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Flirting with party politics: The Australian citizens' movements and the United Australia Party

By the beginning of 1931, the Australian Labor Party held power at a federal level as well as in every state except Queensland and Western Australia. In contrast, the Nationalist Party and its supporters were in disarray and had only just begun to rebuild their political brand. Although their majority in the federal Senate allowed them to block many of the government's less orthodox proposals, this was not enough to force the government to adopt a deflationary approach or prevent Lang from repudiating Australia's debt obligations to British bondholders. The Nationalists and their Country Party allies needed to oust Labor at the next federal election to accomplish that. However, at a time when the need for conservative political unity was greater than ever, a powerful backlash of populist conservatism had arisen. This anti-partyism lay the blame for the Depression at the feet of political parties of all persuasions, including the Nationalists, and questioned whether they even had a future. The citizens' movements, which sat at the apex of this backlash, were willing to bypass existing political parties altogether by supporting independent candidates. This threatened to undercut the Nationalists' electoral base by splitting the conservative vote and handing the Labor Party another term at the nation's helm.

The divide between the Nationalists and the citizens' movements was deeply concerning to many conservatives. This was no mere political contest to them; it was a choice between a sane, respectable government that upheld traditional conservative values and a radical rabble that was willing to destroy the currency and repudiate the nation's debts. The very soul of the nation was at stake. Conservatives needed someone who could bridge the gap between the Nationalists and the mass of frustrated people who had thrown their weight behind the citizens' movements. They needed someone palatable to both sides who could unite the forces of conservatism under one platform with a single set of mutually agreed candidates. In sum, conservatives yearned for a leader—one who could navigate the political machinery in Canberra while bringing the citizens' movements back into the fold. Ironically, the citizens' movements were also looking for a leader. The only question, as the citizens' movements themselves came to ask, was 'who is the man?'.¹ The answer was a relative newcomer to federal politics—a man on the right of the Labor Party Cabinet who was often caricatured as a sleepy koala.

The defection of Joseph Lyons

Winning the support of the opposition

When Joseph Lyons resigned from the Labor Cabinet in January 1931 to protest his colleagues' approach to the Depression, a contemporary observer might have thought his days in politics were numbered. As head of a small group of Labor dissidents, the best he might hope for was to win the Labor caucus to his side in the hope that it might sway Cabinet. But Lyons had also spent the second half of 1930 establishing his credentials as a fiscal conservative. As Chapter Two discussed, he had adhered to the conditions of the deflationary Melbourne Agreement reached by state premiers in August. He had also successfully conducted a £28 million loan conversion campaign in the closing months of 1930—despite caucus opposition—thus avoiding the spectre of repudiation that so terrified conservatives. His resignation over Prime Minister Scullin's reappointment of Theodore as treasurer cemented his image among conservatives as an honest man who was willing to defy the directions of his party on matters

1 Bagot, 'A Dictator Needed', submitted to the Editor of 'The Advertiser', 5 September 1930, box 3, item 25D, CLSA Papers, NLA.

of principle. As the editors of the *Sydney Morning Herald* put it: 'In these days of political opportunism, it is refreshing to know that there are still a few public leaders who prefer honour to power.'²

Lyons was in the perfect position to reinvent his political career—and conservatives were quick to spot the opportunity. Chapter Two noted that a small clique of Melbourne politicians and professionals informally known as 'the Group of Six' had worked with Lyons during the loan conversion campaign. Members of this group were closely associated with the Citizens' Committee—the precursor to the Australian Citizens' League—as well as the chief conservative political fundraising organisation known as the National Union. By the beginning of 1931, the Group of Six came to view Lyons as a potential leader who could unite the various anti-Scullin forces inside and outside parliament. In early February, they encouraged Lyons to cross to the opposition benches and pledged their support to uniting the forces of conservatism behind him. After much soul-searching and a final failed attempt to defeat Theodore's economic proposals in caucus, Lyons and his small group of followers issued a joint vote of censure against the government with the Nationalist Party on 13 March.³ While the vote failed to achieve a majority, it cemented Lyons' image among conservatives as a principled man who was willing to place the good of the nation above party interests and his own personal ambitions. It also signalled Lyons' final break from the Labor Party; he pledged to form a new centrist party with his small group of followers, which received the tentative support of the opposition parties.

Lyons' supporters in the Group of Six and the National Union were keen for him to assume the leadership of the opposition. Since the end of 1929, the Nationalists had been led by Sir John Latham, a former judge and attorney-general who, while a skilled and intelligent politician, lacked Lyons' popular appeal and accessible speaking style. Faced with the concerted pressure of the Group of Six and the National Union, Latham ultimately agreed in April 1931 to step aside as leader of the opposition and recommend Lyons as his successor. Meanwhile, Lyons and his groups of centrists strengthened their relationship with the Nationalist and Country parties by agreeing on a set of seven common policy points. The wording of these points was ambiguous at best—a mere bandaid over the wounds that divided urban professionals and businesspeople, manufacturers, and

2 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 January 1931, 12.

3 Hart, 'Lyons', 43–45; Lonie, 'From Liberal to Liberal', 65; Martin, *Robert Menzies*, 86.

farmers—but it signalled Lyons' intention to act as a force of unity rather than division. It promised balanced budgets and the encouragement of 'productive enterprise', while also committing to assist primary producers with 'real money' and ensuring that tariff policy was 'economically sound'. It also promised a 'fair deal' for employers and employees.⁴ In short, there were words in there that everyone could support.

The citizens' movements' view of mainstream conservative parties

While Lyons had secured the support of mainstream conservative parties, this was only half the battle. In March 1931, the citizens' movements were on a triumphant upward climb. They had already recruited more than 100,000 members between them—a number that would nearly triple in the coming months. To secure unopposed the leadership of a united conservative opposition, Lyons needed to gain their support as well. But how? Despite the occasionally anti-democratic and proto-corporatist nature of the citizens' movements' economic policies, they shared the same traditional conservative values as the mainstream conservative parties. But anti-partyism complicated this ideological congruence. It was an ideological line in the sand that the movements had drawn, a foundation on which they defined what made them different from 'sectional' party machines. If Lyons became the leader of the opposition, he risked losing much of the non-party credentials he had accrued by resigning from the Labor Party in protest.

The Nationalist (or National) Party, which was the leading conservative political force at the federal level in 1931, was an organisational chimera. Rather than comprising a series of united and hierarchical party divisions, the Nationalist Party was a loose coalition of different state-based conservative organisations, including the National Federation of Victoria, the Nationalist Association of New South Wales, and the Liberal Federation of South Australia. Federal policy was developed through the Australian National Federation, comprising six delegates from each state, although only five interstate conferences were ever convened.⁵ It was at the state level where the conservative parties' extra-parliamentary support apparatus was

4 The Seven Points: Policy announced by Mr. J.A. Lyons, 26 March 1931, item 101, box 89, series 49, folder 3, Latham Papers, NLA.

5 C.J. Lloyd, 'The Rise and Fall of the United Australia Party', in *Liberalism and the Australian Federation*, ed. J.R. Nethercote (Sydney: The Federation Press, 2001), 157.

most apparent. The state organisations preselected candidates for both state and federal elections and channelled their resources into promoting those candidates. In turn, those candidates agreed to support the policy platform set forth by the party. This made the Nationalist Party and its state arms the targets of fierce and uncompromising criticism from the citizens' movements, which drew no distinction between the Nationalists' methods and those of their Labor opponents. As the All for Australia League put it in one of their pamphlets:

[T]he Reds dominate the Labour Movement and the Reactionaries have gained control of the Nationalist Party. Controlling these organisations as they do, the extreme sections have forced Parliament to legislate in the interests of their respective factions, regardless of the welfare of the community at large.⁶

This criticism of conservative parties was more than just a half-hearted attempt to win the support of centrist voters by colonising the middle ground. The citizens' movements were squarely set against the methods of party politics irrespective of where on the political spectrum they lay. They viewed party politics of all strands as equally anti-democratic.

The question the citizens' movements inevitably faced was: how could they secure the election of a government committed to the 'national interest' without resorting to party politics themselves? Though this question might seem simple, it raised a host of other questions that required much more specific answers than the high-level platitudes with which the citizens' movements were more comfortable. It was easy to speak of expanding 'until we are such a huge power that our wishes can no longer be ignored'.⁷ But who would fulfil those wishes? Would it be acceptable if they were fulfilled by a party government, even if only in the short term? If this was acceptable, did this mean that anti-partyism was less important, and could therefore be temporarily cast aside, to achieve the more pressing goal of a change in government? And finally, if the goal of sound government was so important, was it acceptable for the citizens' movements to cooperate with other conservative organisations—even if only temporarily—to ensure it was realised? These were very important

6 The Financial Record of Party Politics, undated, item 68, Mutch Papers, SLNSW.

7 Address by Bagot at a Citizens' Public Meeting in Adelaide Town Hall, 14 October 1930, box 1, item 1, CLSA Papers, NLA.

questions in 1931 in Australia, where the three Labor bogeymen—Scullin, Theodore, and Lang—presented conservatives with a real and immediate threat to everything in which they believed.

As the first of the citizens' movements to be founded, the Citizens' League of South Australia was also the first to grapple with these questions. Its original strategy was to pressure the Scullin Government to enact its desired reforms, by creating an all-party coalition if necessary. However, when Scullin openly sided with Theodore's proposals to expand federal spending, the Citizens' League condemned this as a 'refusal to deal with matters affecting the interests of the citizens on national instead of party lines'.⁸ Even if he had declined to support Theodore, Scullin was an ill-suited saviour for the Citizens' League. Apart from being a party politician, his approach to combating the Depression was perceived by the league as hesitant and contradictory. Latham and the Nationalists were a possible alternative, although this would still have required throwing their lot in with party politicians. Bagot even considered asking Sir John Monash to temporarily assume dictatorial control of the nation, as Chapter Three discussed.

What the Citizens' League needed was a leader who could bridge the gap between extra-parliamentary agitation and intra-parliamentary action—someone part of, but not beholden to, the nation's political machinery. Such a leader could, in the league's eyes, effect change from within parliament without being attached to any party, thus preserving the illusion of a national non-party government. Leaders of this calibre would not even be politicians at all, but *statesmen*—an important rhetorical differentiation in the eyes of the Citizens' League:

Out of this new movement new leaders will be found. Men and women who are prepared to serve for the good of the country as a whole instead of for party. We demand statesmen instead of politicians, that all legislation be reviewed as to whether it is for the good of the people as a whole instead of for a section of them.⁹

This search for a leader who was external to the movement is unusual for populist organisations, which tend to place faith in their own leaders; indeed, the relationship between the leader and 'the people' is

8 Letter from Bagot to Scullin, 29 January 1931, box 13, item 11, CLSA Papers, NLA.

9 Address given by Mr. E.D.A. Bagot at public meeting held in the Exhibition Building, 11 December 1930, box 3, item 25D, CLSA Papers, NLA.

a key component of the strategic approach to populism discussed in the Introduction. The Citizens' League, however, was candid in its search for an external leader who could lead the citizenry in their struggle against the political elite.

As the Citizens' League rose to prominence in the closing months of 1930, so, too, did Lyons. His loan conversion campaign utilised many of the same populist tactics as the Citizens' League, including mass rallies, idealistic notions of national honour, and direct appeals to the people against the supposedly apathetic attitudes of those in power. By December, he was a nationally recognised figure and the Citizens' League's leaders were praising him for his 'courage and plain speaking'.¹⁰ A league 'Monster Rally' was held on 11 December 1930 in part to encourage widespread support for Lyons' loan conversion, and a telegram from Lyons addressed to the league was read to the audience.¹¹ When Scullin failed to enforce deflationary measures during the premiers' conference in February 1931, the Citizens' League called on Lyons to overthrow the government and form a new ministry with the opposition. Bagot offered him the league's unqualified backing and circulated telegrams to MPs in New South Wales and South Australia urging them to support Lyons.¹²

Lyons' view of the citizens' movements

Lyons' stand against his Labor colleagues appeared to provide an avenue for the citizens' movements into parliamentary politics that did not overly stretch their non-party credentials. He was, in essence, a conservative politician without the burden of the conservative party machine. This made him the ideal candidate to lead a group of self-proclaimed non-party movements. However, two things needed to happen for this marriage to be realised: Lyons had to want the job, and all three citizens' movements needed to accept him.

10 *The Advertiser*, [Adelaide], 12 December 1930, 19.

11 Telegram from the Hon. J.A. Lyons re: Conversion Loan, 11 December 1930, box 1, item 1, CLSA Papers, NLA.

12 Telegram from Bagot to Scullin, 12 February 1931, box 13, item 11, Telegram from Bagot to Lyons, 20 February 1931, box 13, item 13, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 23 February 1931, box 1, item 2, Letter from Bagot to Lyons, 7 March 1931, box 13, item 13, CLSA Papers, NLA; *The Advertiser*, [Adelaide], 12 February 1931, 7; *Advertiser and Register*, [Adelaide], 21 February 1931, 15.

Lyons' position in February 1931 was complicated by the division between the Nationalist Party (along with its various state arms) and the citizens' movements. If he chose to align himself too closely with political parties, he risked alienating the citizens' movements. Conversely, if he aligned himself too closely with non-party interests, he could lose his chance at leading a united opposition. Consequently, Lyons did not respond to the Citizens' League's overtures to overthrow the Scullin Government until 13 March, when he announced his intention to form 'a new party which would place the country before party'. His brief response said the following, in the usual clipped telegram prose: 'Letters received ... speech today shows my position ... Glad [to] do anything [to] help Australia.'¹³

Lyons' noncommittal response is an important indicator of his thinking at the time, both for what it says and for what it does not say. He knew how fragile and fractious the opposition parties were at that time, and he had no wish to damage his chances of becoming opposition leader by taking up the mantle of leader of the citizens' movements. However, he also realised the electoral boon such a large mass of supporters could bring to a united opposition. When cautioned privately by the editor of *The Argus* a few days later that he should 'check the growth of sectional mushroom movements that may be a menace to unity later', Lyons replied that he did not wish to alienate these movements.¹⁴ He knew the force of public opinion that the citizens' movements could bring to bear and he did not want to reject the tentative support they had offered him.

Uniting the citizens' movements behind Lyons

Disagreement between the citizens' movements

While all the Australian citizens' movements generally supported Lyons, there was considerable disagreement between the Citizens' League of South Australia and the two eastern movements on what a united non-party front should look like. The Citizens' League viewed Lyons' desertion from Labor as a chance for all the forces opposed to Labor—including

13 *Advertiser and Register*, [Adelaide], 13 March 1931, 15; Telegram from Lyons to Bagot, 13 March 1931, box 13, item 13, CLSA Papers, NLA.

14 Hart, 'Lyons', 46.

mainstream conservative parties, the citizens' movements and other non-party organisations, and the forces of 'sane labour'—to unite behind him under one non-party banner. While each organisation would retain its own separate identity under this new united front, the Citizens' League believed the large membership of the citizens' movements would form its backbone. Bagot boasted that Lyons would inherit 'an Australia-wide organisation with an immediate membership of 200,000' should he choose to accept it.¹⁵ The notion that such a political force could really be non-party in nature may seem farcical today; however, it must be remembered that in March 1931 Lyons was, for all intents and purposes, a free political agent. He had resigned from the Labor Party on principle, he had yet to succeed Latham as leader of the opposition, and he had only just announced his intention to form a new minority party. With the citizens' movements enjoying a spectacular rise and the Nationalists in disarray, it was easy for individuals like Bagot to imagine that a new political order free from party domination was being forged.

In contrast, the All for Australia League saw no place for the mainstream conservative parties in a united non-party movement. Instead, it argued that all true conservatives should disavow their existing allegiances, dissolve their separate parties and organisations, and unite under the banner of 'All for Australia'. A Citizens' League delegate to a meeting of the two eastern state leagues in March 1931 reported that the All for Australia League was unwilling to discuss a common policy and refused to support Lyons as federal leader.¹⁶ The reason for their reluctance became clear when, at the first All for Australia League of New South Wales state convention on 28 March, delegates voted by 598 to 40 to launch a new political movement that would support its own candidates at state and federal elections. Delegates stressed that their members, who supposedly came from both sides of the political spectrum, were looking to the All for Australia League for leadership and action and would not countenance supporting either Labor or Nationalist candidates. Their object, one of the founding members explained bluntly, was 'to save Australia and not to save the National party'.¹⁷ When confronted by Latham about the need for unity to defeat Scullin, All for Australia League President Alex J. Gibson replied that he was '[v]ery friendly' towards the federal opposition forces

15 *Mail*, [Adelaide], 21 March 1931, 1.

16 Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 23 March 1931, box 1, item 2, CLSA Papers, NLA.

17 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 March 1931, 12.

but not to the Nationalist Party in general. The solution to the 'federal problem', he explained, was for Lyons and the leaders of the Nationalist and Country parties to join the All for Australia League.¹⁸

These differing visions of a united non-party movement were partially influenced by lingering mistrust between the Citizens' League and its counterparts in the eastern states. As was discussed in Chapter Two, the Australian Citizens' League's upper-class leadership was wary of Bagot's middle-class origins and fiery rhetoric, which they considered a potential liability. The Australian Citizens' League found the leadership of the All for Australia League—which included several prominent businessmen and manufacturers—much less objectionable at first, which explains their decision to adopt the latter's name and objects in March 1931. The placatory excuse they offered the Citizens' League of South Australia for their name change was that 'the name "citizen" to the country dweller connoted too much of city interests'.¹⁹

A heated struggle occurred throughout March 1931 for control of the direction of the citizens' movements. Both eastern state leagues pressured the Citizens' League of South Australia to fall into line with them in a wider movement under the title of All for Australia. The South Australian Citizens' League refused to amalgamate 'on the ground[s] of dominance from New South Wales and Victoria', and Bagot called the Australian Citizens' League 'selfish' for affiliating with the All for Australia League.²⁰ In truth, the leaders of the Australian Citizens' League were far less enamoured with their alliance than they appeared. At the beginning of March, the All for Australia League was a dynamic and rapidly expanding force whose only tangible targets were the forces of inflation and repudiation. By the end of the month, however, its opposition to cooperation with the Nationalists on all fronts was becoming increasingly apparent. This placed the leadership of the Australian Citizens' League in an increasingly uncomfortable position given their work with Lyons on the loan conversion campaign. Indeed, while the All for Australia League was railing against the Nationalists, the Australian Citizens' League leaders who were associated with the National Union and the Group of Six were manoeuvring for Lyons to assume the leadership of the opposition.

18 Notes made on 6 April 1931, item 106, box 89, series 49, folder 3, Latham Papers, NLA.

19 Letter from Bagot to W.A. Burns, 2 June 1931, box 12, item 1, CLSA Papers, NLA.

20 Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 9 March 1931; Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 23 March 1931, box 1, item 2; Letter from Bagot to Sir William Sowden, 23 March 1931, box 13, item 11, CLSA Papers, NLA.

The day after the All for Australia League of New South Wales launched itself as an independent political movement, the Australian Citizens' League leadership met with Latham to reassure him of their support. They also expressed their concern over the hostility from the All for Australia League and suggested it would be difficult to convince them to support the Nationalists.²¹ This may explain Bagot's cryptic statement to a South Australian journalist that the Australian Citizens' League had come to regret changing their name. The reason Bagot cited for the league's regret—that the badge of the newly formed Australian Labor Army bore a startling resemblance to that of the All for Australia League—is humorous but unconvincing.²²

The April 1931 conference

The competing visions of the Citizens' League and the All for Australia League came to a head at a conference of non-party organisations at Balfour's Café in Adelaide on 9–10 April 1931. The purpose of the conference, which was arranged by the Citizens' League, was 'to secure co-ordination of effort, and enunciate common principles, aiming mainly at support of Mr. Lyons'.²³ It is hardly likely the All for Australia League of New South Wales shared this vision, given it had recently decided to field its own candidates. The conference must therefore be seen as an attempt by the Citizens' League to regain control of the citizens' movement phenomenon by securing widespread support for its vision of a united coalition of conservative organisations under Lyons. The number of groups invited to attend may have been part of this strategy. Apart from the three citizens' movements, delegates were invited from the Sane Democracy League, the Empire Party, the Citizens' Federation of Western Australia, the Tasmanian Producers' Advisory Council, the Emergency Committee of South Australia, the South Australian Proportional Representation Group, the South Australian Women's Non-Party Association, the Producers' and Business Men's Political League, and a revived Kyabram Reform Movement.²⁴ The majority of these movements supported forming a united front under Lyons to avoid splitting the conservative

21 Notes made on 6 April 1931, item 106, box 89, series 49, folder 3, Latham Papers, NLA.

22 Letter from Bagot to Sir William Sowden, 23 March 1931, box 13, item 11, CLSA Papers, NLA.

23 Minutes of Executive Committee meeting, 8 April 1931, box 1, item 2, CLSA Papers, NLA.

24 Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 23 March 1931, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 7 April 1931, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 8 April 1931, box 1, item 2, CLSA Papers, NLA; *Advertiser and Register*, [Adelaide], 9 April 1931, 9.

vote. The fact that their combined membership did not even come close to the ever-growing number of All for Australia League members did not matter; at the conference, the All for Australia League delegates would be in the minority.

Lyons accepted an invitation from the Citizens' League to address the conference. He also decided to make the occasion the inaugural event of a broader speaking tour across Australia.²⁵ His campaigning zeal, which had been honed by the loan conversion campaign the previous December and influenced by the populist style of the citizens' movements, was on full display. He and his wife, Enid, were greeted at Adelaide train station by an adoring crowd of supporters and the press, to whom he gave an ostensibly impromptu address in which he uttered his famous line that together they would 'strike a match to-night which will start a blaze throughout Australia'.²⁶ That evening, he gave a speech to a mass rally in the Exhibition Hall that was broadcast live on 5AD and relayed to several other radio stations in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane. Attendance was so large that he repeated his address later that night to overflow crowds at the Garden Theatre and Palais Royal.²⁷ His speech skilfully blended the populist rhetoric of the citizens' movements with the orthodox economic rhetoric that had won him acclaim among conservatives:

The first problem facing us is to restore the confidence of overseas people in Australia. In that objective there should be no party, no sectional, and no State antagonisms ... let us unite on certain leading questions and then leave our representatives freedom of action in order that we might have true representative government.²⁸

However, Lyons' schedule for most of his time in Adelaide was booked solid with meetings and luncheons with conservative organisations and businessmen's groups.²⁹ This demonstrated that he was cognisant of the political power held by the citizens' movements and mainstream conservatives and was keen to maintain support from both.

25 Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 16 March 1931, box 1, item 2, CLSA Papers, NLA; *Advertiser and Register*, [Adelaide], 19 March 1931, 9.

26 *Advertiser and Register*, [Adelaide], 10 April 1931, 21.

27 *ibid.*, 9 April 1931, 9.

28 *ibid.*, 10 April 1931, 19–20.

29 *ibid.*, 19, 21; 11 April 1931, 17.

The citizens' movement conference opened on 9 April 1931. Despite the importance of the occasion, no agreed minutes appear to have survived. The Adelaide *News* captured Bagot's opening address to the conference, but little else:

We are all only too well aware that Australia is facing a crisis. It is our duty as citizens to think nationally instead of individually, to sink petty jealousies, subordinate party politics to national needs, and to unite in a common cause of loyalty and service as the price of our citizenship.

... To preserve as wide a field as possible for our deliberations we submit on the conference agenda one item only—to discuss means by which coordination of action throughout Australia on matters of general importance can best be secured. Briefly, our problem is to find a common equation as a solution of our difficulties.³⁰

The notes and reports of those who attended the conference capture some of the flavour that is missing from the rather bland newspaper coverage. These private recordings detail the heated debate that occurred between the All for Australia League and the various other movements that opposed its vision of unifying all conservative forces under the 'All for Australia' banner. The delegates from the Emergency Committee provided the following report to their colleagues:

Sydney A.F.A. [All for Australia League] people came down to get certain things from Citizens' League e.g. change of name, and formation of new party. Owing to Mr. Bagot's clever tactics they were brought round from their plan of united party to Adelaide plan of cooperating parties. Things very bad in Sydney ... Many of us also tried to impress on them the danger of a split vote. This is very real danger. If A.F.A. hangs out from other parties in Sydney, Senate may feel that an election is too risky, and may pass Theodore legislation rather than face loss of our last bulwark. Admitted AFA have only $\frac{1}{3}$ of vote. Good hopes that all may go on lines of Adelaide Plan.³¹

30 *News*, [Adelaide], 9 April 1931, 8.

31 Minutes of meeting of Emergency Committee Executive, 12 April 1931, series 4, item 1, Price Papers, SLSA.

The minutes of the Citizens' League Executive Committee meeting on 12 April support this account. They praised the league's delegates for withstanding the efforts of the All for Australia League to 'swamp' them, and for 'persuading them that the South Australia scheme of uniting the parties was the best'.³²

So, what caused the All for Australia League delegates to lose heart? Was it really Bagot's 'clever tactics', as the reports of the Emergency Committee and the Citizens' League suggested? Both groups shared the goal of uniting behind Lyons, so their reports may be tinged with triumphalism. It is equally likely that Lyons' speech to the conference on the morning of 10 April managed to persuade the recalcitrant delegates from New South Wales to toe the line. Parts of his speech were preserved by the *Advertiser and Register*:

You know what is needed to set Australia right and bring back prosperity, probably better than any politician does.

... You can accomplish nothing unless you are united. In my discussions with members of various parties, I have found a little hesitation on the part of some persons to forgo their party labels. As one who has given up his party label, I can assure you that it is essential to have one united party. Do not let mere labels stand in the way!³³

Lyons' words were carefully chosen. He was aware of the dissenting view of the All for Australia League in New South Wales and how important it was that the opposition forces were united in the most populated Australian state.

Whatever the cause, the outcome was that the conference delegates agreed to unite behind Lyons. But what exactly did that unity involve? Only two resolutions were passed at the conference. The first was that, due to the crisis of the Depression, the movements represented at the conference agreed to cooperate to 'maintain the principles of national integrity and sound finance, and to oppose inflation, repudiation, and financial drift'. This was hardly controversial; it essentially repeated what each group had already committed to independently. The second resolution contained the more substantial commitment to unify under Lyons:

32 Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 13 April 1931, box 1, item 2, CLSA Papers, NLA.

33 *Advertiser and Register*, [Adelaide], 10 April 1931, 21.

This conference confirms the desirability of unity being achieved on non-party lines under a policy of broad principles submitted by the Hon. J.A. Lyons amongst all political groups opposed to Scullin, Theodore, Beasley policies. If this unity is achieved the conference recommends wholehearted support of the new united movement. As negotiations between Latham, Page, Lyons groups are proceeding, the furtherance of same be left in the hands of the Citizens' League of South Australia, and the All for Australia Leagues of New South Wales and Victoria, with power to add to their number.³⁴

The first two sentences of this resolution suggested that, should a new united movement be formed under Lyons with an agreed set of broad principles, the citizens' movements would support it. However, the third sentence indicated that, as Lyons and the leaders of the Nationalist and Country parties had yet to form a united movement, it was up to the citizens' movements to do so instead, and leave the door open for other groups to join the movement later. This was also reflected in the joint telegram that was sent to Lyons on 11 April by the three citizens' movement leaders:

Pending the time when all the existing political organizations in Australia that stand for the principles enunciated by you shall have united to form one great non-partisan organization under a common name, as outlined in our telegraphic invitation to you it is obvious that you, Mr. Lyons, and the small group of legislators you directly lead should not be handicapped by the lack of an organization in the constituencies, wholly devoted to the task of securing the return to Parliament of all candidates who are prepared to subscribe to the policy indicated in terms of the above-mentioned telegram. We are in a position to supply you with that service, and we have the honor now to place at your disposal the whole force of the All for Australia movement of New South Wales and Victoria, and of the Citizens' League of South Australia, and we invite you to become our leader.³⁵

This carefully worded telegram was essentially offering Lyons the leadership and dedicated service of the citizens' movements, given that he and his group of centrists did not yet have an extensive political

34 Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 13 April 1931, box 1, item 2, CLSA Papers, NLA.

35 Letter from Gibson, Turnbull, and Bagot to Lyons, 11 April 1931, box 1, folder 8, Joseph Aloysius Lyons Papers, MS 4851 [hereinafter Lyons Papers], NLA.

apparatus themselves. In other words, the citizens' movements were offering themselves as the foundation for a new political organisation led by Lyons—a party in all but name. Bagot and his colleagues interpreted this as a victory over the All for Australia League. But the wording of the conference resolutions and the telegram to Lyons were undoubtedly seen as a victory by the All for Australia League delegates, too. If Lyons accepted their offer, the citizens' movements would hold a powerful position over the Nationalist and Country parties. If these mainstream parties wanted to join in a united front, they would have to do so at the mercy and whim of the citizens' movements, of which the All for Australia League remained the largest by a wide margin. Furthermore, the united front would have a 'common name', and no doubt the All for Australia League delegates envisioned that it would be theirs.

Despite the glowing press accounts, then, the conference of 9–10 April achieved little. The only agreement reached was that the citizens' movements would support a united non-party movement led by Lyons. There was still no agreement on what shape that movement would take or how it would iron out the disagreements between the citizens' movements and the mainstream conservative parties. In addition, Lyons' small group of Labor defectors lacked the political support apparatus enjoyed by the other parties in parliament—a gap the citizens' movements had enthusiastically offered to fill.

The murky birth of the United Australia Party

Lyons followed up on the conference by arranging a meeting in Melbourne on 19 April with delegates from the Nationalist Party and the three citizens' movements. The purpose of the meeting was to agree on the name and shape of the 'new united movement' the citizens' movements had endorsed at the conference. If Lyons was to lead a successful coalition of conservative forces to victory in the next federal election, he needed the attendees to agree on two things. First, he needed the citizens' movements and the mainstream conservative parties to agree on a common list of candidates who supported the broad principles set out in his seven-point policy. Second, he needed them to apply their members and their resources to promoting those candidates.

The delegates supported Lyons' proposal that the new movement be called the United Australia Movement. However, as at the conference at the beginning of April, the wording of subsequent resolutions was

murkier. The organisations represented at the conference were ‘urged’ to appoint central committees in each state to ‘secure the return [of] United Australia candidates’. If this could not be accomplished before the next federal election, the central committees were to ‘secure united action in the electorates’. There was no clear commitment to a single agreed list of candidates—in fact, the resolutions specifically noted that ‘no section shall preselect a candidate’—and the number of candidates in each electorate would only be limited ‘in necessary and appropriate cases’.³⁶ In other words, the United Australia Movement seemed to offer something for everyone. For the Citizens’ League of South Australia and the Australian Citizens’ League, it provided the promised united non-party front for which they had asked. For the All for Australia League, it allowed them the freedom to continue to field their own candidates whenever and wherever they deemed it necessary. And for the Nationalist Party and Lyons’ small parliamentary faction, it provided a new party banner under which they could unite. On 7 May, Lyons and his fellow Labor defectors along with the sitting Nationalist Party MPs rebranded themselves as the United Australia Party. Lyons was elected leader of the opposition to the uproarious support of the House of Representatives.³⁷

Coopting the Citizens’ League of South Australia and the Australian Citizens’ League

The Emergency Committee of South Australia

With a loose commitment to unity achieved, the conservative parties in each state set about coopting the populist enthusiasm of the citizens’ movements. The conference of 19 April had established a mechanism for doing so in the form of the proposed central committees in each state. This was likely modelled on a template that had been established in South Australia several weeks earlier. With tensions running high between the Citizens’ League and the South Australian Liberal Federation in the first few months of 1931, leading Liberals W.G. Duncan and Charles Hawker

36 Minutes of a Conference held in Melbourne, 19 April 1931, box 1, item 2, CLSA Papers, NLA.

37 Hart, ‘Lyons’, 51. They were also joined by W.M. Hughes’s Australian Party, comprising himself and three other MPs who had defected from the Nationalists in 1930.

had begun to consider how best to rein in the fiery and unpredictable Bagot. Since he seemed implacably opposed to the Liberals' party structure, they formed the Emergency Committee of South Australia to provide a neutral front under which the Liberal Federation, the Country Party, and the various non-party groups in South Australia could field agreed candidates to contest the next federal election. To be credible, it needed fresh, nonpartisan leadership. Duncan and Hawker approached A.G. Price, author of the highly influential and widely distributed pamphlet *The Menace of Inflation*, to lead the new movement. Invitations were sent to five organisations to attend the inaugural meeting of the committee on 1 April 1931: the Liberal Federation, the Country Party, the Citizens' League, the Political Reform League (whose founder, Keith Wilson, participated in the formation of the Citizens' League), and the Producers' and Business Men's Association.³⁸

An analysis of Price's world view reveals the similarities and differences between mainstream conservatism and the citizens' movement ideology. Price was a typical conservative: British in his loyalties, staunch in his defence of orthodox economics, yet relatively ambivalent about the conservative party apparatus. He believed deflation and balanced budgets were natural—and therefore apolitical—tools of economic management, whereas the methods pursued by Labor were 'absolutely wrong'. Those who supported a sane economy were 'good men' who 'refused to be bound', whereas Scullin led 'a Government of wobblers, and financial extremists' who had 'temporarily sapped the foundations of individualism' with arbitration, pensions, and 'a dozen [other] socialistic policies'. Nevertheless, Price was deeply concerned by Bagot's uncompromising anti-partyism. He agreed to lead the Emergency Committee not because of any strong sympathy for the Liberals, but to prevent the Citizens' League from splitting the vote and 'letting in the extremists again'. This was a fear shared by Duncan and Hawker, who believed the league represented an 'immediate danger' and hoped to keep it under control until it ran out of money or momentum.³⁹ When interviewed many years later about the impetus for the formation of the Emergency Committee, Price's response was blunt: '[W]e started the Emergency Committee to control Bagot.'⁴⁰

38 Price, 'The Emergency Committee of South Australia and the Origin of the Premiers' Plan', 11–13; Circular sent by Price, 29 March 1931, series 4, item 1, Price Papers, SLSA.

39 Price, 'The Emergency Committee of South Australia and the Origin of the Premiers' Plan', 5–6, 11, 13–14, 40.

40 Quoted in Lonie, *Conservatism and class in South Australia during the Depression years*, 248.

Bagot approached the inaugural meeting of the Emergency Committee with considerable bluster. Before the meeting, he told the Citizens' League president and fellow delegate William Queale that he intended to 'let the bastards show themselves and then shoot them'. However, while Bagot proclaimed that he was 'dead against cooperation' with the Liberal Federation, the more moderate Queale was won over by Price's appeals for electoral unity and convinced Bagot to change his mind.⁴¹ The fear of splitting the conservative vote was likely a powerful influence on Bagot's change of heart. He knew that if the Citizens' League fielded its own candidates, there was a strong possibility Labor would emerge triumphant at the next election.

Having agreed to field a single list of candidates, the Emergency Committee then expanded Lyons' seven-point policy into a 12-point policy it would require its candidates to uphold. Two of these additional policies demonstrated the willingness of mainstream conservatives to graft aspects of the citizens' movement ideology on to an orthodox core. Candidates would be required to support the freedom of MPs from party or caucus control and a truce on contentious party issues for the duration of the next parliament.⁴² While this may have been little more than a token appeasement of the Citizens' League, it was enough to satisfy Bagot that he could support the Emergency Committee without compromising his anti-party stance. This was aided by Emergency Committee members such as Price making use of the kind of non-party language for which the citizens' movement was renowned:

[The Emergency Committee] is not really a political movement. It is an effort on the part of disinterested volunteers who have left their work and business simply to help the old parties co-operate, simply to aid them in one essential task of putting the country straight.⁴³

41 Price, 'The Emergency Committee of South Australia and the Origin of the Premiers' Plan', 14–15; Minutes of meeting of representatives to the Emergency Committee, 1 April 1931, series 4, item 1, Price Papers, SLSA.

42 Report of subcommittee to the Emergency Committee, 7 April 1931, series 4, item 1, Price Papers, SLSA.

43 Speech by Price to the Emergency Committee, 18 May 1931, series 4, item 1, Price Papers, SLSA.



A striking pictorial poster issued by the All-For-Australia League. The title given to it is "This is our Lyons. See that he gets the lion's share."

Plate 5.1 Australian Citizens' League cartoon in support of Joseph Lyons

Source: *News*, [Adelaide], 17 December 1931, 11.

Nevertheless, Price strongly disapproved of the Citizens' League's continuing 'desire to run stunts' and he chided Bagot on many occasions for making 'overstrong statements' about the Liberal Federation.⁴⁴ Price's loyalty lay with the existing party system and the parliamentary process, even if he was not connected to any party.

⁴⁴ Price, 'The Emergency Committee of South Australia and the Origin of the Premiers' Plan', 19–20.



Plates 5.2, 5.3, 5.4 Australian Citizens' League billboards in support of Joseph Lyons (after the movement adopted the 'All for Australia League' brand)

Source: Turnbull Papers, NLA.

While Price had not completely ironed out the differences between the Liberal Federation and the Citizens' League, he had managed to secure their cooperation in selecting and supporting pro-Lyons candidates for the next federal election. If the United Australia Party was to successfully oust Scullin at the election and avoid splitting the vote, a similar unity would need to be achieved in the other states. The ties of the Australian Citizens' League to the conservative political establishment in Victoria ensured the central committee established in that state was successful. So confident was Lyons of their support that he decided to publicly announce the launch of the United Australia Movement at a conference of conservative parties and non-party movements in Melbourne on 5 May. The conference agreed to form a central committee to ensure the cooperation of the various Victorian groups in fielding candidates at the next federal election without sacrificing their individual identity.⁴⁵ As with the Citizens' League of South Australia, the fear of splitting the vote overcame any scruples regarding preselection:

⁴⁵ *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 6 May 1931, 9; Conference of delegates, 5 May 1931, Ernest Turnbull Papers, MS 1942/2 [hereinafter Turnbull Papers], NLA.

One of the chief aims of the council will be to prevent three-cornered contests between two non-Labour and one Labour candidate at the polls, with consequent division of non-Labour votes and advantage to the Labour candidate. The object will be to ensure the complete cooperation of the various parties in supporting one candidate in each electorate[.]⁴⁶

Unlike the Citizens' League of South Australia, however, the Australian Citizens' League delegates expressed few qualms about surrendering anti-partyism in the name of political expediency. The political ties of its leaders were simply too strong. This was demonstrated by the election of two founding members of the Group of Six and the Australian Citizens' League to the positions of temporary secretary and chairman of the new central committee. The strongest opponent of unity in Victoria was the Country Party; its delegates soon abandoned the unity movement, and the remaining groups agreed the central committee should consist of five representatives each from the Australian Citizens' League, the National Federation, and the Young Nationalist Organisation.⁴⁷ The Australian Citizens' League subsequently spent considerable time and money campaigning for Lyons, particularly in the industrial constituencies of Yarra, Batman, Bourke, and Maribyrnong. It erected 8,000 billboards and posters, issued newspaper advertisements, and gave daily radio talks.⁴⁸ Two league members were even selected as United Australia Party candidates.⁴⁹

Justifying the alliance with political parties

The Citizens' League of South Australia and the Australian Citizens' League portrayed their support of the United Australia Movement as the logical progression of their anti-party spirit to the political arena. Nationalism was a tarnished brand, inescapably bound to the tired system of machine politics. 'United Australia', as its name implied, was a new and invigorated political force that represented unity along national rather than party lines. Having Lyons at the helm made it easier to preserve this veneer of non-partyism. But moderate or not, Lyons was still a politician engaged in

46 *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 6 May 1931, 9.

47 Meeting of the United Australia Movement, 27 May 1931; Speech made by Ernest Turnbull to the State Council, 20 January 1932, 3–4, Turnbull Papers, NLA.

48 Speech made by Ernest Turnbull to the State Council, 20 January 1932, Turnbull Papers, NLA.

49 Hewitt, 'The All for Australia League in Melbourne', 12–13.

the political process, and the citizens' movements needed to account for this if they were to justify supporting him. They did this by arguing that the principles they shared with Lyons transcended party politics:

Just as we are not 'pro' any party, so we are not 'anti' any party, Labour or other. The best proof of our non-party character is that we have given our support to Mr. Lyons, both before and since he left the Labour Party. In supporting Mr. Lyons we are supporting our own principles, and if we declined to support Mr. Lyons we would be false to our principles, irrespective of the party in which he may belong.⁵⁰

This stance, argued the Australian Citizens' League, was 'political' but not 'party' because United Australia 'was not a political party in the [traditional] sense'.⁵¹

Working with political machines via the emergency and central committees—even if theoretically on an even footing—meant inevitably having to agree on a candidate list. Since the citizens' movements were opposed to preselection, this posed a dilemma: how to agree on a single candidate for each electorate without opening themselves to the charge of hypocrisy? The solution required a certain amount of rhetorical gymnastics. The citizens' movements had always maintained that they were willing to support any candidate, whether a card-carrying party member or an independent, provided they met their strict self-sacrificing and apolitical criteria. Since the candidate lists produced by the emergency and central committees included Nationalists, Liberals, Country Party members, and ex-Laborites, the Citizens' League of South Australia and the Australian Citizens' League could nominally claim that they were merely being consistent in agreeing to them.⁵² This was not preselection, the Australian Citizens' League argued, but merely 'endorsement'—a subtle distinction, noted the *Age* with mirth, that 'the managers of other political parties must be sorry they never before thought of'.⁵³

50 *All for Australia League Shows the Way to Prosperity*, 23–24.

51 *ibid.*, 24; First Meeting of the Council under the new Constitution of the All for Australia League, 9 July 1931, Turnbull Papers, NLA.

52 Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 2 June 1931, box 1, item 2; Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, 29 September 1931, box 1, item 3; OPP Minutes, 13 October 1931, box 1, item 3, CLSA Papers, NLA.

53 *Age*, [Melbourne], 20 May 1931, 8.

Rhetorical gymnastics or not, the Citizens' League of South Australia and the Australian Citizens' League had stretched the definition of 'non-party' to the breaking point. Their leaders justified their actions in several ways. Bagot argued that the imperative of defeating Scullin outweighed any small loss of independence the Citizens' League might incur:

[T]he position in Federal politics is so critical that even at a temporary sacrifice of some degree of independence, we [are] acting in the best interests of the country and citizens by co-operating with other political bodies to ensure the return to Parliament ... of representatives who will stand for the broad principles of national integrity and sound finance.⁵⁴

Likewise, the Australian Citizens' League's 'immediate object' was securing the election of 'all who stand on the common ground of opposition to the dishonest policies of repudiation and inflation' to whom 'we can quite safely leave the details of ... policy'.⁵⁵

The citizens' movements also argued that cooperation would allow them to further their goal of curbing the excesses of party politics. Australian Citizens' League President Ernest Turnbull warned members not to 'delude' themselves into thinking that, by participating in the political process, they were 'altering the party system'. The league might be able to counter 'some of its worst faults' by cooperating with United Australia, but its main purpose was longer term:

The true function of this organisation in the future is to be not a political party, with a policy of a hundred and one planks, but a watch dog, an overseer on behalf of the people to supervise the work of the political parties. Only in some such way can we prevent the parties in the future, as in the past, from sacrificing national to party interests.⁵⁶

Likewise, the Citizens' League of South Australia claimed that its participation in the Emergency Committee would 'break down the control of political parties over candidates' by ensuring they would not 'be tied in any way to any particular political party'. To prove this claim, Bagot pointed to the two 'non-party' planks the league had secured in the Emergency Committee's 12-point policy.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Letter from Bagot to Whiteman, 1 June 1931, box 13, item 10, CLSA Papers, NLA.

⁵⁵ *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 7 May 1931, 3.

⁵⁶ *All for Australia League Shows the Way to Prosperity*, 27.

⁵⁷ Report of Executive Committee presented at Third Convention of Delegates, 10 June 1931, box 1, item 1, CLSA Papers, NLA.

The movements also stressed that their cooperation with mainstream conservative parties would only last until Scullin was defeated. The Australian Citizens' League admitted that there was 'no satisfactory substitute' for the party system of government and it was likely to be 'the prevailing system for a long time to come'.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, it stressed that its participation in the central committee was for 'a specific purpose' and, once that purpose had been achieved, it would 'consider whether there is any reason for continuing [it]'. This would avoid committing it 'to policies and to parties with which it has only some things in common'.⁵⁹ Similarly, the Citizens' League of South Australia stated that its role on the Emergency Committee would last 'only until the next Federal election has been completed' and would not affect its 'permanent aims and objects and ideals'.⁶⁰ Apart from establishing a fixed time frame for cooperation, this was also aimed at reassuring members that cooperation would not derail the fundamental purpose of the movements.

Exposing the inherent contradictions

The decision of the Citizens' League of South Australia and the Australian Citizens' League to cooperate with mainstream conservative parties raised valid questions among their memberships. Despite their protestations to the contrary, the movements' leaders had implicitly acknowledged that anti-partyism was less important than the more immediate goal of securing the election of a conservative government. This exposed a contradiction between those members who agreed with this hierarchy of values and those who had joined primarily out of the anti-party fervour that had arisen in Australia during the Depression. Complaints were raised hard and fast. One concerned member of the Citizens' League of South Australia wrote to Bagot that the movement was in danger of being 'swallowed up by the Liberal Federation', while another thought the Emergency Committee was really 'one big party' in disguise.⁶¹ This sense of shock and betrayal was summarised by Miss L. Rudkin in her letter of resignation:

58 *All for Australia League Shows the Way to Prosperity*, 27.

59 Speech made by Ernest Turnbull, 20 January 1932, Turnbull Papers, NLA.

60 Report of Executive Committee presented at Third Convention of Delegates of Branches of the CLSA, 10 June 1931, box 1, item 1, CLSA Papers, NLA.

61 Letter to Bagot, 3 May 1931; Letter from A. Whiteman to Bagot, 20 May 1931, box 13, item 10, CLSA Papers.

It seems a pity that a movement with such a fine organization behind it should not undertake educational propaganda instead of tampering with politics. The public it seems need education in Citizenship more than anything. We need to develop a Public Conscience and to understand what true Citizenship means.⁶²

Her choice of words demonstrates the central legitimating role that anti-partyism played for some members. The citizens' movements were supposed to be a force that transcended politics entirely in their quest for spiritual and moral renewal. 'Tampering' with party politics shattered this illusion, stripping away the veneer of nonpartisanship and revealing the movements as simply conservative political vehicles of a more populist bent. While those who supported cooperation may have been able to justify this ideological compromise, it was clearly an uncomfortable move for others.

Cooperation with mainstream conservative parties seriously impacted on the fortunes of the two citizens' movements. Enrolment of new members dropped rapidly; attempts to form four new branches of the Australian Citizens' League in June 1931 failed.⁶³ The Citizens' League of South Australia noted that metropolitan subscriptions fell dramatically after it decided to align with the Emergency Committee. Bagot would later conclude that this was the point at which 'public support fell away to an alarming degree' and 'the League lost initiative and popular support'.⁶⁴ Existing members from both the leadership and the front line also responded with protest, dissension, and resignation. Australian Citizens' League Provisional Committee member Alexander Dowsley resigned, claiming the movement's choice would merely reinforce 'the present unsound system of party politics'.⁶⁵ The Echuca district council resolved that its members should ignore the endorsed candidate list circulated by the Australian Citizens' League leadership and follow the original policy of voting for any candidate who was prepared to abide by the movement's ideals.⁶⁶ The Preston branch condemned the leadership for kowtowing to the Nationalists and called on them to resign:

62 Letter from Miss L. Rudkin to Bagot, 12 February 1932, box 13, item 10, CLSA Papers, NLA.

63 Hewitt, 'The All for Australia League in Melbourne', 11–12.

64 Report to Chairman, Finance Committee, from Bagot, 15 March 1932, box 1, item 3, CLSA Papers, NLA.

65 *Age*, [Melbourne], 6 May 1931, 5.

66 *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 20 October 1931, 9.

That owing to the All for Australia League becoming swallowed up by a Nationalist organisation, and thus losing its identity and departing from its original ideals of non-party politics and opposition to pre-selection, the All for Australia League has failed in its duty to its members[.]⁶⁷

The use of the word ‘identity’ reinforces the importance of anti-partyism to some members. It suggests that it was a core component of how they perceived the citizens’ movements, and by extension their participation in them. Sacrificing this ideal, even if supposedly on a short-term basis, transformed the movements into something unrecognisable and therefore unworthy of their continued support.

The last hold-out: The All for Australia League

Failed attempts at unity

The All for Australia League was much more torn than the other citizens’ movements over the question of whether to collaborate with the Nationalist Party. Their dissident position before the citizens’ movements conference on 9–10 April certainly contributed to this. The league’s leaders also genuinely believed the situation in New South Wales was different to that in other states. Given that the Nationalist Association of New South Wales was the most organised of the conservative political machines in Australia in 1931, this belief was not entirely without merit. The fact that chief conservative bogeyman Jack Lang was Premier of New South Wales at the time further contributed to this perception. ‘[T]he problem in this State is different to the problems in the other States or in the Federal arena’, explained one of the league’s founders in a letter to Lyons: ‘[It] calls for different handling and [a] different solution.’⁶⁸

The question of ideological purity or political expediency plagued the All for Australia League virtually from the outset. Its leadership was split over this question at the state convention on 28 March 1931, when the resolution to field its own candidates was raised. Two founding figures in particular, O.D.A. Oberg from the Sane Democracy League and

67 *ibid.*, 1 December 1931, 8.

68 Letter from Norman Keyser to Lyons, 23 May 1931, box 1, folder 8, Lyons Papers, NLA.

A.E. Heath from the Constitutional Association, tried to dissuade the league from launching itself as an independent political force. Oberg warned that such a move would split the movement and 'relegate us to the limbo of disunity in which more than one political party finds itself to-day'.⁶⁹ Their appeal was unsuccessful; as noted earlier in this chapter, the convention overwhelmingly voted in favour of the resolution. The citizens' movement conference in Adelaide on 9–10 April, and the formation of the United Australia Movement in Melbourne on 19 April, did little to mollify their position. Gibson continued to publicly advise Nationalist candidates to 'efface themselves' and join the All for Australia League if they hoped to be re-elected.⁷⁰ League pamphlets proclaimed that it stood 'just as staunchly against the reactionary forces who have gained control of Nationalism' as it did against 'Mr. Lang and his Communist friends who preach the class war'.⁷¹ Price, the leader of the Emergency Committee of South Australia, repeatedly described the All for Australia League as 'dangerous' in his private correspondence; he later recalled that 'the A.F.A. in N.S.W. seemed to dislike the Nationalists even more than they did the Lang crowd'.⁷²

The Sane Democracy League convened a series of unity conferences between the All for Australia League and the Nationalist Association in the hope that the gap could be bridged. The first of these conferences was held on 25 April. The Nationalist delegates suggested that both organisations should be asked to endorse the formation of a central committee to support the United Australia Movement at the next federal election, as was being done in the other states. Gibson flatly replied that the All for Australia League had decided it would have no association with the Nationalist Party unless it dissolved itself and its members joined the league. After some cajoling, however, he reluctantly agreed to put a heavily caveated resolution to the league's Executive Committee supporting the formation of a central committee, provided there would be 'no preselection of candidates'. Instead, the committee would be responsible for deciding whether to endorse 'one or more' of the candidates put forward by its constituent organisations. The committee would have sole

69 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 March 1931, 12.

70 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 April 1931, 12; *The Canberra Times*, 21 April 1931, 1.

71 Socialisation of Industry, undated, item 70, Mutch Papers, SLNSW.

72 Minutes of citizens' movement conference, 9–10 April 1931, series 4, item 1, Minutes of meeting of Emergency Committee Executive, 12 April 1931, series 4, item 1, Price Papers, SLSA; Price, 'The Emergency Committee of South Australia and the Origin of the Premiers' Plan', 18.

control over the electoral campaign, and it would be housed in its own premises. Finally, representation on the committee would be based on 'financial membership' of these organisations and would not include any parliamentary representatives.⁷³

While this resolution did not call for the dissolution of the Nationalist Party, it would certainly have denuded it of many of its limbs. However, it proved successful as a lever to get the All for Australia League to commit to further unity conferences—which may have been the intention of the Nationalist delegates. At a further conference on 29 April, the delegates agreed to recommend the following revised resolution to their two organisations:

That this conference decides to recommend to the National Association of New South Wales and the All for Australia League the appointment of an Emergency Committee, consisting of five representatives of the National Association and five representatives of the All for Australia League, to control all matters connected with the United Australia Movement at the next Federal elections in this State. Mr Lyons and Mr Latham are to nominate an independent chairman and secretary of the committee. This committee is to function on behalf of the United Australia Movement, led by Mr Lyons in the Federal Parliament.⁷⁴

Gibson's proposal that membership of the central or 'emergency' committee be proportional based on the respective memberships of the two organisations had been stripped from this watered-down resolution. This was a victory for the Nationalists, given that the league's membership vastly outnumbered theirs. In addition, the Country Party delegates who attended the conference agreed to ask their organisation to associate itself with the United Australia Movement, at which time they would be granted representation on the Emergency Committee.

What followed over the next month was a confusing, and occasionally contradictory, set of resolutions and counter-resolutions by the nascent Emergency Committee and its constituent organisations. While the delegates from the All for Australia League and the Nationalist and Country parties were cautiously willing to try working together, their respective leadership bodies were wary of the wording of the resolution

73 Conference at Sydney, 25 April 1931, item 130, box 89, series 49, folder 2, Latham Papers, NLA.

74 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May 1931, 9.

adopted by their delegates on 29 April. The Nationalists were reluctant to surrender all control of electoral activities to the committee. The Country Party wanted to partner with the United Australia Movement rather than be one of three organisations participating in it. The All for Australia League continued to issue public statements that it only intended to cooperate with the Nationalists in the federal sphere, as there were matters of principle at the state level over which the two organisations did not see eye to eye. The representatives on the Emergency Committee modified their resolutions to try to address some of these concerns, but with limited success. Furthermore, as their deliberations were occurring largely behind closed doors, the newspapers, the members of the three organisations, and the general public drew their own conclusions about what was going on.⁷⁵ Oberg and Heath resigned from the All for Australia League in disgust, and Heath publicly denounced its leadership in the *Sydney Morning Herald* for not agreeing to work with the Nationalists at the state level.⁷⁶ Conversely, the 16 Newcastle and Hunter subdivisions of the All for Australia League jointly objected to the Executive Committee's decision to take part in the Emergency Committee, which they feared would 'submerge AFA [All for Australia League] entirely' and undermine the league's 'principle of complete political independence'.⁷⁷ The league's Executive Committee tried to reassure these disaffected divisions that their arrangement with the Emergency Committee 'is confined entirely to the Federal sphere', where they had accepted Lyons as their leader on the basis that he had 'thrown off the shackles of machine control and set out as a leader of the moderate section of the community'.⁷⁸ Latham wondered privately whether the only solution was for both the league and the Nationalists to surrender their separate identities and merge into a single United Australia Party.⁷⁹

The straw that broke the camel's back in late May 1931 was a minor procedural matter. With the Country Party still unclear on whether it intended to nominate delegates for the Emergency Committee, the All for Australia League wanted to proceed with a 10-person committee comprising five league and five Nationalist members, with the door left open to amend the committee later should the Country Party decide to

75 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May 1931, 9; 13 May 1931, 11; 15 May 1931, 12; 20 May 1931, 11.

76 *ibid.*, 15 May 1931, 12; 20 May 1931, 11.

77 Letter from Norman Keysor to Lyons, 23 May 1931, box 1, folder 8, Lyons Papers, NLA.

78 *ibid.*

79 Letter from Latham to Bavin, 5 May 1931, item 5c, box 89, series 49, folder 2, Latham Papers, NLA.

join. The Nationalists were adamant that the committee should have 15 members, leaving it to the Country Party to determine the conditions on which it would join. As neither side had a mandate from their organisation to agree to the other's proposal, the meeting was adjourned. Two days later, the newly elected State Council of the All for Australia League resolved that it would 'discharge its electoral responsibilities as a separate entity in both Federal and State spheres'. The All for Australia League and the Nationalist Party issued public statements soon thereafter blaming each other for the collapse of the unity negotiations.⁸⁰

Why had things fallen apart over such a minor matter? For one thing, the All for Australia League had been lukewarm about collaborating with other mainstream conservative parties from its inception. As a result, the heavily caveated resolutions that the embryonic Emergency Committee was able to pass were never likely to satisfy the Nationalist or Country party delegates. But perhaps more telling is that the decision to withdraw from the unity negotiations was the first resolution of the All for Australia League's newly elected State Council. Prior to that, the league had been led by an Executive Committee comprising the movement's founders. While most of the State Council members had previously served on the Executive Committee, they now had a fresh mandate to deliver on their members' wishes. The fact that the Newcastle and Hunter divisions—comprising nearly one-quarter of the active subdivisions of the whole movement—had been in open revolt only days before the election likely confirmed in their minds what that mandate was. With Oberg and Heath having resigned from the executive around the same time, there was no longer a strong contrary view to forging a separate path from the Nationalists. The league would field its own candidates, as it had already avowed to do at the state convention two months previously.

Exposing the inherent contradictions

Unlike the Citizens' League of South Australia and the Australian Citizens' League, the All for Australia League in New South Wales had refused to work with the conservative parties. In effect, it had performed the same prioritisation of values as the other two movements, but in the opposite order. It had elevated its anti-party purity above pragmatic concerns about achieving conservative unity to oust Scullin. This had the same

80 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May 1931, 9; 27 May 1931, 12.

effect of exposing the contradictions between the two values and led to heated criticism from many of its members. After the collapse of the unity negotiations in May, letters from disgruntled members began pouring in to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The letter writers argued that the decision not to cooperate with the Nationalist Association had been made in an undemocratic fashion by the leadership and was distracting the league from its true enemies in Scullin and Lang. As one disgruntled member put it:

As an original member of the A.F.A., I have for some time resented the tactics employed by its spokesmen in directing their attacks on National representatives instead of attacking the real evils of Socialism and Communism, the growth of which threatens the country like a malignant cancer.

Had the A.F.A. leaders (so far as they are purely self-appointed leaders) devoted one half of their time and energy to opposing the repudiation policy of Mr. Lang, instead of attacking the National party, this State might not now be in its present parlous plight. Then again, there is an element of gross inconsistency in the professed desire of the A.F.A. to co-operate with the National and Country parties in the Federal campaign, while continuing to hamstring them in the State sphere.⁸¹

A less scathing but no less condemnatory assessment was submitted by the aged and respected diplomat and businessman Sir Henry Braddon, who had recently resigned from the league's executive:

Coming into existence almost solely to bring about unity, the A.F.A. so far, in State matters, appears to me to have achieved its opposite. Their attitude towards prominent Nationalists seems to me both ungenerous and unjust, and their attitude on the tariff creates difficulties with the country interests.⁸²

Wholesale branch resignations followed in North Ryde, Manly, and Blackheath. The chairman of the North Ryde branch explained their action by arguing that the 'only object the people of the State should have in mind to-day was to get rid of the present Government', while the Manly branch resolved to form a new citizens' committee with the local branch of the Nationalists.⁸³ The Nationalist Association was not slow in

81 *ibid.*, 26 May 1931, 6.

82 *ibid.*

83 *ibid.*, 4 July 1931, 13; 21 August 1931, 9; 25 September 1931, 10.

making use of the opportunity this presented; their leader, Thomas Bavin, proclaimed that the league had abandoned its high ideals, with its main object now being to 'destroy the Nationalist party'.⁸⁴



Little Tommy Bavin finds his new Billygoat rather obstreperous.

Plate 5.5 Cartoon lampooning NSW Nationalist Party leader Thomas Bavin's rocky relationship with the All for Australia League

Source: *The Australian Worker*, [Sydney], 27 May 1931, 3.

Decline

By mid-1931, the three Australian citizens' movements had made a decision regarding their relationship with mainstream conservative parties. While the Citizens' League of South Australia and the Australian Citizens' League had agreed to cooperate through front groups to avoid vote-splitting, the All for Australia League had declared its opposition to any such cooperation. Regardless of their respective choices, each movement

⁸⁴ *Barrier Miner*, [Broken Hill, NSW], 6 June 1931, 1.

had made a decision that exposed one of the crucial contradictions between the radical and the reactionary elements of their ideology: the preservation of anti-party purity to destroy the much-hated political machines versus the need to cooperate with the forces of mainstream conservatism to oust the Labor government. With their cohesion shattered by the exposure of this contradiction, the Australian citizens' movements entered a terminal decline well before the United Australia Party's victory in the December 1931 federal election. Their populist-centred ideology had failed to stand up to the realities of mainstream politics. As a result, their membership rapidly dropped away and their sources of finance—which were never particularly strong—began to dry up. The All for Australia League was so starved of funds and members by October that it did a complete about-face and agreed to cooperate with the Nationalist Association after all.⁸⁵

By the beginning of 1932, the Australian citizens' movements were largely a spent force, devoid of the enthusiastic momentum and mass membership that characterised their heyday. Neither the All for Australia League nor the Australian Citizens' League survived for long after the election. In a stinging blow from the political mainstream in January 1932, branches of the Nationalist Association throughout New South Wales unilaterally renamed themselves United Australia Party branches and cordially invited members of the All for Australia League to join them—despite an agreement the previous November that the two organisations would work together to build the new party's structure.⁸⁶ The league's executive voted unanimously to sever its ties with the Nationalists in February, although some branches sought to work with them.⁸⁷ There was a slight increase in league activity during the NSW state elections in mid-1932, but—with the exception of a few enthusiastic branches—the league essentially ceased functioning after the election. The Australian Citizens' League resolved to enter hibernation in January 1932, although its State Council asked that its members continue to keep a 'watchful eye' for when it might be needed again.⁸⁸ The National Federation of Victoria interpreted this as a decision to disband and decided to follow the example of its northern sibling by

85 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 October 1931, 9. Trevor Matthews argued that the members of the league executive were gifted £1,000 to pay off their debts in exchange for cooperating with the Nationalists; see Matthews, 'The All for Australia League', 145.

86 Letter from Sydney Snow to Lyons, 29 January 1932, Alex J. Gibson Papers, privately held.

87 *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 5 February 1932, 10; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 February 1932, 3.

88 Speech made by Ernest Turnbull to the State Council, 20 January 1932; Minutes of the State Council meeting, 20 January 1932, Turnbull Papers, NLA.

renaming itself the United Australia Organisation. The league issued a public statement criticising the federation for failing to consult with them and stressing that it would not accede to becoming a 'party hack'.⁸⁹ It was a parting blow from a movement that never again awoke from its slumber.

Only the Citizens' League of South Australia, the first of the citizens' movements, survived the United Australia Party's victory in any meaningful form. Several branches amalgamated in early 1932 due to a drop-off in branch activity, which helped to temporarily stave off the movement's decline. It ostensibly increased its total membership despite the increase in resignations, reaching a peak of 23,133 in August—or 7.11 per cent of the total state electorate—although it is likely many of these members were nominal by this point. With Scullin defeated, the league focused its attention on reducing government expenditure, abolishing the tariff, increasing empire trade, combating communism, and reducing unemployment. League President W.M. Queale was appointed as a member of the Unemployment Relief Council.⁹⁰ The league considered forming a new political party in 1933 to combat its declining membership and revenue, but ultimately decided against it.⁹¹ Under Bagot's tireless guidance, it managed to limp on until December 1934 in a severely restricted capacity before resolving to enter into voluntary liquidation.⁹² In what probably amounted to the closest admission of their own partisan stance ever made by a citizens' movement, the Citizens' League noted in its death throes that the majority of its members in its heyday had been 'Liberals who had [since] returned to the party ranks'.⁹³

The crisis had passed, and the swathes of disenchanted conservatives who had flocked to the citizens' movements returned to the fold. The mainstream conservative parties bent instead of breaking. Lyons had coopted the populist style of the citizens' movements just enough to wrap them into a new centre-right political framework with the Nationalists. The risk of vote-splitting was overcome, just as European fascist movements were 'smash[ing] the electoral base of the mainstream liberal

89 *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 24 February 1932, 8.

90 Report of Executive Committee presented to the Second Annual Convention of Branch Delegates, 12 September 1932, box 1, item 9, CLSA Papers, NLA.

91 Minutes of Special Convention of Delegates of Branches, 3 October 1933, box 1, item 9, CLSA Papers, NLA.

92 Minutes of Special Meeting of Executive Committee and General Council, 17 December 1934, box 1, item 4, CLSA Papers, NLA.

93 Minutes of Special Meeting of enrolled members of the Citizens' League, 4 October 1934, box 1, item 2, CLSA Papers, NLA.

and conservative parties'. The conservative establishment stayed solid and the elites in finance and industry were never forced to turn to a more extreme alternative to defend their interests, unlike their contemporaries in Germany. Rather than breaking the control of the political machines, the citizens' movements ultimately helped to reinforce them.



Arise Sir U.A.P.!

Although the All For Australia League, which provided much of the driving force of the United Australia Organisation at the last Federal election, has not been consulted, the President of the Nationalist Federation (Mr R. G. Menzies) has announced that the National Federation will in future be known as the United Australia Organisation.

Plate 5.6 Robert Menzies, president of the National Federation of Victoria, is anointed leader of the United Australia Organisation after failing to consult with the Australian Citizens' League about the change

Source: *The Herald*, [Melbourne], 24 February 1932, 3.

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