**Anderson Dawson and the first labour government**

Labor tradition ascribes the founding of Queensland Labour to a meeting of striking pastoral workers under a ghost gum tree (the "[Tree of Knowledge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_Knowledge_%28Australia%29)") in [Barcaldine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barcaldine%2C_Queensland), Queensland in 1891.

On the 9 September 1892 the *Manifesto of the Queensland Labour Party* was read out under the same [Tree of Knowledge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_Knowledge_%28Australia%29) at Barcaldine following the Great Shearers' Strike.[[1]](#footnote-1) It was written by Charles Seymour and signed by Thomas Glassey the first person to be popularly elected on a labour platform in Queensland. The handwritten manifesto was the culmination of intense union activity arising from political and economic instability in Queensland at this time. The Manifesto emphasised the economic circumstances of working calls people, an detailed the party grievances against vested interests intent on retaining their hegemony. The objective was equal political social and economic rights and curbing the excesses of capitalism.

An unlikely Labour hero emerged at this time by the name of Anderson Dawson, (he was born Andrew but later changed his name to that of his father - Anderson). He was unlikely to achieve worldwide recognition, but that was what did happen over the period I am writing about.

He was born 16th July 1863 at Rockhampton. His mother died when he was six and he was subsequently placed in the Diamantina orphanage in Brisbane until 9, but then later retrieved by an aunt to live with her at Redbank. He eventually relocated to Gympie with an Uncle where he was at school until 12, and then began work variously including newspaper running, bullock driving and as a miner at Charters Towers. In 1886 he went to the Kimberley in Western Australia to unsuccessfully dig for gold, before returning to Charters Towers and marrying an Irish widow Caroline Ryan in 1887.

Dawson was one of a number of Labour activists who was not letting a limited circumstances hold him back.

In 1890, he published a political pamphlet called *The Case Stated* calling for the creation of an Australian republic. He was elected the first president of the local Miners Union. During the Pastoral Strike of 1891 he was Chairman of the Charters Towers trike committee. He was involved in the running of the Australasian Republican Association, and in 1892, was elected its second president. It is worth noting that the Australian Republican Association had previously called for the creation of a third political party in Queensland, so there is a historical link between republicanism and the nascent Labour Party. He was also vice - president of the district council of the Australian Labour Federation (ALF). For a time he was editor of *The Charters Towers Eagle,* which he part owned until 1900, and, as ifall of this wasn’t enough, he was also elected to the local council in Charters Towers. There is no question Dawson was ambitious to advance himself and was not letting a small thing like being an orphan with limited education stand in his way. Whilst his ambition places him squarely with other politicians as grappling for power and recognition and in that respect is neither commendable nor condemnable as it is simply the nature of the beast, it is his apparent refusal to let circumstances stand in his way that places him in a category to be admired.

It may not come as a surprise given the foregoing that he entered politics in the 1893 election as one of two Labour candidates for Charters Towers. He won the seat and retained it at the 1896 and 1899 elections. During this time he was a member of the 1896 Royal commission into Mining. He objected to the Queensland parliament sending a contingent to the Boer war without parliamentary approval, thereby establishing a precedent of sorts for labour objecting to what he saw as unauthorised executive decisions. He successfully objected against the draft university bill which provided only men could be senators of the university senate. This showed a drive for social equity and social inclusion.

A motion moved by Dawson regarding the Railways Standing Committee resulted in the conservative Premier James Dickson resigning on 1st December 1899. Prior to this occurring leaders of factions representing the opposition had led Dawson to believe they would support him in the House. The Lieutenant-governor, Samuel Griffith, called on Dawson to form a ministry which lasted until 7th December. Griffith had appointed this minority Labour government as a deliberate ploy to force the warring conservatives to get their act together. It took only four hours for the House to vote the new government out. The anticipated support did not eventuated. Dawson sought a further adjournment of the House but to no avail. His government was voted out on the floor of the house. It was to be the shortest ministry of any state government in Australia, but was nevertheless, still the first socialist Labour party government in the world. I will return to these events shortly.

Dawson remained parliamentary leader of the Labour Party until August 1900. He resigned due to ill health and it is interesting to note he was still only 37 years old. The still young man with the Nietzsche like moustache was to go on to Federal politics heading the Labour party ticket for the Senate, Queensland. He was chairman of the first meeting of the Federal parliamentary labour party which elected john Christian Watson as the first parliamentary leader of the Labour Party. At the Senates first sitting he proposed unsuccessfully the Senate President should not be elected by secret ballot.

He was a member of the Senate, which in those days sat in Melbourne, until 1906. His political career did continue to have some successes, despite struggling with some health issues associated with dusted lungs and alcoholism. When Chris Watson formed the world first national Labour government in April 1904, Dawson - forever present when great things are happening it seems - was appointed Minister of Defence. As Minister of Defence he displayed great antipathy to Major – General Sir Edward Hutton, an English military man who as commander of Australian land forces, possibly represented an image Dawson no doubt detested, privilege, wealth and conservative vested interest. Dawson was to consider a high point of his time as minister was that ‘ he had pulled down from his pedestal the biggest bounder who had ever commanded the forces in Australia, Major – General Hutton.’ He again reprised his concern about executive decision making without parliamentary approval, when in October 1906, he questioned a later Minister of defence, Senator Playford, on his authority to make individual defence compensation payments without the consent of parliament.

The cooler Melbourne climate did not suite this Queenslander and exacerbated Dawson’s poor health. He clearly had no love for the southern capital. He stated during a debate on the federal capital site, later to be chosen as Canberra, that the Queensland people had ‘ an unutterable disgust for Melbourne.’ Later declaring in the same debate that, ‘ if …the seventh circle of Dante’s Inferno were chosen, I would prefer it to Melbourne.’ As an ex-Melbournian I think that a little harsh but I do concede a similar love for Queensland in the same vein as our protagonist. By the 1906 election Dawson had a poor relationship with the Queensland State executive of the Labour Party. This was in part caused by his support for labour liberal alliances in parliament as an expedient, and his unwillingness to pay a 50 pound levy placed on Queensland labour senators. He was initially demoted the unwinnable fourth spot on the ticket. Whilst the party, possibly concerned with negative electoral perceptions associated with his demotion, did upgrade him to the potentially winnable 3rd spot, he resigned as a candidate shortly thereafter, citing ill health. Agonisingly, (I say that because I can sense the angst that he must have felt) he changed his mind, but the executive did not reinstate him. Dawson filed a writ for 5000 pounds against the *Worker* in November 1906 for alleged defamation. He ran as an independent, splitting the labour vote and the entire ticket subsequently lost. A bad result that signalled his retirement from politics at 43. He revealed his instability and deteriorating health through these actions, which probably highlighted personal frictions at the time.

Dawson was now unable to find work in Melbourne. He returned to Queensland in 1909 whilst his wife and 4 children remained in Melbourne. He was admitted to the Brisbane General Hospital on 6th July 1910 and died from the effects of alcoholism on 20th July 1910. His widow and children reportedly did not attend his funeral. He was buried in Toowong Cemetery on 21st July 1910. The Federal electorate of Dawson is named after him.

The story of Dawson had its triumphs and obvious sadness’s. The purpose of this paper is to address the wider issue of his experience and what it meant for Queensland democracy, which is the real point of my paper. I would argue that it gave powerful impetus to democracy in Queensland, was instrumental in paving the way for future Queensland and federal Labour governments.

When Dawson and his team fleetingly ran the state, it gave the Labour Party a brief window to examine the previous governments files. His Treasurer and Postmaster General William Kidston in his few days in office uncovered some unsavoury land deals.

In parliament Dawson spoke mainly on matters affecting mining and railways and as previously mentioned objected to Queensland sending a military contingent to south Africa without parliamentary approval.

The fact was that Dawson was supportive of an alliance between the parliamentary labour party and the Liberal Party. This did set him apart from other more segregationist thinking politicians.

After the election of 1896 there was a disagreement over tactics between the PLP which included Dawson and the leaders of the Australian Labour Federation outside of parliament. The former wanted to enter into judicious arrangements of compromise with other opposition parties. The fact was that Dawson was respected by many non labour members of the House. He was only agreeable to compromise if it meant enacting Labour reforms which included high amongst them electoral reforms reflecting one man – one vote.

In trying to form a government Dawson’s task was a difficult one. Inside the Labour caucus there was some opposition to any Labour Liberal alliance. Outside the parliament the Australian Labour Federation generally opposed any attempt to assume office prematurely. Dawson however did not want to let pass the opportunity to show Labour was prepared to govern. He had sought support from other non-labour factions and wanted to govern in order to institute reforms of which electoral reform was high in priority. When the factional support did not arise he went ahead anyway with an all Labour government sworn in on 1st December.

The Labour Party’s only satisfaction in government was obtaining evidence of corruption and bad administration.

It is not historically accurate to overstate Dawson’s role at this time. He was one of a number of factional players. Dawson however is symbolically important in his forming government because it represented the triumph of the argument labour can form government in its own right and not just through alliances. The fact was he was in favour of forming alliances but in the absence of support went ahead anyway.

When Griffith was leader he had tried to enlist labour support of the liberals.

When the liberals and conservatives formed a loose coalition in 1890 seven Griffith liberals stood out in what was known as an independent opposition. It was this body that Labor was potentially forming an association with. At what cost would this have been?

While it was not until the 1909 election that Labour in opposition would be officially seen as the opposition party. Dawson was symbolically important in seeing labour, despite his willingness to parley, in the absence of support he would go it alone.

In one sense by forming government, however tenuous that may be, represented at least a means to force the liberals hands to support labour.

Dawson was instrumental in forming agreement with the independent Liberals that each party would not field a candidate in the seat already held by each party. It seemed that a liberal – labour coalition may happen

At the 1899 election the conservatives won 43 seats, labour 21 and independents 8. The leader Dickson was not popular. Prior to the opening of parliament in May the labour leader Glassey refused to contest a ballot for leader and Dawson was elected. The position was tense as the conservatives were by no means a cohesive bunch and the ALF did not want the parliamentary party to form government with alliances that may impact the purity of the labour brand.

And it is here that I would argue that Dawson and others position at the time is quite significant. They may have wanted alliances but what they really wanted was to form government to enable electoral reform of one vote one value.

The issue of sending a contingent to the Boer war without parliamentary approval was one thing but what cost the government office was voting on a bill creating a standing committee to investigate all new railway lines. Amendments to this bill, which Dickson said if defeated would be taken as a vote of no confidence, were defeated with the assistance of one defecting labour member.

For labour to form office was a complex proposition. There were 21 labour members, 8 independents and 4/5 dissident conservatives also known as ministerialists. The PLP executive were exploring the possibility for a loose coalition that may govern long enough to achieve electoral reform. That is assuming they could get through a then existent Legislative Council.

Dawson was prepared to offer the conservative dissident leader E B Forrest the premiership or any ministry and the independent liberals 2 ministries leaving only 3 for labour. However the conservative defectors indicated through Forrest they would not be in a coalition with Labour. The independent liberals also declined to participate.

Dawson and the Labour members had to go it alone. Through the aforementioned lack of support the government had to resign when on the floor of the house Dawson’s motion for a further adjournment of the house was defeated 36 votes to 26.

Why had the government get formed in the first place when it knew it could not survive?

We might assume personal ambition might have had something to do with it.

Dawson obviously felt he would receive more support from dissident conservatives and liberals than he ended up receiving.

This misguided belief was certainly instrumental in Dawson convincing Griffith that he could form government. Dawson and others were anxious to show Labour could govern and not just occupy a cross bench position favoured by some. Dawson went on to say after his defeat

‘*The action I have taken is to a very large extent, if not wholly, to show members of the house and the country that we do not regard politics as a joke*.’

Electoral reform was certainly one of Dawson and his colleagues principle reasons for wanting office. The platform contained a raft of other reforms the party wanted implemented;

* Pensions
* Workers compensation
* Industrial conciliation and arbitration
* Work for the unemployed
* Land reform,
* Nationalised railways

When Dawson and other leading labourites went off to federal parliament this left William Kidston in charge of state labour. The earlier experience in unsuccessful coalitions was lesson learnt and William Kidston was part of coherent liberal labour coalitions some of which he led as premier, and then finally confirming labour in opposition by 1909. By 1915 a straight Labour government won office under T J Ryan with labour ultimately going on to hold office continuously until 1957 with the exception of two years of conservative government during the depression.

It is easy to overstate the role of Dawson in the creation of Australian democracy. He was part of the political machine and played machine politics. In my view his role has an important symbolism and some substantive historical precedent setting to boot. He was instrumental in the creation of labour as a viable party in opposition and eventually in government in its own right. He was instrumental as a pioneer in giving labour respectability as a viable government party. Therefore his role in Australian democracy is being part of the process of having a viable party fit for both opposition and government and for that he deserve recognition. Not bad for a poorly educated orphan with no resources other than his own ambition and an instinct for making something big from small beginnings.

Dr Rhett Martin

1. ["125th anniversary of the Manifesto of the Queensland Labour Party | State Library Of Queensland"](https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/blog/125th-anniversary-manifesto-queensland-labour-party). *www.slq.qld.gov.au*. 8 September 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)