survived an attempt by Labor to dislodge him and force an election. With the UAP now supporting Dunstan the LCP considered it time to resume talks to reunite with the UCP. Labor was forced to review its future position now it was not needed to support a Dunstan minority government.

The early years of the war brought with them a significant change in Australian federal politics. Prime Minister Menzies made strenuous efforts to put the country on a war footing, but his difficulties were manifold. Page and his party had refused to be part of the first Menzies ministry, especially as Menzies had demanded he choose the ACP representatives. Menzies eventually agreed that ministers be selected by mutual agreement of the leaders of both parties.² Even after the fall of France and the end of the 'phoney war,' Menzies was faced by a lack of UAP-ACP cooperation, despite the inclusion of Country Party members in his next two ministries. He also had to deal with factions within his own steadily disintegrating UAP.³ The Prime Minister sometimes found cooperation came from the opposition when his coalition partners maintained a different stance on policy. When the Menzies-Fadden government was formed in March 1940 one condition extracted by ACP leader Fadden was that his party would not support the motor vehicle manufacturing monopoly legislation. However the monopoly was given to the Australian Consolidated Industries when Labor supported the

² Page, *op. cit.*, p. 329

³ F Alexander, *From Curtin to Menzies and After*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1973, p. 7

legislation. Labor explained they did this for the war effort even if it went against their usual policies and approach in opposition.

The ALP national conference on 24 June 1940 agreed that Labor could join an Advisory War Council on an equal ministerial and opposition footing. The parties did meet but without positive results. Menzies and his cabinet rejected the idea as any decisions by an advisory body would require inside information only available to cabinet. Any advisory council should be working with an all-party ministry as ‘complete and confidential information should not be given to a body who accepts no responsibility for decisions made or action taken.’⁴ Curtin responded that his party would not object to suspension of the constitution under the emergency conditions of war until the crisis was over, allowing for a constituent assembly. Menzies rejected the concession. Curtin was indicating his party’s full commitment to the war effort but not to an all-party National government.

In mid-August 1940 Menzies’ problems in cabinet were exacerbated when three of his senior ministers died in a RAAF plane crash taking them from Melbourne to Canberra for a cabinet meeting. Among the 10 persons killed were the Minister for the Army, G A Street, Minister for Air, J V Fairbairn, and Vice-President of the Executive Council, Sir Henry Gullett, along with the Chief of the General Staff, Lt. Gen. Sir Cyril Brudenell White and his staff officer Lt. Col. F Thornthwaite. It was a costly tragedy for a nation which was trying to adjust itself to the conditions of war.⁵ With the death of those ministers, Menzies took the opportunity to call an election for 21 September to cater for a reshuffle of cabinet and to strengthen his position within the coalition as Prime Minister on the back of sympathy over the terrible accident. It was not to work out as he hoped.

The 1940 federal election cost the coalition its House majority: the UAP’s numbers were reduced to 23 and the ACP to 14 while Labor mustered 32 and Lang Labor four. Two ACP ministers, H C V (Vic) Thorby (Calare) and Horace Nock (Riverina), lost their seats to Labor in NSW. J B Chifley regained Macquarie from the UAP after an absence from parliament of almost nine years. The Menzies government now depended

⁴ Letter from Menzies to Curtin, 12 July 1940, in Page, op. cit., p. 330

⁵ H Gordon, *An Eyewitness History of Australia*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1978, p. 310

upon two Victorians, the independent A W Coles with a leaning to the UAP and Alex Wilson a self-styled independent Country Party member. When the result was finally known Menzies again sought a National government to secure guarantees of parliamentary stability. He was unsuccessful and re-formed his two-party coalition, this time persuading Page to rejoin the ministry in his former portfolios.

After the election Archie Cameron was displaced by Fadden as leader of the Country Party. Cameron had alienated some of his parliamentary party and was opposed by McEwen and Page for the leadership. Page did so as a foil to have Cameron re-elected, while deputy leader of the Country Party at the election, Tom Paterson, sought to have McEwen withdraw as he thought his leadership would destroy any rapprochement between the LCP and UCP in Victoria. Ultimately only Page and McEwen contested the position. The vote was deadlocked and Page successfully recommended a temporary leader. Fadden was elected and his leadership later confirmed.⁶ He would remain leader for 18 years.

After '40 days and 40 nights' of the Fadden government, Coles and Wilson crossed the floor and Labor was in power. The LCP attacked Wilson: 'the first time in history that a wartime government had been displaced on domestic issues such as pensions, soldiers' pay, bank charges and taxation.'⁷ The new Labor government, after meeting with the Commonwealth Bank board, made negotiated changes to interest and mortgage rates before introducing a new budget. These would need to meet Wilson's expectations for the farmers as well as bringing about a greater measure of social justice. The burden of war must be shared, something Fadden could not do.⁸

The focus of Australian politics was on the world arena, the metropolitan and party newspapers giving their space over to it and the recruitment campaigns. The newspapers were smaller too as paper rationing was implemented. There were many articles on Australian troop movements in Tobruk and the Middle East. The Victorian parliament had reduced its days of meeting, often not doing so for months. Hence news of parliament was scant. The *Countryman* did give some space to the legal victories of

⁶ Page, op. cit., pp. 334-5

⁷ *Liberal Country Times*, 23 October 1941

⁸ *Labor Call*, 23 October 1941

Lamb and Hocking, the former's successful damages claim against the *Ouyen and North West Express* and Hocking receiving 250 pounds damages⁹ and a public apology from *Truth* over the alleged UCP-Labor 'plot.'

The personal contest between Dunstan and Hocking continued, *Truth* siding clearly with Dunstan and resurrecting the 'plot by Hocking and the rebels' to break the UCP-Labor alliance and replace it with a UCP-UAP 'shandygaff' government.¹⁰ Its motivation was revenge at Hocking for the forced apology and for Hocking handing over the printing contract of the *Countryman* from *Truth* to the Argus and Australasian Ltd. *Truth* explained it opposed Hocking because Dunstan put the people ahead of factions and that the rebels supported the ALP-UAP redistribution proposal to defeat the Dunstan government.¹¹ *Truth* again denied any connection between itself and John Wren when Allnutt, explaining the change in the contracts, was reported as saying: 'The premier is using us to serve the vested interests of Collins Street and John Wren, who you know controls *Truth*.'¹²

Whenever the pressure was on him, rumours would arise that Dunstan was seeking to enter federal parliament, the *Bendigo Advertiser* suggesting he might challenge Wilson in Wimmera if an election was called and would accept a position in the war cabinet under Fadden. Again Dunstan was forced to deny the story. Opposition leader Tom Hollway, himself under constant pressure from, the National Union,¹³ accused the Central Council of the UCP of controlling the Premier and ordering him not to amend the Transport Regulations Bill. The UCP minister present made no attempt to correct the misrepresentation. Hocking sent a letter directly to Hollway seeking a correction and remarked how silent UCP MPs were on the matter. Dunstan was angry that Council had usurped his position in contacting Hollway directly and indicated he would not be controlled by any 'outside body.'¹⁴ He received support from the parliamentary party

⁹ *Countryman*, 13 June 1941

¹⁰ *Truth*, 9 November 1940 (shandygaff is a mild drink of ale and ginger beer which saps the will when drunk too much)

¹¹ *Truth*, 30 November 1940

¹² *Truth*, 21 December 1940

¹³ P Aimer, *Politics, Power and Persuasion: The Liberals in Victoria*, James Bennett, Sydney, 1974, p. 7

¹⁴ *Countryman*, 19 November 1941

for his reprimand of Hocking even though they opposed the Bill.¹⁵ From this time on Hocking lowered his public profile in politics.

During the year Cain also came under political pressure. He had long felt humiliated by the way Labor meekly supported Dunstan to keep the UAP out of office. To him personally it was a complete betrayal of all his principles.¹⁶ The alternative, to surrender any leverage over the government albeit that the returns were paltry, was not to be considered – yet. Cain continued to reject motions from the branches such as that at the Victorian ALP conference in January when the Mildura branch moved to withdraw support from the Dunstan ministry:

I can't see the advantage of severing the present political working arrangement at this juncture. There is no alliance with the Country Party and never has been. Over five years I have sought instructions from the state Labor conference and have never been asked to break with the Dunstan government. It is not always easy to carry out such an arrangement. At times it is very difficult to compromise.¹⁷

The 'lock-in' also prevented Labor from opposing the UCP in country seats just at a time when federally Labor's support was steadily increasing.¹⁸ This changed in mid-year when the Victorian ALP conference decided to endorse candidates against Dunstan himself and his two ex-Labor ministers, Hogan and Bailey, at the next election.¹⁹ Labor's disaffection spilled over among the UCP 'rebels' who were starting to question Dunstan on legislation when he ignored Labor amendments 'while the country was at war.' Keith Dodgshun (Ouyen) went as far as to say he wouldn't even mind if the UCP was in opposition for a time.²⁰

The Achilles heel for Dunstan was undoubtedly electoral redistribution. During the debate on the Redistribution of Seats Bill a few weeks after federal Labor assumed government in 1941, Cain explored the future of his party's support for the Dunstan

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 26 November 1941

¹⁶ White, *John Cain*, p. 93

¹⁷ *Labor Call*, 30 January 1941

¹⁸ D W Rawson, *The organisation of the Australian Labor Party, 1916-1941*, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1954, pp. 265, 270-1

¹⁹ *Argus*, 31 May 1941

²⁰ *Countryman*, 14 November 1941

government. After lamenting how Dunstan had torpedoed a correction in the disparity of electoral representation back in 1928, he pointed out the rural bias had further deteriorated to 42:100 as the drift to the cities accelerated. Labor was now being asked by an independent to end the alignment that supported such maldistribution, 'but this would mean an end to the best of a bad lot of anti-Labor governments.'²¹ Cain acknowledged that the Premier had played a more prominent administrative role than some of his predecessors. By following a middle course there had been some progressive legislation, but not enough, the Premier's poor health over the last six months aside. But Labor would not defeat the Dunstan government over redistribution because that would bring the UAP in. Cain summed up Dunstan's prevarication over redistribution:

But if the premier says that because of the war now is not the time, he means there is a future time to correct certain anomalies. Power is more important to the premier than a fair voting system.²²

Towards the end of 1941 some Labor MPs were growing bolder. They attempted to secure a Wages Board for rural workers if they so desired it even though Cain had earlier ruled that out while they continued to support the UCP government.²³ On other occasions the Premier suffered several reversals when he tried to stymie Labor's moves. Dunstan was moved to admit reality: 'we have had a bad time during the last few months.'²⁴ With Labor's withdrawal of support only a matter of time, the strain was clearly showing. Dunstan was careful to use opportunities outside parliament to ensure this was delayed. He sometimes showed his former radical character, in one instance telling the Australian Natives Association council that after the war class distinctions would be set aside and money found to increase production and achieve a greater degree of social justice.²⁵

Labor's support became increasingly uneasy. The government's exclusive concentration on rural matters to the detriment of Labor's hoped-for legislation led Pat Kennelly MLC to even declare at a meeting of the ALP branch in Kyabram that it almost seemed

²¹ *Labor Call*, 13 November 1941

²² *ibid.*

²³ Rawson, *op. cit.*, p. 273

²⁴ *Countryman*, 5 December 1941

²⁵ *Age*, 10 October 1941

Dunstan must have persuaded Tunnecliffe to sign the Country Party pledge when Labor's support was ultimately accepted by the Governor back in 1935.²⁶ A second consideration was that, with Labor in government federally, it would be difficult to be seen to be in harness with the 'enemy' at state level if there was a conflict in policy.

This shift in Labor's allegiance away from the UCP led some Country Party members to criticise those they saw as 'traitors' in their party. Their wrath centred on Wilson. They spread rumours that his selection in November as a delegate to the Empire Parliamentary Association Conference in London had been a 'reward' for his crossing the floor to support Curtin. They believed these positions usually went to solid party members. When Wilson then accepted the honorary position of Assistant to the Minister for Commerce on matters affecting rural interests he was attacked by his 'colleague' George Rankin for taking on the new role.²⁷

In the New Year with the ever-increasing Japanese threat and Labor's withdrawal of support on the horizon, Dunstan resurrected his plea for an all-party ministry in Victoria, even though he expected Labor to refuse. He did gain support from Hollway 'because we need metropolitan representatives in government in a time of war.'²⁸ The UCP executive objected declaring *it* would be the final arbiter as to whether its parliamentary members would join in an all-party state government: 'any pronouncements on behalf of the party are premature.'²⁹ The *Countryman* noted that half a dozen UCP members did live in the city and that most spent a lot of time in Melbourne.³⁰ It appears that the editor could not imagine a 'mind-set' but only a location that determined an individual's approach to politics and adoption of particular policies. Without Labor's support for an all-party ministry Dunstan took the opportunity of Harris' resignation from the ministry to carry out a reshuffle bringing in L R Rodda. The UCP parliamentary party urged Dunstan to continue his pursuit of a National ministry as a wartime necessity.³¹

²⁶ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 345

²⁷ *Countryman*, 27 March 1942

²⁸ *ibid.*, 9 January 1942

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*, 16 January 1942

The Curtin government now moved to introduce uniform income tax across Australia to finance the war effort. The constitution was clear, with Section 51 giving power to the federal parliament to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to (ii) taxation, but so as not to discriminate between states or parts of states. A uniform tax would not discriminate but could the parliament remove the right of the states to continue to impose their own income tax?

The Premiers' Conference was unimpressed with Curtin's initiative, arguing for states' rights and claiming it was the first step towards unification on a permanent basis, something Labor had sought since 1919. The need to finance the war effort now gave Labor a convincing rationale and growing public support. A joint meeting of the UCP Central Council and the parliamentary party by a majority supported Dunstan's opposition to the uniform tax. Hocking was quick to point out that half the MPs and half the Council were not present at the meeting.³² Furthermore, it had been called at the request of the parliamentary party, a reversal of past practice, suggesting that now Dunstan controlled Central Council and was set to direct federal UCP MPs on the taxation issue.³³

In mid-year Dunstan considered a legal challenge to the legislation should it be passed by the Senate. The Bill was passed by the House of Representatives, with Coles and Wilson refraining from the vote and Labor's Maurice Blackburn voting with the opposition on 'legal grounds.' The LCP believed Labor's action was proof they were socialistic under the guise of essential war measures and exposed the reason why they would not enter a National government.³⁴ This argument was weakened however when the Bill gained support from a Senate dominated by anti-Labor. Dunstan realised that withdrawal of support of his government by Labor would follow as he learned of growing moves within Labor to end the arrangement. He tried to reassure his party:

They can't achieve more than they are now and I suspect it is another flying kite, as there is every time there is a by-election – this time in Gippsland North Province.³⁵

³² *ibid.*, 15 May 1942

³³ *ibid.*, 22 May 1942

³⁴ *Liberal Country Times*, 23 April 1942

³⁵ *Countryman*, 19 June 1942

Dunstan stood by his promise to ‘fight all the way’ and a legal challenge was lodged in the High Court by four states including Queensland’s Labor government. NSW was notably absent.

Those within the Victorian Labor Party now had an undeniable case to withdraw their support from the Dunstan government. Labor’s national solidarity was more important than any small advantages that might come from keeping Dunstan in government and the UAP out. The ALP central executive met before the opening of the 1942 parliamentary session and despite Cain telling them he favoured keeping Dunstan in office directed that he withdraw support from the government.

When state parliament resumed the Lt. Governor, echoing the Premier, advised that measures which were contentious or not urgent ‘should stand over until the return of more normal conditions.’ Anticipating the Labor censure motion the UAP struck first, with its deputy leader W H Everard, acting in Hollway’s absence, moving an amendment of support to the Address in Reply. Trumped, Cain’s amendment remained in his pocket to the undisguised delight of the Premier.³⁶ Labor moved from the cross-benches into opposition, Cain declaring the real issue was about winning the war and preparation for peace to which Dunstan replied that it was pathetic to break a seven year alliance which had achieved so much. The UAP promised to support Dunstan until the next election.³⁷ Labor was now free from the uncomfortable dilemma of supporting a Country Party state government which was which was not fully supportive of the federal Labor government’s war policies, especially in the domestic arena, and which challenged in the courts the uniform taxation legislation.

The *Age* praised Labor for its support of Dunstan since 1935, ending years of stagnation due to the dominance, if not stranglehold, of sterile ultra-conservative influence. Composite governments had led to a perpetually recurrent atmosphere of breakdown and crisis. The *Age* complimented Labor for its unity of interest and for not promoting any conflict between producers and rural and urban workers. Over the first five years of its seven year ‘alliance’, the government had been conspicuously successful but, with Labor’s withdrawal because of Dunstan’s lack of cooperation with the Commonwealth

³⁶ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 348

³⁷ *Countryman*, 10 July 1942

Labor government, the UCP was again captive to the UAP. The *Age* concluded: 'The people do not want to return to composite government.'³⁸

Dunstan's eighth budget was presented in August continuing the fiscal position when he was supported by Labor but earning general criticism from the UAP and Labor that the government was not cooperating enough with the federal government's war effort. One UCP member thought more attention should be given by the states to postwar reconstruction.³⁹ At the back of his mind Dunstan was considering a state election to force such issues and consolidate his party on the current electoral boundaries. Cain too was assessing his party's opportunities arguing at its state conference for the removal of limitations on a Labor minority government. The platform still demanded that Labor hold a majority of seats to form a government. Cain said that if they had been in a minority Labor government they could have gained UAP cooperation to push through the redistribution legislation: 'Such opportunities arise without a moment's notice.' Bill Barry put the opposing case: being in opposition was correct as Labor was then not fettered in its opinions as would be the case in a minority government. He agreed with Cain that redistribution was essential to give Labor a chance but Labor would find it impossible to implement its program or wider view if allied to another party.⁴⁰

Elections were constantly on the minds of the MPs and their leaders and discussions turned to the fate of the three Victorian MPs who were either serving overseas or known to be POWs. The experience of the position of candidates for an election, particularly sitting MPs, in the Great War was revisited. In 1917 it was made possible to nominate for the election by telegraph or cable if a signed nomination form had not been left behind as W Kennedy Smith, the retiring MLA for Dundas, had done. Initially, serving MPs were to be named in the legislation but the Legislative Council had widened it to include any sitting member serving overseas. Bill Slater (not then an MP) had left a signed form to nominate for Mildura but the Labor Party had changed this to Dundas. Ironically these two overseas serving men competed for Dundas, Slater defeating Smith. In the Assembly, Knox raised the question of whether the Premier would legislate to permit other persons to sign a nomination form on behalf of those MPs who may be

³⁸ Quoted in *Labor Call*, 16 July 1942

³⁹ *Countryman*, 25 September 1942

⁴⁰ *Labor Call*, 10 September 1942

POWs, posted as missing and not presumed dead or could not communicate with the returning officers, to contest their seats. Dunstan replied that those MPs currently overseas had taken advantage of Section 6 of the Electoral Act 4691, passed in 1939 to enable them to contest their electorates in their absence. Kent Hughes and Lamb would be able to contest any coming election. Knox was elected Speaker after Slater resigned to become Australia's first minister to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, now an ally of Britain and America. Soon after these happenings the parliament learned that the family of Hamilton Lamb MLA had been officially informed that 'Hamilton Lamb, formerly reported missing, was now a POW of the Japanese.'⁴¹

Talks resumed regarding the possible reunification of the LCP and the UCP, with the LCP believing that Labor in power federally could provide the necessary impetus.⁴² Learning of this Dunstan was certainly upbeat when the state representatives met at the Constitutional Convention in Canberra to discuss realignment of powers essential for the war effort. He opposed holding a referendum to have the federal government assume these powers indefinitely. Along with the other states he agreed to enact legislation which would enable them to carry out obligations directed by the Commonwealth government under the current constitutional arrangements, effectively transferring many state powers to the Commonwealth for five years: 'The state is duty bound to hand these powers over to the Commonwealth to enable it to deal with the problems associated with post-war reconstruction.' Both Curtin and Cain noted that Dunstan was far more accepting of enlarged Commonwealth powers than when he opposed the uniform taxation legislation or during the recent joint sitting of the Victorian parliament. Rumours resurfaced that he was seeking a federal seat, now possibly Wannon.

⁴¹ *Countryman*, 27 November 1942

⁴² *Liberal Country Times*, 17 December 1942

CHAPTER 12

WARS CAN BE WON AND LOST

‘There is only one thing that counts in parliament
and that’s the numbers.’

A A Dunstan, 19 November 1943

This chapter analyses the reunion of the two Country Parties and the political controversy over electoral malapportionment. The consequential return of the LCP to the UCP is explained as a response to the accession of the federal Labor government and its push for increased Commonwealth powers. The removal of the pro-Labor Country Party rebels also took away another barrier to reunification. The argument that malapportionment was the basis for the long life of the Dunstan regime was confirmed when he was forced to accept an electoral redistribution which undermined his government.

The competition between Dunstan and Hocking had come to an end. This reduced the influence of the ‘rebels’ and encouraged a return of the LCP to the UCP. Consequently the conservatives felt free to cooperate at state and federal levels to oppose the federal Labor government’s push for centralisation of powers. Dunstan exploited this fundamental economic debate between the Commonwealth and the states to call a state election, ostensibly on public issues and openly supporting the federal government in time of war, but in reality to settle internal party issues. Party numbers differed only slightly and the UCP reached the greatest representation it would ever hold in the Assembly. A few weeks later on 21 August 1943 federal Labor won a resounding victory at the polls.

Dunstan lost office when outmanoeuvred by a UAP amendment to a Labor motion of no-confidence based on electoral redistribution and John Cain headed a Labor government for four days until the UCP and UAP combined to defeat him with a ‘convenient’ coalition, even though it meant that the UAP lost the opportunity to reform the Electoral Act. Dunstan resumed the premiership. He achieved this without consultation or approval from Central Council. The formation of the Liberal Party at the

end of 1944 galvanised conservative opposition to Dunstan. During the following year members of his own party started to turn against him and he was forced to accept electoral redistribution. His internal party critics and former coalition partners voted him out of office leading to the expulsion of some of the ‘rebels.’ The Governor installed a minority cabinet until an election saw a minority Cain Labor government in office for the next two years. The era of Dunstan’s artfulness and the influence of the UCP were over. After Cain followed five years of non-Labor minority and coalition governments until 1952 when the electorate expressed its preference for a majority (Labor) government, the first of a series for the next 40 years.

Early in 1943 there were signs that the UCP and LCP might mend their differences. Hocking had virtually given up the fight against Dunstan and in February announced his retirement at the next Conference from Central Council: ‘I sever my association with the Central Council of the UCP for the time being with great reluctance and chairmanship of the *Countryman* Board.’¹

The rebels would lose their champion and lessen their ties with their main propaganda sheet. Immediately the LCP approached the Central Council to meet with its executive with a view to reaching political unity – ‘to weld country interests into one political entity, and to fight the federal government’s tightening controls.’² Reunification was not straightforward despite the common objective to oppose federal Labor’s controls over rural interests and to resist Labor’s electoral expansion in Victoria.

Hocking’s decision to lower his political activity had been forced upon him by circumstances, not simply political setbacks. The war had deeply affected the Hocking household. Both sons had joined the air force and his own long working hours were extremely tiring.³ It was time to concentrate on his business interests which had expanded with war-related contracts. Before he retired from his UCP positions Hocking was anxious that the breach between the two groups should be healed. Notably, it was

¹ *Countryman*, 12 February 1943

² *ibid.*

³ Hocking, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-8

Hocking himself who moved the motion for discussions to take place in April. In the same way that he had shaken hands with Dunstan at the 1940 Conference he was prepared for reconciliation with McEwen, now that the heat had gone out of the LCP versus UCP conflict. Fadden acted as the broker for the rapprochement, bringing Hocking and McEwen together in his room at the Hotel Australia in Melbourne where the two ‘sunk [sic] their differences and shook hands.’⁴ Now he accepted the reasonableness of the argument that unity was necessary to oppose an irresponsible federal Labor government and now Victorian Labor was in opposition.⁵ Hocking saw that McEwen should also be readmitted to his former ‘fold.’ Hocking would remain a member of the Country Party until the end of 1948 when he joined the LCP ‘to fight the twin evils of socialism and communism.’⁶ Perhaps his differences with Dunstan had not fully abated as, when approached to run against him at a later election, Hocking took some time before he decided against it.⁷

The LCP was adamant it was not simply rejoining the UCP. Unity was the key not absorption. The LCP wanted to avoid criticism as was levelled by Wilson who alleged that the UAP and CP in Queensland had ‘merged’ as a precondition for Fadden being accepted as Prime Minister by the UAP.⁸ A preliminary meeting of the respective Victorian Councils, held in the offices of the Chamber of Commerce, acknowledged UCP president Phayer’s argument that it was inevitable one body would need to submerge its identity but how far was that body prepared to submerge its principles? Composite ministries would have to be accepted at federal level by the UCP as experience showed this was the only way to bring all members of the parliamentary party into line with the opposition position.⁹ Any loss of independence was greatly outweighed by the increase in overall strength as a result of fusion. The ‘freedom’ previously enjoyed by Wilson and Rankin was a luxury no longer seen as acceptable.

The 27th Annual Conference of the UCP in Melbourne saw Dunstan argue that the UCP effectively had only two MPs (Wilson and Rankin) in the House of Representatives and

⁴ Sir Arthur Fadden, letter to Patricia Hocking, 10 March 1972, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 140

⁵ *Countryman*, 19 February 1943

⁶ *Age*, 10 February 1949

⁷ *Sun News-Pictorial*, 22 June 1949

⁸ *Liberal Country Times*, 25 March 1943

⁹ *Countryman*, 19 February 1943

that neither could be relied upon: ‘Essentially we have no representation in the House of Representatives – the farce must end.’ Wilson argued right to the finish for an independent Country Party: ‘Be united against the enemy but not against the Labor Party or any other party alone. I would support a national government but Labor’s rigid rules prevent it.’ Dunstan agreed with Wilson that the ACPA constitution should be changed: ‘Unity of the country parties must be a first step before national unity or a national government is possible.’¹⁰

By May the major obstacles to unity were gone with Lamb absent on war service and the other rebels silenced. The rank and file approved the creation of a single Country Party in Victoria. Delegates could attend the ACPA and affiliate if that constitution was acceptable. A joint Central Council was formed, leading McEwen to declare:

Today marks the end of a phase of country party politics in Victoria. My expulsion when I joined the Lyons-Page ministry was due to an anti-UAP mentality of the time and sympathy for Labor rather than the rules. It has been a clash of strong personalities.¹¹

The split in the Country Party had been healed through a newly shared hatred for a common enemy – the Labor Party seeking extra federal powers.

Events at federal level played into Dunstan’s hands. Labor in a minority in both houses suffered defeat in the Senate over those parts of its budget which sought increases in taxation. Curtin’s government did gain support from Queensland and NSW which passed the necessary legislation transferring certain powers to the Commonwealth for postwar reconstruction, but Victoria agreed only if all the other states did likewise. By drawing Curtin out on the issue of a National government, Tom Paterson hoped to assist his party in a Victorian election should it be called as expected. Curtin’s message in a letter to Paterson was clear: ‘A national government would be a national tragedy spending time in disputation, leading to absolute confusion – best met by the Advisory War Council which is serving Australia well.’¹² Paterson’s strategy was that Labor’s rejection of a National government would add rationale to Dunstan’s argument that he would only acquiesce if there was national (all states) unity on the question.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 16 April 1943

¹¹ *Liberal Country Times*, 6 May 1943 (final issue)

¹² *Countryman*, 28 May 1943

Under the banner of ‘unity’ Dunstan called a state election for mid-June. Hamilton Lamb and all sitting MPs were endorsed by the UCP. Proudly Dunstan boasted that the Country Party had held every seat it had won since 1917¹³ and that the current parliament (the 34th) was the first ever in its history to have run its full course.¹⁴ He now acknowledged (as Lamb had done years earlier and earned Dunstan’s rebuke in parliament) that some adjustment in electorates was needed to overcome anomalies.¹⁵ The 1943 election would be far different from those since 1935. Labor ceased to be ‘the tail of the Country Party’ and consequently Dunstan saw that his party had been transformed into the ‘sparring partner of communism’ free to take the fight to the people.

Cain was backed by the anti-Dunstan *Age* attributing to Cain the credit for Dunstan’s first five years of progressive legislation and for forcing the UCP to adopt a wider view in order to avoid being branded as sectional. Now the war had overshadowed the state parliaments: ‘We need to shed light on this penumbral activity.’ The Country Party had lost the virility and progressive characteristics of its more youthful days. The Dunstan government was now impotent, ‘a harmony of silence and inaction.’ The *Age* continued putting it clearly: ‘The people have no desire for the resumption of the long discredited type of composite governments that in the past made Victorian politics a by-word of paralysis and futility.’¹⁶

State issues were hard to highlight during the war especially as this election was called by Dunstan to settle internal party issues not public policy ones. Tom Hollway, leader of the UAP since the death of Sir Stanley Argyle in November 1940 and recently discharged from his war service as an intelligence officer with the RAAF in New Guinea, promoted separate tribunals for teachers and public servants and the need for electoral redistribution. Dunstan made no effort to compete but did promise increased facilities for country schools and conceded that some readjustment was needed on electoral redistribution as long as country interests did not suffer. Labor concentrated on education, raising the school leaving age and abolishing fees from kindergarten to university and setting up an independent teachers’ tribunal. Cain promised action on

¹³ *ibid.*, 4 May 1943

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 21 May 1943

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *Age*, quoted in *Labor Call*, 13 May 1943

electoral redistribution and described Dunstan's attitude to the current boundaries as 'a smug complacency amounting to a public scandal.'¹⁷

Nonetheless, the major election issue was essentially one of full or conditional cooperation with the federal government. The voters were mainly preoccupied with their daily lives under wartime conditions and the electoral outcome in Victoria was one of little change. Labor contested the 12 UCP seats that it had conceded in 1940 as part of their de facto coalition arrangements but succeeded in capturing only one, Warrenheip held by Ned Hogan. Labor also won Essendon when the UAP member retired. Labor later lost another supporter when independent Ivy Weber, who retained Nunawading, resigned the day before the new session opened to contest the federal electorate of Henty. She was unsuccessful but Labor gained her state seat at the by-election. As well as losing Essendon to Labor, the UAP lost Brigadier Cohen's seat of Caulfield to an independent. Cohen had spent long periods overseas with the fighting forces as a member of the Red Cross but as this had not been recognised in the legislation as 'active service' he was not eligible to be returned unopposed like Hamilton Lamb and Wilfrid Kent Hughes.¹⁸

The UCP gained two seats, one from each of the other parties, and increased its support when independent Labor member E E Bond was replaced in Port Fairy and Glenelg by another independent, H R Hedditch, who aligned himself with the UCP to the point where he could have almost claimed to have been one of them.¹⁹ Over 26 years the Country Party in Victoria had grown from four parliamentary members to 26. It was now the largest party in the Legislative Assembly while the UAP was the smallest, although it held the power of veto from the cross-benches.

Curtin called a federal election soon afterwards for 21 August 1943 to convert his government's fragile two-independents majority to one in both houses voted in by the people. When Paterson decided to retire, his party had to discourage Dunstan from nominating for Gippsland. He still hungered for an escape to federal politics. Wilson who had been in London at the Empire Parliamentary Association Conference returned

¹⁷ *Age*, 22 May 1943

¹⁸ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 352

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 350

in time to contest Wimmera. While he had been away he ensured support for Curtin by pairing with a member of the UAP. The conservatives continued to campaign against Wilson labelling him a ‘quasi-Labor’ minister for his advisory role to the Minister for Commerce and Agriculture W J Scully. Rather than being pleased that this independent UCP member had an influence on issues central to farmers they were angered by his alleged payment of four hundred pounds for those services.²⁰ Curtin’s team was greatly assisted by the obvious differences between the opposition parties and the personal competition between Fadden and Menzies. When Menzies produced his 10-point plan ‘National Service Group,’ Fadden countered with a 21-point manifesto of his own. The public tide went with Labor which was able to form a majority with 44 MPs in the 76-member House of Representatives and a majority in the Senate. The campaign against Wilson failed and he celebrated a clear and absolute victory in Wimmera.²¹

In the lull after the federal election the spotlight partly returned to Spring Street. Discussions were taking place between the UCP and UAP to form a composite government but this depended upon Central Council’s approval. Labor predicted that any composite ministry would:

adopt the distinguishing feature of all composite governments in Victoria since 1918 – ‘inertia’ – and that the UAP would accordingly betray its policy of electoral reforms. Had not Dunstan, despite his pre-poll acceptance of the inevitability of some electoral change to correct the imbalance between electorates, repeated his opposition to redistribution at the declaration of the poll in his electorate of Korong and Eaglehawk? – ‘I am not prepared to be bullied, bluffed or bounced into adopting a policy which will spell disaster to the country districts.’²²

The way to test the UAP’s resolve was for Cain to force the issue over redistribution. Buoyed by its recent win in the Nunawading by-election, and believing the result was ‘where the citizens spoke in definite language on the matter of the redistribution of Assembly seats,’²³ Labor sponsored a no-confidence motion²⁴ because of the

²⁰ *Countryman*, 13 August 1943

²¹ *ibid.*, 20 August 1943

²² *Herald*, 26 June 1943

²³ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 215, 15 September 1943, p. 687

²⁴ *ibid.*, 7 September 1943, p. 513

government's failure to remedy the inequitable and anomalous state electoral position and proposed an automatic 10-yearly adjustment based on federal electorates. The motion was debated over three days in the new Assembly. Despite Labor promoting its redistribution scheme,²⁵ which had all-party support at federal level, Hollway's amendment proposed a teachers' tribunal and a ratio of 100:64 (city:rural) electors for a future redistribution. Interestingly, the debate continued in private for a little over one and a half hours in the very early morning. Strangers were ordered to withdraw and there was no Hansard reporting during this time. Hollway's amendment prevailed and Dunstan was defeated 36:24. He resigned immediately on 10 September. Cain, as leader of the second largest party in the Assembly, was commissioned as Premier on 13 September and immediately sought a fortnight's adjournment of the house.

While the Labor central executive had softened its attitude towards a minority Labor government, it believed it retained the right to direct parliamentary tactics leading up to the new sitting of the parliament. It gave Cain its support only if he pursued redistribution as soon as possible. If not, he was to seek a dissolution and then, if the Governor refused, Cain would be obliged to resign. Cain had been advised by the central executive not to seek assurances from the UAP or any other source. The strong support for electoral redistribution as demonstrated on the floor of the house should be sufficient 'proof' for the Governor, especially as it had been initiated by Labor.²⁶ Cain was obliged to heed the Labor executive while Dunstan now chose to ignore his Central Council advice.

The Melbourne newspapers supported the Cain government and a redistribution, the *Argus* stating 'The Cain government should be given a fair chance'²⁷ and the *Age* that 'any strategy to withhold cooperation would be regarded by electors as an attempt to make a *burlesque* of state politics.'²⁸ The next day, the *Sun News-Pictorial* predicted that the Cain government would not survive.²⁹ And so it proved to be.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 543

²⁶ *Labor Call*, 16 September 1943

²⁷ *Argus*, 14 September 1943

²⁸ *Age*, 14 September 1943

²⁹ *Sun News-Pictorial*, 15 September 1943

The UAP faced a dilemma. It could rejoice in Dunstan's defeat but it could not tolerate a Labor government. In their parliamentary party meeting only Archie Michaelis supported a minority Labor government. His case was that Dunstan had been in too long and as Labor was the only alternative they should give it a chance with the UAP as the watchdog. Moreover, any move by Labor for a redistribution would need to be sanctioned by the UAP and that would no doubt be fairer than Labor's program for reform, as shown in the no-confidence debate that had seen Dunstan fall. The UAP insiders realised that Cain had personally dismissed the idea of a minority government with UAP support when it had been quietly mooted in the corridors. Any such alliance required some form of electoral pact which was unrealistic given that the parties were traditional foes at state and federal levels. Further, this would have necessitated the UAP suffering a Labor minority government claiming all the credit for any legislation at a coming poll as previously Dunstan had over Labor. Also the UAP majority in the Legislative Council would be put in an intolerable position in its complicated role as watchdog. 'Watchdog' or 'bulldog' depended on how each party saw its role in the Council. Hollway claimed: 'The Legislative Council is a non-party house in the view of our supporters, but is a Party House as far as Labor is concerned.'³⁰

Any alliance or cross-bench support for a minority government required approval by the participating parties in both chambers. Then there was the inconsistency of support for Labor at state level and outright opposition at federal level. It was an uneasy choice but the conclusion was clear. Labor federally was on the rise and the UAP on the wane as demonstrated at the August election. The only way to survive in Victoria seemed to be for the UAP to be in coalition with Dunstan or to support his minority government. Labor must be kept out of government. The first step was to frustrate Cain's motion for a fortnight's adjournment. Dunstan foreshadowed a vote of no-confidence in the government³¹ then he and Hollway combined to defeat Cain's adjournment motion 24:29. The house agreed to meet the next day at 10.30 am.

So it happened that on 16 September Cain was defeated by a Dunstan sponsored vote of no-confidence. The short-lived fifth Labor government of four days awaited the Governor's decision which was that there would be no dissolution and consequently

³⁰ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 215, 15 September 1943, p. 686

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 692

another government formed. Cain would have to follow his party's instructions and resign. With this in mind and wishing to avoid another election, Dunstan's no-confidence motion had been framed with full cooperation from the UAP, the second clause carefully worded:

That in the opinion of this House, a Government can be formed possessing its confidence, capable of providing stable government and authorised to introduce legislation in respect of redistribution of seats, a long-range plan for education, and the setting up of an independent tribunal for the Public service, including teachers.³²

Cain did resign and Dunstan succeeded in forming a composite ministry³³ without obtaining Central Council's prior approval. He had control over his party executive compared to Cain's experience. The UAP with half the numbers of the UCP in the Assembly accepted the deputy premiership and two portfolios in a ministry of nine. Central Council quickly endorsed the arrangement post facto.³⁴ Members of the UCP parliamentary party had mixed reactions to Dunstan's decision. Allnutt recalled the redistribution debate a few years earlier in which the Premier had cautioned Lamb who had appeared to move towards a fairer position. During that debate Allnutt recalled Dunstan being reported as saying: 'I oppose composite ministries – the saving of several country seats at the enormous cost of moral bankruptcy is far beyond the political endurance of any party.'³⁵

For most, Dunstan's moves were seen as brilliant for they had prevented any redistribution. The *Countryman* claimed he had saved the party from losing up to 19 seats.³⁶ Not all were happy that a coalition had been formed, and some UCP members pointed out that only the smaller management committee had voted approval. Dunstan explained that time had not permitted the calling of the full Council. All that was needed now was endorsement of the management committee's decision, failure to do so would be embarrassing. Dunstan would now indeed increasingly be seen and later described by

³² *ibid.*, p. 693

³³ *ibid.*, 21 September 1943, p. 700

³⁴ *Countryman*, 24 September 1943

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

Labor as a dictator.³⁷ He had flouted every party rule relating to joint or supported UCP ministries. When Central Council met to fully endorse the parliamentary party's action it scraped through eight votes to six. Some saw this as due to Dunstan's three 'locked-in women's votes' on Council who had been elected separately by the Women's Conference and not by the full Conference itself. The votes were seen by Dunstan's opponents as a sort of thankyou for the way he had ardently advocated at the previous Conference for women's rights and that their numbers on Central Council be increased to three. One biographer comments that timely praise for women was most uncharacteristic of Dunstan but his strategy was now clear.³⁸

His critics pointed out that in a vote on redistribution the UAP would have come to the aid of the UCP anyway to save the other anti-Labor party from the common enemy.³⁹ This was confirmed by Ian Macfarlan who had just rejoined the UAP after eight years as a member of the LCP and as an independent, to serve again as deputy leader. He admitted that even if Labor had stayed in office and introduced a redistribution Bill along the lines of the UAP amendment during the anti-Dunstan no-confidence motion (accepted by the Assembly) his party would not have supported it and certainly the Legislative Council would have defeated it. It seemed not to trouble Macfarlan that his party had misled the Governor for he had justified the scenario as the 'best way of bringing about a redistribution. We have prevailed upon the premier to give away six seats – "Half a duck is better than no dinner."'»⁴⁰

During the life of this coalition Dunstan would reward that 'electoral treachery' with treachery of his own by failing to deliver any of the UAP's reforms on education and the public service as promised to the Governor. Two years later Macfarlan expressed his disappointment in the coalition:

Efforts in that direction proved a complete failure and, looking back over what has since happened, I now realize the futility of what we attempted. We were powerless inasmuch as we were in an easy minority of the total number of the government. I have been in four governments since I was first elected as

³⁷ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 219, 27 September 1945, p. 4336

³⁸ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 365

³⁹ *Countryman*, 24 September 1943

⁴⁰ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 215, 21 September 1943, p. 705

member for Brighton, and I have no hesitation in saying that this composite government was the least efficient of them all.⁴¹

Dunstan countered all this criticism by arguing that a composite government was formed to provide a workable parliament and to enable urgent and progressive legislation in times of war. He said that the Cain government could not even rely upon the two independents for support. – ‘they were as variable as the wind.’⁴² A fortnight later when the Country Party won Waranga, Dunstan, claiming the win as a form of proof, made the assertion that ‘the electorate rejects Cain’s redistribution.’⁴³

In the face of continuing criticism within the general membership of the UCP, Dunstan now moved to consolidate his support, first seeking confirmation of what he had done with a vote of confidence from his parliamentary party. Only Allnut voted against him. He also gained the full Central Council’s confirmation of the management committee’s decision. He showed that the price of coalition was an electoral redistribution approved by the UAP but which would result in the UCP losing only six seats and not between 13 and 19 seats as under the original Labor-UAP motion. He then claimed that the UAP had gone to *him* with the new proposal and he had accepted it: ‘There is only one thing that counts in parliament and that’s the numbers.’⁴⁴

Allnut was joined by Everett (from the north-west) on Central Council in his criticism of the Premier’s style saying it was a legacy of his campaign against the four Mallee Hens because ‘they would not bow down to his dictation. The premier does not understand the feeling of the people in the Wimmera and the Mallee.’ He had always seen the north-west as too close to Labor and still opposing his part in bringing the LCP and UCP together. Everett and Allnut challenged Dunstan to get the Redistribution Bill through then dissolve the coalition. As a concession Dunstan said the coalition would only last the length of the parliament and that when an election was held the UCP would come out as a separate party.⁴⁵ A couple of former critics in the Wimmera acknowledged that Dunstan really had had no alternative. Mick Mibus, Lamb’s campaign manager in Lowan and the man Lamb had nominated in his will to take over

⁴¹ Pamphlet for 1945 election, quoted in Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, p. 364

⁴² *Countryman*, 1 October 1943

⁴³ *ibid.*, 15 October 1943

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 19 November 1943

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

in the event of his not returning from the war, summarised it thus: 'The party either had to become extinguished or make the best of a bad deal.'⁴⁶ R C Rankin MLC added that the party could not hand over to city interests without taking advantage of a way out: 'Alternative to what we did is death of our organisation.'⁴⁷

In March 1944 the 28th Country Party Conference met in Melbourne with a chance for the rank and file to debate the legitimacy of the composite government formed against the party rules. Dunstan sought support for his action explaining that both the UAP and Labor were using the redistribution issue to bring about the downfall of the government and weaken the party. Conference had no option other than to agree, but indicated that the rank and file alone should in the future determine such matters. Delegates voted to exclude the increased MP representation on Central Council (one MHR, one MLC and two MLAs elected by their parliamentary parties) from voting on this particular issue. Dunstan cleverly diverted any anger by concentrating his attack on the Commonwealth government's 'grab for power' and the coming Constitution Amendment (Powers Bill) Referendum scheduled for August. Another major debate was over the role and powers of the editor of the *Countryman*, since the editorials and prominence of articles exerted significant influence over the readership. Now president Skeat wanted to be consulted by the editor on issues of policy and to advise him after consultation with other directors. Skeat said this would prevent 'creating a Caesar within the organisation.' When an interjector suggested he was referring to Hocking, Skeat denied Hocking had been a dictator but added that the party 'does not vest an autocratic power in one man.' The proposal to harness the editor was defeated.⁴⁸

On the referendum issue, Alex Wilson indicated his strong support for the 'Yes' case and criticised Dunstan for agreeing at the Premiers' Conference to go along with it if all the other states did but on his return to Melbourne announcing total opposition.⁴⁹ Immediately Central Council overwhelmingly agreed with Dunstan to support the Australian Country Party in its campaign against the referendum.⁵⁰ Dunstan had sought this support on two planks: states' rights to entrench his power as Premier, and as an

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 3 December 1943

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 28 April 1944

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 12 May 1944

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 19 May 1944

economic link with the UAP, also to preserve support for his premiership. Dunstan now clearly controlled Central Council, always being able to call upon the three delegates from the Women's' Section and the four parliamentary party representatives. Furthermore, he ensured that he was one of the four and that he was always present when Council met. Later on Bussau would describe those seven Central Council members, all unelected by Conference, as a 'bloc vote' to be used against over-concentration of power in the elected Central Council.⁵¹ This control over Central Council allowed Dunstan to limit any embarrassment from that quarter and to devote his energies to parliament and any coalition tensions.

Dunstan was careful to try to offset any criticism that he was not cooperating with the federal government by including in the Governor's speech at the opening of parliament that his government was working closely with the federal government's war effort. Had he changed his mind on the referendum or was it more likely, as Labor saw it, that 'there was something sinister lurking behind the moves.'⁵² On the same day leave of absence was extended to Lt. Hamilton Lamb and Wilfrid Kent Hughes 'on service with His Majesty's forces.'

Central Council worked hard to bring any dissidents on the referendum into line, particularly those in the Mallee. It expressed its disapproval of any MP or Central Councillor using their title when supporting the 'Yes' case. Again the two camps traded legal opinions, Dunstan's KCs advising that the referendum 'afforded dangerous provisions.'⁵³ It did not go unnoticed that the 16 page campaign pamphlet for the 'No' case in Victoria issued by the Country Party was printed by the Government Printing Office.⁵⁴ The federal government's case was not helped when the Lang faction in the caucus condemned the referendum as a 'Curtin version of the Niemeyer Policy.'⁵⁵ The campaign on the referendum was another instance of an 'unholy alliance' across parties bound by a common hatred of a particular policy. The referendum was narrowly defeated, winning support in only two states, Western Australia and South Australia. In

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 18 April 1946

⁵² *Labor Call*, 6 July 1944

⁵³ *Countryman*, 14 July 1944

⁵⁴ *Labor Call*, 10 August 1944

⁵⁵ *Countryman*, 21 July 1944

Victoria it failed by 0.69 per cent, in NSW by 4.56 per cent and nationally by 4 per cent. Notably there was a majority of 2.8 per cent among members of the forces.⁵⁶

On 27 October 1944 the *Countryman* carried news of the death in Siam of Hamilton Lamb MLA. The Assembly was suspended for the day and the flag flown at half-mast. From Canberra Curtin paid a personal tribute. Other tributes flowed freely at campaign meetings, branch meetings and official functions held during the run-up to the by-election. On one occasion the Minister for Water Supply J G B McDonald declared:

He was one of the young men with a great future, which he had sacrificed when his country called, and they could only admire his courage and respect his memory.⁵⁷

Dunstan opened the UCP campaign for Lowan, something he never would have done for Lamb, although he did officially unveil the coloured portrait of Hamilton Lamb MLA in uniform in the UCP party room the same week. (It hangs there today alongside that of Dunstan, the only two portraits in that room.) Although the Redistribution of Seats Bill had been introduced in September and passed the next month 30:19,⁵⁸ the by-election was held on the current boundaries as the new boundaries were yet to be drawn. Labor put up a strong fight in Lowan, their candidate Jack Tripovich leading on the primary vote but losing to Mibus on the preferences of the unendorsed UCP candidate. Labor claimed that the reduced primary vote for the UCP in this blue-ribbon seat was essentially a vote of no-confidence in the Dunstan government and that other UCP MPs should feel uneasy.⁵⁹ The outcome in Lowan was repeated in the Bulla-Dalhousie by-election in November. Labor led on the primaries but L L Webster retained the seat for the UCP held previously by R A James who had won it from the UAP at the last election but who died after only 15 months in office. The increase in support for Labor at these polls stirred rumours that Dunstan was likely to retire and follow Bussau as Agent-General in London. Dunstan denied the allegation but the rumours would not have helped his self-confidence nor his hold on the premiership.

⁵⁶ *Australian Parliamentary Handbook*, p. 733

⁵⁷ *Countryman*, 27 October 1944

⁵⁸ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 217, 11 October 1944, p. 217

⁵⁹ *Labor Call*, 9 November 1944

The UAP and sections of the UCP had now accepted that ‘do-nothing’ Dunstan was not going to act that year to deliver independent tribunals for public servants or teachers. The long-awaited Soldiers Settlement Bill also failed to make the statute book. He did however belatedly see that legislation was enacted to establish the Country Fire Authority urgently recommended by the Stretton Royal Commission following the conflagration that razed much of Victoria in 1939. Another bushfire in early 1944 had hastened progress on this Bill. The most important legislation of the session had been the redistribution of seats. Dunstan had deferred the Bill for as long as he could but a gesture had to be made as the UAP grew increasingly impatient. The two non-Labor parties argued over the exact formula and Dunstan wore the UAP down from a ratio of 100:68 (city:rural) in the original no-confidence motion to a ratio of 100:57, the new boundaries to be effective once accepted by the parliament. The Electoral Districts Act while an improvement on the ‘Argyle Blot’ still gave rural Victoria over-representation. Labor reluctantly approved it, formally only, at the third reading.

At Albury in December a new conservative political party was being formed. Concerned about the deteriorating stocks of the UAP, R G Menzies and others had brought about the creation of the Liberal Party aimed at bringing in all the ‘bits and pieces’ shed by the UAP over the past two years. They numbered 18 groupings across Australia at the last count.⁶⁰ In the face of perceived concentration of power in Canberra by Labor, the basic structure of the new party gave maximum state autonomy seen as a necessary precondition for bringing those widespread ‘bits and pieces’ together.⁶¹ The Liberal Party said it would be ‘federalist,’ not ‘centralist’ like Labor.

Dunstan realised that the new Liberal Party, if successful, would galvanise opposition to him and the coalition. When the house rose for the end of the year he deliberately ensured that the parliament was not prorogued, the first time since 1935. If this had been done the Governor would have been required to open the new session with a speech outlining the coalition’s policies and program. Now the session would simply continue and the UAP (Liberal Party) would be denied the opportunity to include any important debates in the legislative program. He had avoided any opportunity for the UAP to embarrass him or cause an open breach. Dunstan was alert to the threat that once the

⁶⁰ J Jupp, *Australian Party Politics*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1964, p. 130

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 131

redistribution boundaries were finalised the UAP might break the coalition and force an election. He gave the electoral commissioners a very long time to complete their report, delaying it until 1945 and so postponing his political execution.

By 1945 with the diversion of the referendum out of the way, opposition to Dunstan's leadership was increasing among the rank and file of his party, especially among the wheat farmers. The Australian Wheat Farmers' Federation said that he was more concerned to secure political capital than benefit individual wheat farmers. Rallies against the price of wheat were organised. The (unendorsed) Country Party MLC for Gippsland, Trevor Harvey, in parliament just three months, declared his disappointment with the progress of the state under Dunstan – 'his only ambition is to show a credit balance as Treasurer.'⁶² Support on Central Council and in the parliamentary party was waning. Allnutt and Dodgshun were particularly critical of Dunstan's leadership, reporting that the wheat farmers were turning against him.⁶³ As a 'stop gap' Dunstan tried to accommodate the wheat farmers by promising to introduce a Wheat Stabilisation Bill after the war was over.

One side event was seen to be worth reporting by the *Countryman*. In February Curtin had arranged for the first member of the royal family to be appointed Governor-General of Australia, the Duke of Gloucester.⁶⁴ Appointing a non-Australian to this position was contrary to Labor's beliefs but perhaps this choice was to cement the coalition of the Allies, in particular Australia and Britain as the war was heading towards a conclusion in Europe. No end was in sight to the war in the Pacific.

Rumours were rife that an election would be called a year early as a solution to Dunstan's problems. These had started when the Redistribution Bill had been passed but now accelerated as the commissioners finalised their boundaries for the new seats. Eight seats held by the Country Party were abolished and two created. Lowan was marked for disappearance and distributed into three: Dundas, Ouyen and Borung.⁶⁵ Dunstan's threat to Lamb a few years earlier had come to pass. Dunstan realised as he celebrated a decade as Premier on 2 April (except for those few days under Cain) that he could not

⁶² *Labor Call*, 25 January 1945

⁶³ *ibid.*, 2 February 1945

⁶⁴ *Countryman*, 2 February 1945

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 29 March 1945

predict with certainty how much longer he could stay at the top. But no other Country Party Premier in Victoria could stand before the delegates at the coming Annual Conference with such a record.

The 29th Annual Conference celebrated the 10 years in government, the increase to a record 39 MPs in the state parliament and the fact they had not lost a by-election. Despite this unparalleled record Dunstan still had to suffer a certain amount of heckling from delegates as he tried to oppose Alex Wilson's arguments to support Chifley's moves to restore the Commonwealth Bank to its role as a strong central bank as outlined in its original charter. The federal Labor government's proposals were based on the findings of the recent Royal Commission, but Dunstan had obligations to those Collins Street financiers behind the coalition partner, the Liberal Party. The Conference recognised that it was the Labor Party which had foisted the redistribution on the UCP and that the party was now obliged to honour the deal with the UAP but at the same time protect its own interests.⁶⁶

Dunstan wanted to avoid an election unless it was on a date of his own choosing. The optimum timing was now on the old boundaries. To get his way he threatened to adjourn the house each day hoping the UAP would support his approach to the commission to redraw the boundaries.⁶⁷ Hollway objected strongly to these tactics as Dunstan tried to keep at bay the pressure from Labor, the UCP and his Central Council. Holding onto office at all costs was essential to Dunstan and he finally rewarded Norman Martin, the man he had promoted to cabinet over others more loyal to prevent him leaving the party, to the position of Agent-General in London.⁶⁸ This was a position that earlier rumours had predicted would be taken up by Dunstan himself.

The gulf between Central Council and the parliamentary party widened over the commissioners' redistribution plan. Council supported it as honouring the deal with the Liberal Party and any changes sought by the parliamentary party were seen as an unpalatable breach of the agreement. Dunstan explained that the party could only reject the plan once. The only way it could be defeated was to break the coalition and 'I do not

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 27 April 1945

⁶⁷ *Labor Call*, 24 May 1945

⁶⁸ *Countryman*, 18 May 1945

want an early election – not until June next year.’⁶⁹ Eventually Dunstan sided with his parliamentary party to refer the plan back to the commissioners. He then did a turn-around and cabinet decided not to oppose the first plan under pressure from the Liberals who wanted the matter finalised. Dunstan rationalised the change in tactics telling his parliamentary party that if the second plan proved unsatisfactory and was opposed this would lead to new legislation which could be even worse for the UCP:

We [sic] moved it in parliament; can we now oppose it? The Liberals have allowed us in government for nearly two years without undue pressure. If we withdraw now we will have neither honour nor dignity. We cannot let control of Treasury and Premiership go.⁷⁰

Finally the parliament approved the plan under the Electoral Districts Bill, supported by the 45 combined votes of the ministry, the UAP and Labor. Cain explained that after his government had been displaced by ‘that marriage of convenience’ over redistribution, the Labor Party now had decided to support the proposal ‘as it made some contribution towards a solution of the unfair electoral condition in this state.’⁷¹ The plan was opposed by more than half the UCP MLAs when 14 backbenchers voted against it. Not only were they dissatisfied with the redistribution plan but they were demonstrating that they had the numbers to depose Dunstan as Premier. Mibus was among the 14, no doubt upset that the seat of Lowan, to which he had recently been elected, was to disappear. Allnutt was furious with the Premier that a minority of the parliamentary party had overruled the majority and the chance to obtain a better plan for the UCP.⁷² As a sop, Dunstan arranged for the Bill to be amended in the Legislative Council knowing the move would not succeed. The voter ratios were now 13,800 rural, 19,500 provincial and 25,000 metropolitan. Dunstan had survived long enough to create another record – the longest-serving Premier in Australia’s history, 10 years, three months and 20 days.

Labor continued to gain support throughout Australia winning several by-elections, including J L Cremean in Clifton Hill succeeding his brother who died in mid-year. The war in Europe was over and victory in the Pacific appeared closer. These victories were overshadowed by the deaths of two national leaders: President Franklin D Roosevelt in

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 25 May 1945

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 219, 15 May 1945, p. 2997

⁷² *Countryman*, 8 June 1945

April and John Curtin three months later, only six weeks before the end of the war in the Pacific. Ben Chifley was readily accepted as the successor to Curtin. In Britain Clement Attlee surprisingly led Labour to victory over the war hero Churchill as the people reacted to oppressive wartime controls. Britain now had a Labour majority government for the first time in its history, 390 seats out of 640 in the House of Commons. Understandably, in Victoria the UCP now asked the vital question: should Dunstan opt for or be forced to the polls? Would Labor win?⁷³

Given Labour's election in Britain, and the recent by-election victories in Australia, Labor predicted the political tide swinging their way when Japan surrendered following the atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Victory at war should be rewarded by victory at the polls by a thankful people. In Victoria a fortnight later, Labor moved the no-confidence motion to catch the 'paralysed' Premier, the motion simply stating, without reasons, 'That the government does not possess the confidence of the House.'⁷⁴ Dunstan, in reply, labelled Labor's motion as being 'all-embracing of the dragnet type' and lacking specific charges.⁷⁵ He acknowledged that 'the Labor Party has kept my government in office for a long while. We have squared that debt and now we are dealing with the future,' then he dismissed 'the flimsy and paltry reasons submitted by the Leader of the Opposition.'⁷⁶

Frank Field, the member for Dandenong and Cain's new deputy, charged the Premier with having 'no fixed political principles, it is easy to retain the Premiership, because one is able to trim one's policy to suit the needs.'⁷⁷ Field illustrated this with Dunstan's alliances conveniently changing from Labor to the UAP (now the Liberal Party) to maintain his Premiership, citing the *Age* on 10 October 1941 when the Premier addressed the Australian Natives Association and supported a greater degree of social justice after the war and comparing this with the *Argus* on 21 March 1945 quoting him as complaining that 'incessant demands were being made for higher wages, shorter hours and more and more social services.'⁷⁸

⁷³ *ibid.*, 10 August 1945

⁷⁴ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 219, 29 August 1945, p. 3793

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 3802

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 3809-10

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 3811

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 3813

The Mallee Hens wanted Dunstan out, Allnutt declaring he still was not in favour of composite ministries and that Dunstan had ‘proved himself to be the greatest assassin this state has ever known.’⁷⁹ He was forced to withdraw the comment and explained he was speaking ‘in the political sense.’⁸⁰ Allnutt said his support for Dunstan had always been strained but he had crossed the floor now the Premier had ‘accepted the support of the direct opposition and thereby sabotaged a majority decision of his own party.’⁸¹ Allnutt added that he supported Labor on the issue of redistribution now that Cain had indicated Labor was prepared to increase the size of the house by five or six and to return three or four seats to the country.⁸²

E J Mackrell also criticised Dunstan, described him as ‘fanatically dictatorial and running a one-man government’ but was not asked to withdraw. He continued:

Composite governments do not work – they only work if one party works with another. The Allan government failed and so did the Argyle government ...

I believe in an independent government.⁸³

He explained that, like Allnutt, he had supported Cain’s motion to enlarge the Assembly by three seats to restore the three electorates lost by the country. This invited the riposte that Cain had ‘sent a sprat to catch a Mackrell.’⁸⁴ Dodgshun said he was against composite governments and that this was not disloyal as it was the position of the rank and file of the party. F A Cameron, who had opposed Dunstan during the Hocking dispute, said he could not support Labor’s motion but he disliked composite or coalition administrations and the UCP certainly needed new leadership: ‘the sooner the United Country party changes its leader the better it will be for the party and the State as a whole.’⁸⁵ Cameron pledged to ‘do all I can to change the leadership and dissolve the present coalition.’⁸⁶ Not one UCP backbencher had made a speech in favour of the composite government.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 3831

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*, p. 3833

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 3850

⁸⁴ *Countryman*, 31 August 1945

⁸⁵ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 219, 29 August 1945, p. 3868

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

Despite Allnutt and Dodgshun voting with Labor, and Mackrell paired with Kent Hughes, still a POW in Changi, Dunstan survived 33:29. The vote would have been 32:30 as parliamentary practice was to disallow pairing when voting on a vote of no confidence, but on this occasion UCP members supporting the motion agreed to pair with Kent Hughes.⁸⁷ The debate had started just after 2.30 pm and did not conclude until 7 am the following morning.

The management committee of Central Council acted swiftly inviting the rebels Allnutt, Mackrell and Dodgshun to attend a meeting to explain themselves. The *Countryman* prepared the ground for the 'hearing' with a long and neutral editorial on the relationship between the parliamentary party and the rank and file: 'It is the membership from the bottom up that in our party is entitled by democratic procedure to originate and shape the policy of the UCP.'⁸⁸ At the combined Council-parliamentary party meeting all MPs were asked whether they would in future abide by majority caucus decisions. Several MLCs walked out saying the upper house was a house of review.⁸⁹ No decision to punish any MPs was taken but next day Council, with no MPs present, did expel Mackrell and Allnutt on a 13:2 vote after a close vote determined not to refer the matter back to a combined Council-parliamentary party meeting.

Dunstan's leadership was now in the balance. When parliament reassembled the government was defeated on the Supply Bill 29:26, with the expelled UCP MPs, the two independents and the five dissident Liberals voting with Labor. Dunstan sought a dissolution. The Governor, Sir Winston Dugan, set an election for 3 October but indicated that supply should be passed earlier to prevent the illegality of possible payments without parliamentary sanction such as public service salaries. This had happened in Victoria in 1909 and Dugan was anxious to avoid a repeat. Dunstan wanted to go to the people as Premier but supply was defeated 26:31. He clung on to office and recommended to the Governor that Cain be asked to form a temporary government but Cain could not guarantee supply. The Governor, on the recommendation of Hollway and Lind, installed dissident Liberal Ian Macfarlan, Attorney-General in the Dunstan

⁸⁷ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 219, 29 August 1945, pp. 3877-8

⁸⁸ *Countryman*, 31 August 1945

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 21 September 1945

government, as a leader of a caretaker ministry. This ‘composite of opposites,’⁹⁰ numbering 10 in total, received support from Labor and Allnutt and Mackrell to secure supply conditionally on going to the polls. The ‘stop-gap’ government accepted this and deferred the original date until the Saturday after Melbourne Cup Day.

The parliamentary debates⁹¹ over several days provide an insight into the attitudes held by some MPs of all parties towards coalitions and minority governments over the period of Dunstan’s premiership. He expressed his anger towards the new Premier and those who had crossed the floor to defeat him:

Macfarlan praised my budget but at the same time was working to unseat the very government of which he was a member ... and now Mackrell who supported the line of independence for the UCP accepts a position in a composite ministry. He abandons his principles to join this suicide ministry.⁹²

Dunstan saw the new ministry as a coalition of treachery and political convenience.

Allnutt described Dunstan and his role as leader of a minority government as ‘self, first, last and always ... depriving my electorate of any assistance.’⁹³ Cain accused Dunstan of heading a do-nothing government over the last two years: ‘He led a government of inaction and hangs on like a leech. By refusing to resign he is heading a dictatorship.’⁹⁴ Archie Michaelis who would become a member of the new ministry claimed the dislodgement of Dunstan was ‘ultimate payback for stabbing Argyle in the back 10 years ago.’⁹⁵ Once again the change in government from one ‘bits’n’pieces’⁹⁶ to another ‘bits’n’pieces’ was about men not measures even if to get supply before the election.

With supply granted Dunstan would now go to the polls still as party leader if not as Premier. *Labor Call* condemned the recent parliamentary experience as ‘selfish political jockeying for power,’ and claimed that Dunstan complained parliament was unworkable when it was really he himself.⁹⁷ Given Labor’s cooperation with Dunstan in the past and

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 5 October 1945

⁹¹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 219, 25 and 27 September 1945, pp. 4302-66

⁹² *Countryman*, 28 November 1945

⁹³ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, vol. 219, 25 and 27 September 1945, p. 4309

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 4325

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 4350

⁹⁶ ‘bits’n’pieces,’ expression used in *Labor Call*, 11 October 1945

⁹⁷ *Labor Call*, 4 October 1945

attempts to work with Hollway to bring about his downfall through redistribution this seems less than totally honest. The same party which is an ally in coalition or on the cross-benches is an enemy in opposition.

Cain was quietly confident of victory. The newly-formed Liberal Party was in disarray with Hollway and his deputy Macfarlan openly brawling, while the Country Party showed signs of tiring of Dunstan's stubbornness.⁹⁸ During the campaign Hollway and Dunstan attacked the 'interim government of bits'n'pieces' but this did not signify a return to the 'normal' as Hollway made it clear he would not support a minority UCP government. Labor, backed strongly by the *Age*, campaigned on a Labor versus Dunstan theme going so far as to quote one (un-named) member of the UCP Council: 'Albert Dunstan had twisted so often they had to screw his socks on.'⁹⁹ The other newspapers appeared to be neutral but inevitably were not favourable towards Dunstan as they appealed for a result to end the parliamentary disorder.¹⁰⁰

Cain campaigned strongly leaving no doubt as to the leitmotif of the ALP campaign: 'Labor is the only party which ... [can] offer stable government as a single self-reliant political organisation.'¹⁰¹ Labor won eight seats with strong gains in country districts and formed a minority government with reliable support from two metropolitan independents.¹⁰² Nursing its wounds and lamenting the loss of seven seats, including that of Allnutt, the only comfort for the UCP was that they had denied Labor an absolute majority. The UCP parliamentary party, when it reconvened, elected Dunstan's protégé J G B McDonald as leader and K Dodgshun as deputy. Dunstan did not renominate for the leadership: 'After thirteen and a half years as a minister and ten and a half as premier I am entitled to a rest.'¹⁰³ Cain's government embarked on a reformist program in housing, hospitals and land settlement but faced a hostile upper chamber which pruned this program. Labor now held government at federal and state levels except in South Australia where Tom Playford's government held out with the support

⁹⁸ White, *John Cain*, p. 114

⁹⁹ *Labor Call*, 18 October 1945

¹⁰⁰ Paul, *The premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan*, pp. 392-3, 396-7

¹⁰¹ *Labor Call*, 25 October 1945, quoted in P Strangio, 'John Cain snr: The star-crossed premier' in P Strangio and B Costar (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 256

¹⁰² Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 181

¹⁰³ *Countryman*, 23 November 1945

of one independent. Labor in government in all the states could have cooperated with Chifley to voluntarily transfer powers to the Commonwealth but, given that even Labor governments value states rights and these vary between states, this may not have occurred. A revitalised Liberal Party, a series of postwar strikes and general industrial chaos along with an anti-communist campaign by the press and within his own ranks through 1946 and 1947 would see to it that the Cain government would last just two years. It survived two no-confidence motions in the Legislative Assembly and suffered an uncooperative Legislative Council. The Council ultimately refused supply, the first time in the 20th century, forcing Cain to the polls at which Labor was routed.

In Victoria a majority government would not be formed until the next Cain government in 1952-55. The five years between the two Cain governments would see Hollway and McDonald in coalition and each of them twice heading a minority government with cross-bench support, Hollway by the UCP and McDonald by Labor. The Cain majority government set the pattern and other majority governments followed, notably that of Henry Bolte which lasted from 1955 to 1972. In almost three decades there had not been a majority government since the Lawson government (1918-23). When Joan Kirner's Labor government was defeated in 1992 there had been four decades of single party majority government. The Country Party had become much more conservative than in its heyday and its numbers had been reduced so much since the early 1950s, largely due to a fairer electoral redistribution introduced by the Cain government, that it was not part of any government again until 1992. To a degree a two-party parliament had returned to Victoria. A coalition government was formed under Jeff Kennett (Liberal) and Pat McNamara (National) in 1992-99. Steve Bracks' Labor minority government supported by independents, reflecting shades of the 1941 Curtin government, followed for three years until he formed a majority government in 2002 which was re-elected in 2006. In July 2007 John Brumby, the Treasurer, took over as Premier. Since the end of the Kennett/McNamara coalition the Nationals in Victoria have operated separately from the Liberals and not in a continuing coalition while in opposition.

CONCLUSION

As the name suggests, the Country Party's origins and purpose arose from a belief amongst farmers around the time of the Great War that the established city-centric party system was not meeting the needs and concerns of the rural community. Its founders faced an immediate dilemma. Within the existing conservative parties, their potential power would be constrained by powerful financial and grazier interests whose policies on banking and the tariff were inimical to small farmers. At the same time anti-Labor feeling ran high in many country areas as farmers feared that Labor governments would bring agricultural workers under the arbitration system, increase land taxes and favour the leasehold system over freehold or further releases of Crown land.

Country interests were represented as small factions within the political parties, but as wheat pooling and other government regulations and controls came into force during the war, the farmers realised that such factions would not deliver the benefits they wanted and decided to establish their own party.¹ Reduced to its simplest terms, farmers through their own Country Party would return their own members to parliament, back them with a strong electoral machine and insist they support 'measures before men' using their power for concrete results.' The term 'measures before men' was not new, with G W Hall (MLA for Moira 1880-89) having employed the phrase 'measures not men' back in 1889.² A major objective of the new party, given its relatively small size, was to maintain its existence and identity as it campaigned to achieve its platform. It was always under constant threat through various associations within its ranks, between states and the federal body and as a partner in any coalition or arrangement with one or more of the other political parties.

Differences of opinion over strategy marked the early development of the party at all levels as it protected its separate identity, frustrated that its avenue to power inevitably lay through a larger political force. Its small parliamentary numbers dictated that it could not form a majority in its own right. As Bruce Graham expressed it, the Country Party (wherever it was) was a minority group or rather a 'complex of interlocking

¹ Graham, op. cit., p. 292

² *Age*, 23 March 1889

groups.’³ Inevitably this meant that any new organisation would fill the middle ground between the conservatives and Labor and be able to negotiate with either.

As pointed out in the preceding chapters, political attitudes and incomes in rural Australia are closely related to the history of settlement of an area, the climate and produce along with whether that particular commodity was for domestic consumption or export. Sugar growers in Queensland’s tropical north would not necessarily agree on all issues with dairymen or orchardists in the more temperate regions nor with wheat and wool growers and pastoralists in the dry inland areas. Also, small farmers on struggling backblocks had little in common with the landed gentry. However, what these disparate groups did have in common was a belief that the existing parties – the conservatives controlling commerce in the cities and provincial towns and the Labor Parties essentially comprised of city-based unionised workers – had no real understanding of rural politics and production. Neither did they seem to have an understanding of world markets in primary produce nor the impact of droughts and over-production. Rural producers saw the city-based parties as a world apart from themselves. Furthermore, commonly held grievances such as poor transport, less than adequate communication and scanty education in the country were a unifying factor.

History showed that the prevailing economic situation, boom or bust, drought or plenty, was vital in determining the Country Party’s preferred political partner. During bad times the farmers identified a common cause with the workers in their battle for survival. They would join forces to demand state controlled marketing, protection for manufacturing and farming interests, monetary reforms and rural credit. Typical of this was in the Riverina and north-west Victoria where many farmers had come from families who had been labourers in the gold fields or urban workers and returned soldiers who had shared the tragedies and victories of war. This radicalised the Victorian Country Party as they saw the wealthy city business people as the ‘enemy’ and the cause of many of their problems.

The Great War of 1914-18, the drought of 1914 and the Depression of the 1930s were to play major roles in determining the development and political strategy of the Victorian

³ Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 292

Country Party movement. First, the emergence of the party occurred after farmers were dissatisfied with wheat prices and lobbied for a continuing wheat pool. The dairy farmers and some graziers joined them in opposing price fixing and marketing controls for butter, milk and meat which continued after the war. A weakened Labor Party which had split over conscription provided a cleft in the two-party system. The Victorian Farmers' Union took advantage of the political space created and gained a foothold in parliament. Ironically, the lessons of early trade union and Labor Party techniques provided examples of cohesion and the basis for a platform. Later the Depression saw the rise and fall of both the Nationalist/United Australia Party and Labor allowing the Country Party to consolidate its position in what had become a fairly evenly divided three-party system.

The young Victorian Country Party immediately faced some major decisions on political and parliamentary tactics to secure its goals. Given their small numbers compared to the other parties, should they be non-aligned, sit in the corner and bargain with the government and opposition in return for concessions or align with one of the other parties in a composite or coalition government? Early on the choice of being in a minority government was merely a dream. The choices would not be easy, as the leadership and membership held different views about which of the major parties was the greater friend or foe. Little could be achieved if all the eggs were put into one basket, yet nothing could be garnered without that political basket. The choice was not based solely on policies but also on personal ambitions and philosophies as well as political friendships and animosities. There was also the division between the general membership set apart from the travails of parliamentary representation and the MPs themselves who encountered the pitfalls of negotiation every day. It was different for the other parties. Dedicated Labor leaders were given clear instructions (if not controlled) by their conferences and executives while the conservatives left decisions to their leaders who in turn were guided by close advisers. Ultimately the Country Party would attempt to adopt a position between these two extremes. However, commonality on some policies with the two major parties led to a split in the 1920s. This split probably prevented many of the agrarian radicals going over to the Labor Party.

Ironically, rather than weakening the Country Party, the existence of the two parties actually served to maintain the strength of the movement as a whole.⁴

During the period studied, Victoria saw only two majority governments, both Nationalist, 10 minority governments supported by a cross-bench party and five coalition governments. There was a 29 year gap (1923-52) when a majority government could not be formed.⁵ With the emergence of the Country Party at the polls in 1917 three parties now competed for government. This led F W Eggleston (MLA for St Kilda), a brilliant lawyer and a minister in Victorian Nationalist governments from 1924 to 1927 (and a trenchant critic of the Country Party), to conclude that ‘the three-party system made stable government impossible.’⁶ While the Dunstan-led Country Party minority government lasted eight years from 1935 to 1943 it was so policy inert as to be described as the ‘do-nothing government.’

Why were there three decades of revolving governments whereas the Dunstan minority government was so secure? The emergence, growth and maturity of the Country Party as a third force in Victorian and federal politics was a major factor but it must be recognised that there had been minority governments since the establishment of parliament and the development of the party system. For example, in 1913 the Elmslie Labor minority government held office even if only for a fortnight. As the previous chapters have shown, several factors need to be taken into account, including the development of the parties, the relationship between them, the political leadership, the electoral system, the two-house parliament, the economic environment and the nexus between the state and Commonwealth governments in a federal system.

In his dry but intellectually compelling book, *Reflections of an Australian Liberal*, Eggleston distinguishes the Labor and Country parties from the conservatives by categorising the first two as political pressure groups with sectional interests and the last as a residual collection opposed to those pressure groups and so occupying the ground not filled by those parties.⁷ He acknowledges that the conservatives had a support base drawn from commerce, manufacturing and the pastoral industry and that ‘strings were

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 296

⁵ See Appendix 1

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 37

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 125

pulled from the shadows' but denied, not altogether convincingly, that this meant the party was a 'pressure group.' While mindful that Eggleston was a member of his 'residual group' of conservatives, his classification is important in understanding the various alliances among the three parties. It suggests the parties all acted for various interests, the Country and Labor parties (with set objectives and goals) dominated by measures and the residual party (intent on blocking change and maintaining their positions in commercial and social life) dominated by men.

The early Country Party was essentially bifurcated between radicals and conservatives, and hence was constantly in a dilemma as to which side to favour and whether to be on the cross-benches, in opposition, in a minority government or in a coalition (or composite) government. Each side often favoured a different party leader as champion for their views. The Labor and Country parties sought support and alliances to achieve their platforms, but Labor would not enter formal coalitions in parliament even in times of war. Both parties, bent on achieving objectives for their political clientele, were driven by 'measures' but this required leaders who were convinced of those targets and that they could achieve them along with followers who would support them at conferences, in the caucuses and on the floor of parliament.

The three-party system in Victoria determined that an alliance between two of them was essential to form government. Given the political animosity between Labor and the conservatives the essentially middle-ground party, the Country Party, was able to exploit the situation by siding with one of them to keep the third party out of office. It was a matter of keeping a common enemy in opposition and this varied on issues and the opportunity to form a minority or composite government. The dependence on another party when in government or on the cross-benches gave the opportunity to the Country Party to achieve its policy objectives but compromise was essential. Measures ran second to men or, to put it another way, survival and limiting a common enemy was more important than the compromises leading to small gains in policy objectives.

Dunstan's dominance and obstinacy in dealing with the other parties, especially refusing to consider an electoral redistribution which would have undermined his premiership, saw the UCP, after the 1943 election, reach its zenith as the largest party in the Assembly with 26 members. To survive it was forced to compromise with the Hollway-

led UAP and form a coalition – a most unhappy marriage of convenience⁸ – when the other parties threatened to cooperate with legislation to end the maldistribution. At a forced election, with Dunstan previously ousted from the premiership, the UCP lost seven seats, beginning the decline of the Country Party in Victoria.

The incoming minority Labor government lasted two years until replaced by a Liberal and Country Party coalition at an election forced when the Legislative Council denied supply in 1947. The Hollway/McDonald coalition collapsed over Hollway's secret deal with the Trades Hall to end state-wide strikes affecting essential services. The Liberals then attempted to absorb the shrinking Country Party by forming a united 'Liberal-Country Party' but fusion foundered in the usual acrimony.⁹ Strangely, the Liberal minority government survived when two Country Party members abstained from crucial supply and confidence votes. At the 1950 election the Country Party lost three more seats but formed a minority McDonald government with Labor support, the price being a series of Labor programs and electoral reform of the Legislative Council which saw Labor gain eight provinces at the subsequent election. Redistribution for the lower house was not part of the bargain. This had to wait until a majority Labor government under long-time leader John Cain was elected in 1952. The malapportionment prop for the Country Party had been removed and the party would not be in government again in Victoria until the coalition victory of 1992.

The two major parties now dominated the contest for government. In 1955 the Labor Party split along sectional-industrial lines. When the Labor defectors treated with the opposition the Cain government was doomed. Henry Bolte led a Liberal majority government into office. Labor was decimated. The Liberal Party would govern for the next 27 years until Labor regained office. The Country Party, renamed the National Party from 1975, was reduced to being a minor player in Victorian politics.

⁸ Costar, 'Albert Dunstan', p. 224

⁹ B Costar, 'Tom Hollway: The bohemian' in P Strangio and B Costar (eds), *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 233

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APPENDIX 1

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES¹

Abbott, Richard H S, MLC (Northern) 1907-13, 1922-28, Senator (Vic) 1928-29, Non-Labor, VFU, VCP

Allan, John, MLA (Rodney 1917-36), VFU, VCP, UCP, Premier 1924-27

Allnutt, Albert G, MLA (Mildura) 1927-45, CPP, UCP from 1930, Govt Whip 1936-37, expelled from UCP 1945, leading critic of Albert Dunstan from 1939

Andrew, David, Senator (Vic) 1925-28, VFU, pro-Nat ACP

Argyle, Sir Stanley S, MLA (Toorak) 1920-40, Nat, UAP, Premier 1932-35

Asquith, Herbert (Lord), UK MP, Liberal, 1886-1925, Prime Minister 1908-16

Bailey, Henry S, MLA (Port Fairy 1914-27, Warrnambool 1927-32 and 1935-50), Lab, expelled 1932, UCP from 1934

Balfour, James M, MLC (Gippsland) 1936-43, UCP, Ch. Committees 1943

Barker, Stephen, Senator (Vic) 1910-20 and 1923-24, Lab

Barnes, John, Senator (Vic) 1913-20 and 1923-38, Lab

Barry, William P, MLA (Carlton) 1932-55, Lab, later DLP, associated with John Wren

Beasley, John A, MHR (West Sydney) 1928-46, Lab, Lang Lab, Lab

Beaverbrook, Maxwell Aitken, Baron, b Canada, House of Lords 1917-64, newspaper magnate including *Daily Express* and wealthy businessman

Blackburn, Maurice M, MLA (Essendon 1914-17, Fitzroy 1925-27, Clifton Hill 1927-34), Speaker 1933-34, MHR (Bourke 1934-43)

Blamey, Sir Thomas A, Chief of Staff to General Monash, Commander Australian Forces in Middle East, Second World War, Australia's first Field Marshal 1950

Bodman, Henry G, MLA (Gippsland South) 1927, Ind

Bolte, Sir Henry E, MLA (Hampden) 1947-72, Lib, LCP, Lib Premier 1955-72

Bond, Ernest E, MLA (Glenelg 1924-27, Port Fairy and Glenelg 1927-43), Lab (except 1932-37)

Borthwick, Alexander H, MLA (Gippsland North) 1938-42, UAP

Bourchier, Sir Murray W J, MLA (Goulburn Valley) 1920-36, VFU, UCP, Leader UCP 1933-35

Bowser, Sir John, MLA (Wangaratta and Rutherglen 1894-1906, Wangaratta 1906-27, Wangaratta and Ovens 1927-29), Economy Party, VFU, Premier 1917-18

Bracks, Stephen P, MLA (Williamstown) 1994-2007, Lab, Premier 1999-2007

Brennan, Thomas C, Senator (Vic) 1931-38, UAP

Brownbill, Fanny E, MLA (Geelong) 1938-48, Lab (first female Labor MP in Victoria)

Brownbill, William, MLA (Geelong) 1920-32, 1935-38, Lab, mayor Geelong 1915

¹ The purpose of these notes is to assist the reader to identify persons mentioned in the text. They are not intended to provide comprehensive biographies.

Bruce, Stanley M, MHR (Flinders) 1918-29, Nat, Prime Minister 1923-29

Bruxner, Michael F, MLA (Northern Tablelands 1920-27, Tenterfield 1927-62) NSW, Prog. Party, CP, Deputy Premier 1932-41

Bussau, Sir (Albert) Louis, MLA (Ouyen) 1932-38, CPP Pres 1929, Att.-Gen. 1935-38

Cain, John, Snr, MLA (Jika Jika 1917-27, Northcote 1927-57), Lab, Premier Sept 1943, 1945-47 and 1952-55

Calwell, Arthur A, MHR (Melbourne) 1940-72. Lab, Fed. Deputy Parliamentary Leader 1951-60, Parliamentary Leader 1960-67, strong link with Albert Dunstan

Cameron, Archie G, MLA (Wooroora) SA 1927-34, MHR (Barker) 1934-56, ACP, UAP, Lib, Leader ACP 1939-40, Speaker 1950-56

Cameron, Finlay A, MLA (Kara Kara and Borung) 1935-45, CPP 1927, UCP, opposed Dunstan

Campbell, Sir Malcolm, British speed racing sportsman, world record holder on water and land

Carlisle, John J, MLA (Benalla and Yarrawonga 1903-04, Benalla 1904-27), Lib, Nat, Economy Party, VFU, VCP

Casey, Sir Richard G, MHR (Corio 1931-40, La Trobe 1949-60) UAP, Lib, member British War Cabinet 1944-46, Governor-General 1965-69

Chanter, John M, MHR (Riverina) 1901-03, 1904-13 and 1914-22, Prot, Lab, Nat and Farmers

Chapman, John H, Senator (SA) 1926-31, ACP

Charlton, Matthew, MHR (Hunter) 1910-28, Labor Leader 1922-28

Chifley, Joseph B (Ben), MHR (Macquarie) 1928-31 and 1940-51, Prime Minister 1945-49

Churchill, Sir Winston L S, British MP 1900-22, 1924-64, Cons and Lib, Prime Minister 1940-45 and 1951-55

Cleary, Edward F, MLA (Benalla) 1927-36, CPP, UCP, Govt Whip 1935-36

Cohen, Harold E, MLC (Melb) 1921-35, MLA (Caulfield) 1935-43, Nat, UAP, UAP Govt leader LC 1928-29

Coles, Sir Arthur W, MHR (Henty) 1940-46, Ind

Collins, Thomas J, MHR (Hume) 1931-43, ACP

Cook, Sir Joseph, MHR (Parramatta), 1901-21, Anti-Soc, Lib, Nat, Prime Minister 1913-14

Cook, Robert, MHR (Indi), 1919-28, VFU, CP

Copland, Sir Douglas B, b NZ, economics professor Uni Tas. and Uni Melb, adviser to governments on Premiers' Plan, first Vice Chancellor ANU

Corser, Bernard H, MHR (Wide Bay) 1928-54 ACP

Corser, Edward B, MHR (Wide Bay) 1915-28, Lib, Nat from 1917

Cotter, Edmund J, MLA (Richmond) 1908-45 Lab, associated with John Wren

Coyle, Ernest A, MLA (Waranga) 1927-43, Nat, UAP. Joined UCP 1933

Cremean, Herbert M, MLA (Dandenong 1929-32, Clifton Hill 1932-45), Lab

Cremean, John L, MLA (Clifton Hill) 1945-49, MHR (Hoddle) 1945-55, Lab, DLP

Crockett, William P, MLC (North Western) 1919-28, VFU, VCP, CPP

Curtin, John, MHR (Fremantle) 1928-31 and 1934-45, Lab, FLP, Lab, Prime Minister 1941-45

Dedman, John J, MHR (Corio) 1940-49, Lab (member VCP 1927)

Dillon, James C, MLA (Essendon) 1932-43, UAP

Dodgshun, Keith, MLA (Ouyen 1938-45, Rainbow 1945-55) UCP, opposed Dunstan, Deputy Leader UCP 1945-55

Douglas, C H, Major, Canadian engineer, developed Douglas Social Credit economic theory

Downward, Alfred, MLA (Mornington) 1894-1929

Drew, Harold V, MLA (Albert Park 1932-37, Mentone 1947-50) UAP, Country Lib, Ind. UAP, Lib, LCP

Dugan, Sir Winston (Baron), Governor SA 1934-38, Governor Vic 1939-49 (period extended five times)

Dunstan, Sir Albert A, MLA (Eaglehawk 1920-27, Korong and Eaglehawk 1927-45, Korong 1945-50) VFU, CPP, UCP, 1920-50 Premier 1935-43 and 1943-45

Dunstan, Arthur S, son of Albert Dunstan

Earle, John, Senator (Tas) 1917-23, Nat

Eggleston, Sir Frederic W, MLA (St Kilda) 1920-27, Att.-Gen. and Sol.-Gen 1924-27, Nat

Elliott, Robert C D, Senator (Vic) 1929-35, ACP

Elmslie, George A, MLA (Albert Park) 1902-18, Premier Dec 1913, Lab

Evatt, Herbert V, Dr, MLA (Balmain) NSW, 1925-30, Lab, Ind, Justice of High Court 1930-40, MHR (Barton 1940-58, Hunter 1958-60), Lab, Pres. UN General Assembly 1948-49, Leader ALP 1951-60

Everard, William H, MLA (Evelyn) 1917-50, Speaker 1934-37, Nat, Econ, UAP

Fadden, Sir Arthur W (Artie), MHR (Darling Downs 1936-49, McPherson 1949-58) ACP, Prime Minister for 40 days in 1941

Fairbairn, James V, MHR (Flinders) 1933-40, UAP, minister in Menzies government

Fairley, A W, member, State Electricity Commission

Fallon, Clarence G, Qld Sec. and Nat Sec. AWU, Pres. Fed. Exec. ALP, 1938-44

Fenton, James E, MHR (Maribyrnong) 1910-34, Lab, UAP from 1931

Fisher, Andrew, MLA (Gympie) Qld 1893-96 and 1899-1901, MHR (Wide Bay), 1901-15, Prime Minister 1908-09, 1910-13 and 1914-15, Lab

Forde, Frank M, MHR (Capricornia) 1922-46, Lab, FLP, Lab, Prime Minister six days 1945

Forgan Smith, William, MLA (Mackay) Qld, Lab, 1915-42, Premier 1932-42

Forrest, Frederick E, MLA (Caulfield) 1927-30, Aust. Lib

Forster, Sir Henry W (Baron), Governor-General 1920-25

Fowler, James MacK, MHR (Perth) 1901-22, Lab, Lib, Nat

Game, Sir Philip, Governor of NSW 1930-35, dismissed Premier Lang 13 May 1932

Garran, Sir Robert R, first appointed public servant 1901, Sec. A-G's Dept 31 years. Trusted adviser to 16 governments

Giblin, Lyndhurst F, Richie Prof. Economics, Melbourne Uni. 1929-40. C'wealth Statistician and adviser to Prime Minister Lyons

Gibson, David H, MLA (Grenville) 1917-21, VFU

Gibson, Sir Robert, Chairman Commonwealth Bank board 1926-34

Gibson, William G, MHR (Corangamite) 1918-29 and 1931-34, VFU, CP

Glowrey, Harold, MLA (Ouyen) 1927-32, CPP

Glynn, Patrick M, MHR (Angas) 1901-19, Free Trade

Gorman, Sir Eugene, KC, adviser and emissary for Albert Dunstan

Goudie, George L, MLC (North Western) 1919-49, VFU, VCP, UCP, Govt Leader in Leg. Council 1942-43

Gray, A C (Burnett), MLA (St Kilda) 1927-32, Aust. Lib

Greenwood, Edmund W, MLA (Boroondara) 1917-27 and Nunawading 1927-29) Nat but never sought endorsement

Gregory, Henry, MHR (Dampier 1913-20, Swan 1922-40) Lib, ACP

Groom, Sir Littleton E, MHR (Darling Downs) 1901-29 and 1931-36, Prot, Lib, Nat, Ind, UAP

Gullett, Henry S, MHR (Henty), 1925-40, Nat, UAP, minister in Menzies government

Hall, George W, MLA (Moir), 1880-89

Hall, John J, MLA (Kara Kara) 1917-18, defeated on recount, VFU, journalist, editor *Countryman*

Hannan, Joseph F, Senator (Vic), Lab 1924-25

Harris, Sir John R, Dr, MLC (North Eastern), 1920-46, VFU, UCP, Govt Leader in Leg. Council 1935-42

Hart, Isaac, journalist, established VFU in 1916 with J J Hall and Percy Stewart

Harvey, Trevor, MLC (Gippsland) 1943-52, UCP, unendorsed 1943

Hawker, Charles A S, MHR (Wakefield) 1929-38, Nat, UAP, member Lyons Ministries

Hedditch, Harold R, MLA (Port Fairy and Glenelg 1943-45, Portland 1947-50), UCP, LCP

Hewson, Arthur, MHR (McMillan) 1972-75, CP, NCP

Higgins, Henry B, MLA (Geelong) 1894-1901, MHR (Northern Melb) 1901-06, Lib, Justice High Court 1906-29, President Conciliation and Arbitration Court

Higgs, William G, MHR (Capricornia) 1910-22, Lab, Deputy Leader

Hill, William C, MHR (Echuca) 1919-34, VFU, CP

Hocking, Albert E (Bert), businessman and orchardist, mayor Camberwell, Pres. UCP 1933-35, member State Savings Bank board

Hogan, Edmund J (Ned), MLA (Warrenheip 1913-27, Warrenheip and Grenville 1927-43), Lab, Premier 1927-28 and 1929-32, expelled Labor 1932, UCP from 1935

Holland, John J (Jack), MLA (Flemington 1925-45, Footscray 1945-55), Lab, State Pres. 1935-36

Holloway, Edward J, MHR (Flinders 1929-31, Melbourne Ports 1931-51), Lab

Hollway, Thomas T, MLA (Ballarat 1932-52, Glen Iris 1952-55), UAP, Lib, LCP, Premier 1947-50 and Oct 1952

Hughes, William M, MHR (West Sydney 1901-17, Bendigo 1917-22, North Sydney 1922-49, Bradfield 1949-52) Nat, Ind. Nat, UAP, Lib, Prime Minister 1915-23

Hunter, James A J, MHR (Maranoa) 1921-40, ACP

Huntingfield, W C, Baron, Governor of Victoria 1934-39 (first native-born Governor), MP House of Commons 1923-29

Hurry, Geoffrey, MHR (Bendigo) 1922-29, Nat

Inchbold, Percival P, MLC (North Eastern) 1935-53, UCP, LCP, UCP

Irvine, Sir William H, MLA (Lowan) 1894-1906, Premier 1902-04, MHR (Flinders) 1907-18, Chief Justice of Victoria 1918-35

Isaacs, Sir Isaac A, MLA (Bogong) 1892-1901, MHR (Indi) 1901-06, Prot., High Court Judge 1906-30, Chief Justice 1931, Governor-General 1931-36

James, Reginald A, MLA (Bulla-Dalhousie), 1943-44, UCP

Johnson, S Allan, foundation member VFU

Jones, Paul, MHR (Indi) 1928-31, Lab

Jowett, Edmund, MHR (Grampians) 1917-22, Nat, CP

Keane, Frank P, MLA (Essendon 1924-27, Coburg 1927-40), Lab

Kennelly, Patrick J, MLC (Melbourne West) 1938-52, Senator (Vic) 1953-71, Lab

Kennett, Jeffrey G, MLA (Burwood) 1976-99, Lib, Premier 1992-99

Kent Hughes, Sir Wilfrid S, MLA (Kew) 1927-49 Nat, UAP, Deputy Leader UAP 1935-40, POW Changi 1942-45, MHR (Chisholm) 1949-70, Lib, LCP

Kerby, Edwin T J, MHR (Ballarat) 1919-20, Nat

Keynes, John M, British economist

Kiernan, Esmond L, MLC (Melbourne North) 1919-40, Lab, Ind 1932-40

Kirner, Joan, MLC (Melbourne West) 1982-88, MLA (Williamstown) 1988-94, Lab, Premier 1990-92

Kneebone, Henry, Senator (SA), 1931, Lab

Knox, Sir George H, MLA (Upper Yarra 1927-45, Scoresby 1945-60) Nat, UAP, Lib, LCP, Speaker 1942-47

Lamb, Hamilton G, MLA (Lowan) 1935-43, UCP (died POW Siam 1943)

Lang, John T (Jack), MLA (Granville and Parramatta) NSW, Labor Premier 1925-27 and 1930-32, MHR (Reid) 1946-49 (Lang Labor)

Latham, Sir John G, MHR (Kooyong) 1922-34, Lib, Nat, Chief Justice High Court 1935-52

Lawson, Sir Harry S W, MLA (Castlemaine 1899-04, Castlemaine and Maldon 1904-27, Castlemaine and Kyneton 1927-28) Lib, Nat, Premier 1918-24

Lind, Sir Albert E, MLA (Gippsland East) 1920-61, VFU, VCP, UCP, Deputy Leader 1937-45

Lyons, Joseph A, MHR (Wilmot) 1929-39, Lab, UAP, Prime Minister 1932-39

Macaulay, William, MLC (Gippsland) 1937-57, UCP, LCP, UCP

MacDonald, J Ramsay, MP (Leicester and Aberavon), UK, first Labour Prime Minister 1924 and 1929-35

Macfarlan, Ian, MLA (Brighton) 1928-45, Nat, UAP, Deputy Leader 1931-35, Country-Lib group 1936-37, Ind 1937-43, UAP Deputy leader 1943-45. Led Lib faction bringing down Dunstan

Mackey, Sir John E, MLA (Gippsland West) 1902-24, Min, Lib. Econ, Nat, Speaker 1917-24

Mackrell, Edwin J, MLA (Upper Goulburn) 1920-45, VFU, UCP expelled 1945

Madden, Walter, MLA (Wimmera 1880-89, Horsham 1889-94)

Maltby, Sir Thomas K, MLA (Barwon 1929-55 and Geelong 1955-61) Nat, UAP, Country-Lib, Lib, Macfarlan supporter 1945

Mann, Edward A, MHR (Perth) 1922-29, Nat

Mann, Sir Frederick W, Chief Justice Victorian Supreme Court 1935-44

Mannix, Daniel P, Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne 1917-63

Martin, Norman A, MLA (Gunbower) 1934-45, UCP

Maxwell, George A, MHR (Fawkner) 1917-35, Nat. Ind. Nat, UAP

McCann, William J, MLC (North Western) 1928-31, CPP, UCP from 1930, Pres VFU 1924-25 and founding Pres PPU 1926

McClelland, Hugh, MHR (Wimmera) 1931-37, ACP

McCormack, William, MLA (Cairns) Qld, 1912-30, Premier 1925-29

McDonald, Alexander, MLA (Stawell and Ararat) 1935-45, UCP

McDonald, Sir John G B, MLA (Goulburn Valley 1936-45, Shepparton 1945-55) UCP, Whip 1938-43, Leader 1945-55, Premier 1950-52

McDougall, John K, MHR (Wannon) 1906-13, Lab

McEwen, Sir John, MHR (Echuca 1934-37, Indi 1937-49, Murray 1949-71) Vic. CP, ACP Prime Minister 1967-68, Leader ACP 1958

McGrath, David C, MLA (Grenville) 1904-13, MHR (Ballarat) 1913-19 and 1920-34, Lab, UAP

McKenzie, William G A, MLA (Wonthaggi) 1927-47, Lab

McLachlan, James W, MLA (Gippsland Nth) 1908-38, Lab to 1916, Nat. Lab, Ind

McLeod, Donald, MLA (Daylesford) 1900-23, Cons, Min, Lib, Nat

McNamara, Patrick J, MLA (Benalla) 1982-2000, Nat, Leader 1988-99, Deputy Premier 1992-99

McPherson, Sir William M, MLA (Hawthorn 1913-30), Lib, Econ. Party, Nat, Premier 1928-29

McWilliams, William J, MHR (Franklin), 1903-22 and 1928-29, Revenue Tariff, Anti-Socialist, Lib, Nat, CP

Menzies, James, MLA (Lowan) 1911-20, Lib, Nat, father of Sir Robert Menzies, brother-in-law of Sydney Sampson MHR and brother of Hugh Menzies MLA (Stawell)

Menzies, Sir Robert G, MLC (East Yarra) 1928-29, MLA (Nunawading) 1929-34, MHR (Kooyong) 1934-66, Prime Minister 1939-41 and 1949-66

Mibus, J W (Mick), MLA (Lowan 1944-45, Borung 1945-55, Lowan 1955-64) UCP, LCP

Michaelis, Sir Archie, MLA (St Kilda) 1932-52, UAP, Lib, LCP, Macfarlan supporter 1945

Monash, Sir John, celebrated Lt. General of Australian Forces in the Great War. Chairman, State Electricity Commission of Victoria 1921-30

Moore, Arthur E, MLA (Aubigny) 1915-32, Farm. Union, Premier Qld, 1929-32, CP-NP

Murdoch, Sir Keith A, journalist and Great War correspondent and Australian newspaper proprietor

Murphy, James L, MLA (Port Melbourne), 1917-42, Lab

Niemeyer, Sir Otto, Director Bank of England and Chairman of Bank for International Settlements

Nock, Horace K, MHR (Riverina) 1931-40, ACP

O'Connor, Richard E, Senator (NSW) 1901-03. Prot

O'Loghlin, James V, Senator (SA) 1907, 1913-14, 1914-20 and 1923-25, Lab

Old, Francis E, MLA (Swan Hill) 1919-45, VFU, UCP, Whip 1930-35, Deputy Premier 1936-37

Oldham, Trevor D, MLA (Boroondara 1933-45, Malvern 1945-53) UAP, Lib, LCP, Lib. Deputy Premier 1945-47, founding member Young Nats

Oman, David S, MLA (Ripon and Hampden 1900-04, Hampden 1904-27) Lib, Nat, Economy Party, President of Lismore VFU but remained Nat

Ozanne, Alfred T, MHR (Corio) 1910-13 and 1914-17, Lab

Page, Sir Earle C G, MHR (Cowper) 1919-61, FSU, CP, Leader ACP, Prime Minister 1939

Page, James, MHR (Maranoa) 1901-21, Lab

Paterson, Thomas, MHR (Gippsland), 1922-43 ACP

Paton, James R, MLA (Benambra) 1932-47, UCP, Whip 1940-43

Peacock, Sir Alexander J, MLA (Clunes and Allendale 1889-1904, Allendale 1904-33), Premier 1901-02, 14-17, 1924, Lib, Nat

Peacock, Lady Millie G, MLA (Allendale) 1933-35, UAP, first female MLA (Vic)

Pennington, John W, MLA (Kara Kara 1913-27, Kara Kara and Borung 1927-35), Lib, Nat, UAP

Phayer, C A, member, Melbourne Harbour Trust

Pickering, E A, Chief President VCP 1926

Plain, William, Senator (Vic) 1917-23 and 1925-38, Nat

Prendergast, George M, MLA (North Melb. 1894-97 and 1900-26, Footscray 1927-37), Lab, Premier 1924

Prowse, John H, MHR (Swan 1919-22, Forrest 1922-43) ACP

Rankin, George J, Brigadier, MHR (Bendigo) 1937-49, Chairman UCP 1937-38

Ready, Rudolph K, Senator (Tas) 1910-14 and 1914-17, Lab

Reddaway, W Brian, Research Fellow Econ. Melbourne Uni

Rees, Richard B, MLC (North Western) 1903-19, Non-Lab, VFU

Rodda, Leonard R, MLC (Western) 1937-43 and 1943-46, UCP, founding member VFU

Rommell, Erwin, German Field Marshal featured in Battle of Alamein

Russell, Edward J, Senator (Vic) 1907-14, 1914-25, Lab, Nat from 1916

Ryan, Thomas J, MLA (Barcoo) 1910-19, Qld Premier 1915-19 and MHR (West Sydney) 1919-21, Lab

Saltau, Marcus, MLC (Western) 1924-40, Nat, UAP, Ind 1940

Sampson, Sydney, MHR (Wimmera) 1906-19 Ind. Prot, Lib

Scaddan, John, MLA (Ivanhoe) WA 1904-16, Lab Premier (1910-16), Nat. Lab MLA until 1924

Scullin, James H, MHR (Corangamite 1910-13, Yarra 1922-49), Lab, FLP, Lab, Prime Minister 1929-32

Scully, William J, MHR (Gwydir) 1937-49, Lab

Shann, Edward, Prof., eminent economist, Adelaide University

Sheahan, James M, Senator (Vic), 1938-40, 1944-62, Lab

Simpson, H L, member and chairman, Farmers' Debts Adjustment Board, 1935-46, Chief President UCP 1938-40, 1944

Skeat, Reginald R, Chairman UCP 1936-37

Sladen, Charles, MLA (Geelong) and MLC (Western), first Treasurer 1855, Premier 1868

Slater, William, MLA (Dundas) 1917-32, 1932-47, MLC (Doutta Galla) 1949-60, Speaker 1940-42, Lab

Smith, W Kennedy, MLA (Dundas) 1914-17, Lib, Nat

Snowball, Oswald R, MLA (Brighton) 1909-28, Lib, Nat, Speaker 1927-28

Snowden, Philip, UK MP, Labour, first Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer

Somers, Lord Arthur H, Governor of Victoria 1926-31

Stahle, L R D, Treasurer UCP

Stewart, Percy G, MLA (Swan Hill) 1917-19, MHR (Wimmera) 1919-31, VFU, CP, CPP

Stradbroke, Viscount, Governor of Victoria 1921-26

Street, Geoffrey A, MHR (Corangamite) 1934-40, UAP, minister in Menzies government

Stretton, L E B, Judge, headed Royal Commission into 1939 Victorian bushfires

Theodore, Edward G, MLA (Qld) 1909-25, Premier 1919-25, MHR (Dalley) 1927-31, Treasurer, Lab

Thomas, William T, MLA (Glenelg) 1920-24, Lab

Thorby, Harold V C, MHR (Calare) 1931-40, ACP

Thornthwaite, Francis, Lt. Col., Staff Officer to General Brudenell White

Toutcher, Richard F, MLA (Ararat 1897-1904, Stawell 1904-35) Nat

Tripovich, John M, MLC (Doutta Galla) 1960-76, Lab, Contested Lowan 1944

Tuckett, George J, MLC (Northern) 1925-55, Country Party

Tunnecliffe, Thomas, MLA (West Melbourne 1903-4, Eaglehawk 1907-20, Collingwood 1921-47), Lab, Leader 1932-37 and Speaker 1937-40

Turnbull, Winton G, MHR (Wimmera 1946-49, Mallee 1949-72) ACP

Wales, Sir George, MLC (Melbourne) 1936-38, three times lord mayor Melbourne

Walter, Arthur L N, MLA (Gippsland West) 1924-29, UCP, Ch. Pres. UCP 1920-22

Ward, Edward J, MHR (East Sydney 1931 and 1932-63), Lab, Lang Lab, Lab

Watt, William A, MLA (North Melb. 1897-1900, East Melb. 1902-04, Essendon 1904-14), Lib, Premier 1913-14. MHR (Balaclava) 1914-29, Lib, Nat

Weaver, Isaac J, MLA (Korong) 1917-27, VFU, VCP, Pres UCP 1931-32, LCP 1938

Weber, Ivy L, MLA (Nunawading) 1937-43, Ind, usually supported Dunstan

Webster, Leslie L, MLA (Bulla-Dalhousie 1944-45, Mernda 1945-47), UCP

Wettenhall, Marcus E, MLA (Lowan) 1920-35, VFU, UCP

White, Sir Cyril Brudenell, Major General, Chief General Staff AIF, 1920-23 and General 1940

White, Thomas W, MHR (Balaclava) 1929-51, Nat, UAP, Lib

Wienholt, Arnold, MHR (Moreton) 1919-22, Nat

Williams, Robert H, MLC (Melbourne West) 1922-38, Lab, expelled over Premiers' Plan

Wilson, Alexander, MHR (Wimmera) 1937-45, Ind. CP. Admin Norfolk Is. 1946-52

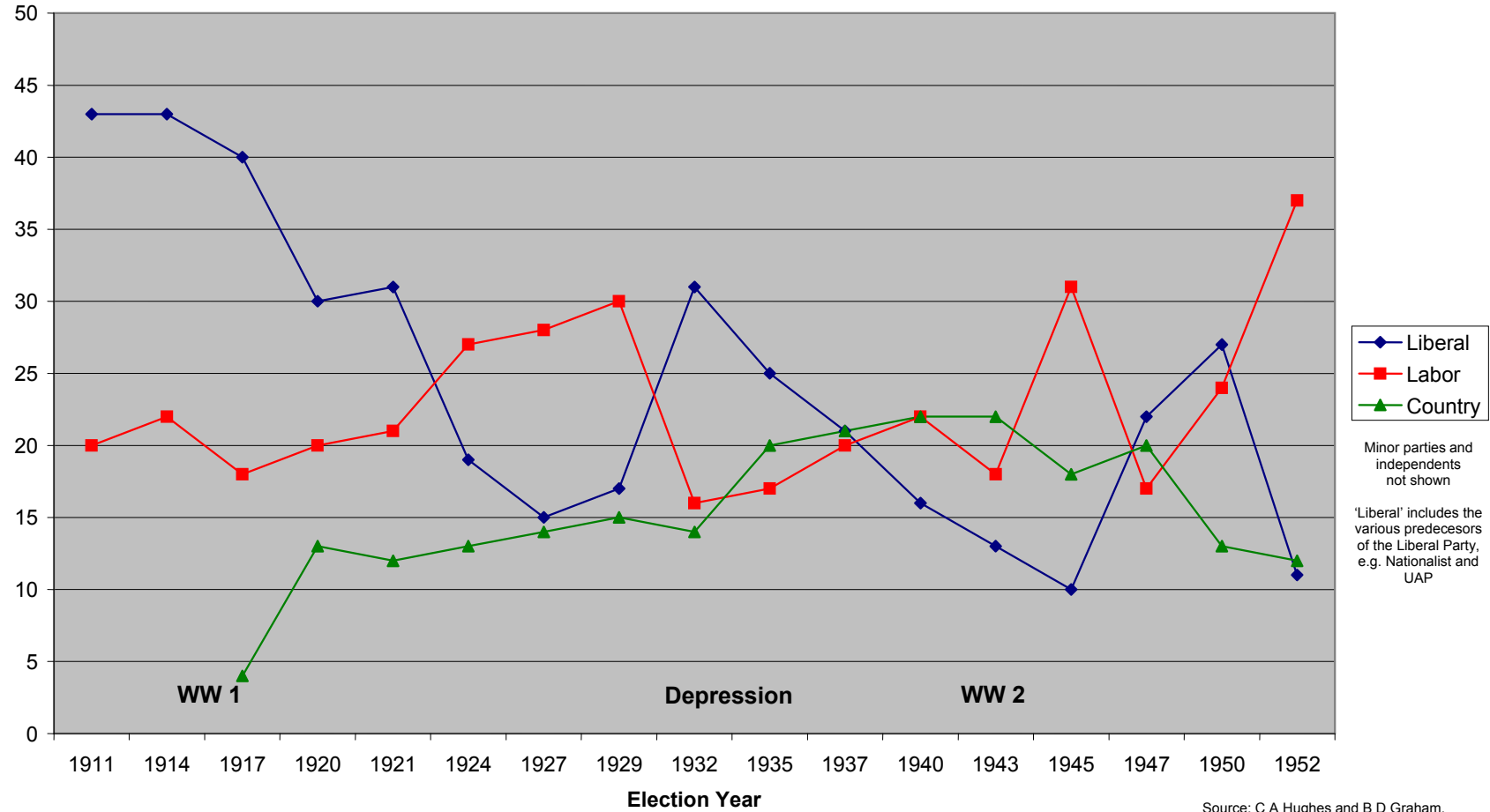
Wise, George H, MHR (Gippsland) 1906-13 and 1914-22, Prot., Ind, Nat

Wren, John, Melbourne entrepreneur, promoter, founder of Vic. Trotting Assn

Zwar, Albert M, MLC (North Eastern), 1922-35, VFU, VCP, UCP

APPENDIX 2

VICTORIAN LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS 1911-52 (SEATS WON)



Source: C A Hughes and B D Graham,
*Voting for the Victorian Legislative Assembly
1890-1964*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1975