

Chapter Two: Federation: Commemoration or Celebration?

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It would be fair to say that most Australians have remembered the Centenary of Federation in a perfunctory way. Ordinary people have been involved on the fringe, politely watching the odd parade. Meanwhile the cultural trendsetters in the broadsheets and the ABC have been notably quiet. It could have been worse. The last time there was any formal attempt to celebrate Australian achievement, during the Bicentenary, the response amongst Australia's intelligentsia was distinctly hostile.

We have not seen anything during the Centenary like the five volume *A People's History of Australia since 1788* published by Penguin. This denunciation of white settlement would have left readers in no doubt that they should be hanging their heads in shame at what their forebears did to Aborigines, women, the poor and so on. It is good to be able to record that the one major book relevant to Federation produced on the occasion of the Centenary is a fine work of scholarship and judicious warmth about the experience, by John Hirst, entitled *The Sentimental Nation*. Nevertheless it is my view that the accumulation of negative accounts about our past, and about Federation in particular, has set the tone for public lack of interest in the Centenary.

It is no wonder that even the proudest Australians seem to be rather muted in their feelings towards Federation, given what they have been told about it. Commentators critical of earlier proud stories of Australia's progress have dominated accounts of our history in the last couple of decades. The historians, journalists and public intellectuals in question are a guilt ridden generation, ashamed of their past.

One of the dominant themes in recent commentary on Federation is that the "Founding Fathers" were "forelock tugging courtiers to the British". According to this perspective, there was never any serious attempt to carve out an "Australian" identity distinct from Britain and its Empire. When leading figures amongst the Founding Fathers (notably Deakin) took over the reins of government in the early years of the Commonwealth, they are alleged to have swung Australia behind the Empire. It is said that this policy ultimately led to the sacrifice of tens of thousands of Australian men and women in an Imperial war.

Another theme is that once Federation was achieved, Australia's leaders pursued racist objectives, exemplified in the White Australia policy. As the Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee put it in 1994 (a Committee headed by former Victorian Premier, Joan Kirner and which included Philip Adams):

"In 1901 the notion of unity was possible because of the dominance of monocultural values. Australians now want a concept of unity, which takes into account an unprecedented complexity, based on ethnicity, on beliefs, on cultural choices... Federation was a time when the indigenous people were to be formally excluded. Moreover, Federation was to usher in the era of 'White Australia' ".¹

The first of these revisionist themes received much attention during the campaign to make Australia a Republic prior to the 1999 Referendum. The Republican leaders tried to convince voters that by voting for a Republic they would at last achieve a final and crucial symbolic break with Britain. It was asserted that by removing the Monarchy from our Constitution this would achieve what the Founding Fathers never sought, that is, true national independence. By contrast, the United States embraced a genuinely independent future when it fought a War of Independence against the Empire. As Castles and colleagues write:

“Australia grew as part of the British Empire. Unlike the USA, India or Britain’s other far flung possessions, Australia never managed a decent independence movement let alone a liberation struggle... The creation of a nation in a struggle for independence is usually the pre-eminent moment for the definition of national character, language, culture and myths. Australia has missed out on this”.²

Most of the Republican leaders, including Malcolm Turnbull, Tom Keneally and Donald Horne fully shared this view of our history. They appealed to the patriotism of Australian voters by claiming that the attainment of a Republic would offer Australia the fresh start it lacked at the time of Federation.

In the light of these comments it is hardly surprising that there is little reverence or even respect for the leading Founding Fathers these days. This includes Alfred Deakin, whose influence was central, both in the attainment of Federation and in putting into legislative form the vision accompanying Australian nationhood. Even in Melbourne, his home town, there is little to commemorate his memory (except a belated use of his name for the odd college or university). Remarkably, Deakin’s grave in the St Kilda cemetery is virtually anonymous. There is not even an indication outside the cemetery that he is buried there, let alone any directions about how to find the modest site. Deakin has fared poorly in recent histories, most notably in Manning Clark’s six volume *opus*. Clark regards Deakin as a stuffy establishment figure, against whom he juxtaposes Henry Lawson. The latter is said to be representative of all that was potentially progressive in Australia, and the former, the antithesis. This characterisation is misleading at best. Deakin played a crucial role in the legislative achievements of the first decade of the 20th Century, which was arguably the greatest era of social reform in Australia’s history.

There is another factor which mutes any prospect of a celebration of the Centenary of Federation. For much of Australia’s intelligentsia, any celebration of the event would be regarded as involvement in a nationalist rite. This goes against the grain of current intellectual fashions. Nationalism involves notions of peoplehood, that is of a community which thinks of itself as distinctive, and which shares certain common beliefs and heritage. It implies notions of over-riding loyalty to that community and an implication of willingness to sacrifice individual gain to its interests. Such ideals run directly counter to the predominant individualistic ethos within the intelligentsia, its support for minority rights and its hostility to any notion of an over-riding community responsibility.

The origin of Federation

There is no space here comprehensively to rebut the characterisation of Federation described above.³ Rather, a couple of aspects central to this viewpoint will be explored. The first concerns the achievement of Federation and the alleged lack of any nationalist impetus in this achievement.

Consider the situation in the six Colonies of Australia at the end of the 19th Century. In each, authority was channelled upwards through an Imperial Governor to the British Government in London. By the late 1880s the Colonies had developed a form of local patriotism. They were jealous of their rights, even at times against Imperial wishes. The notion that they would willingly trade away fundamental rights, such as taxation, to an unknown Commonwealth Parliament seems absurd. Even today, after a hundred years of Federation and an accompanying spread of Australian patriotism at the expense of parochial State loyalties, it is almost impossible to get State governments willingly to forgo any of their powers to the Commonwealth. Yet at the time of Federation, the Colonies were persuaded to do just that. It is difficult to see how this could have occurred without a committed popular nationalist movement.

In fact there was such a movement. It was strongest in Victoria, where it was led by young “natives”. The organisational focus was the Australian Natives Association (ANA). The strength of this movement in Victoria derived from that Colony’s peculiar demography. The generation of men and women born of the 1850s gold-seeking migrants had come to maturity by the 1880s. They were ambitious to take over the reins from the immigrant generation, which dominated the senior ranks of politics, the law, education, religion and business. However, this aspiration was jeopardised by the lowly status associated with being native born. The “natives” were declared by visitors, immigrants and even some of their parents’ generation to be inferior to those trained in the Imperial heartland. The indignation about this put down of their colonial origins, along with their solidarity as a native-born generation, helped lay the foundations for a nationalist movement.

The ANA leaders sought to turn their designation as native Australians from a disadvantage to an advantage. This they did by declaring that they, as Australian-born citizens, were representative of the “new world”, free of the restrictive class, caste and religious divisions of the “old world”. They defined themselves as the mirror reflection of the Empire. Their action constituted a symbolic break from Britain. This does not mean that they rejected their British heritage. Rather, they presented themselves as “Australian Britons”, free from the alleged deficiencies of the old world.

Their up and coming leaders, of whom Deakin was amongst the foremost, associated themselves with progressive reform efforts within the Colony. The ANA embodied these ideals in its organisational structure. Though membership was limited to native-born males, the organisation insisted that there was to be no reference to religion or any other sectarian divisions within its ranks – unlike most of the other Friendly Societies established in the Colony at the time. One of the largest, for example, the Catholic Hibernian society, excluded non-Catholics from its ranks.

The achievement of Federation became a focus of the ANA’s objectives. Federation came to symbolise their claims for dignity as native Australians. It was regarded as a key to the removal of the colonial tag. ANA members (and other native-born Australians) were able to link their personal aspirations to that of the national cause. It was this identity between self and nation which was at the core of the natives’ zeal to work for Federation.

While the ANA made most of the running to put Federation on the political agenda in the 1890s, there was a parallel cultural movement centred around the *Sydney Bulletin*. This helped define the spirit of Australian nationalism. The writers and artists involved wanted to see the emergence of a distinct “Australian” culture, which they, of course, would play a key role in articulating. Like the ANA patriots, they wanted to remove the blanket of English culture which, at least in the eyes of the governing immigrant classes, was vastly more prestigious than the “Colonial” product. *The Bulletin*, under the leadership of its editor Archibald and literary page supremo, AG Stephens, deliberately cultivated an Australian ethos. They imagined its heart to be located in a “bush” setting. By so doing they added an unmistakably Australian sense of place, sharply differentiated from the green, orderly and misty British landscape. The values which allegedly prevailed in this setting were emphatically egalitarian – including disdain for authority. This too represented a deliberate inversion of British ways, and was consciously designed to differentiate Australians from their Imperial cousins.

A White Australia

In the eyes of Australia's contemporary intelligentsia, there is no more damning cause for denunciation of the Federal heritage than the actions of the first Commonwealth Parliament when it legislated for a White Australia. In retrospect it is a tragedy that Federation is so closely associated with this legislation. The underlying assumption was racist. The Federation Fathers believed that a hierarchy of races existed, in which both physical and social characteristics were bred into the separate racial groups. Thus one frequently finds references at the time that the Chinese race was inherently "servile" because multiple generations of its people had been forced to live this way by China's rulers.

This is, of course, totally false. None the less, belief in the idea was of great significance to Australian nation-builders. Alfred Deakin (in his role as the Commonwealth's first Attorney-General) introduced the "White Australia" legislation. He was a fervent nationalist committed to the objective of creating a nation built around an Australian "people", sharing common characteristics. As the following statement indicates, this precluded people who were "different":

"A united race means not only that its members can intermix, intermarry and associate without degradation on either side, but implies one inspired by the same ideas, and an aspiration towards the same ideals, of a people possessing the same general cast of character, [and] tone of thought".⁴

But as noted, Deakin and most of his fellow patriots wanted to create a nation distinctive in its "new world" egalitarian ethos. They looked to the United States, the "Great Republic of the West" and saw the huge social divide between black and white, in which blacks were treated as an inferior race. Since there were to be no "second class citizens" in Australia, they determined that the Commonwealth should legislate so as to debar any immigration which might create such a divide here.

The link to Australia's social democratic ideals was quite explicit. As Deakin put it in 1903, White Australia:

"... means equal laws and opportunities for all, it means protection against the underpaid labour of other lands; it means social justice as far as we can establish it, including just trading and the payment of fair wages...A White Australia is not a surface, but it is a reasoned policy which goes to the roots of national life, and by which the whole of our social, industrial, and political organisation is governed".⁵

At the time, "White Australia" was understood as a sacrifice. Unlike the United States or Britain throughout its many colonies, Australia would not depend on cheap coloured labour to get the rough work done. Australians would "roll up their sleeves" and do the work themselves, though on wages and conditions sufficient for a white worker to maintain his/her dignity. This was to be costly, as in the sugar industry. Once the Melanesian workers indentured to do the work had been repatriated, sugar planters had to be paid bounty sufficient to cover the costs of Australian workers. But it was a price they were prepared to pay.

Sadly, all that is remembered of this legislation today is its racist intent. The social democratic ideals behind it have been largely forgotten. Yet, as noted, the "White Australia" legislation was organically connected to the highly progressive labour legislation passed during Deakin's period as Prime Minister. Australia was unique amongst western nations at the time (other than New Zealand) in the extent to which the various Arbitration Courts and Wages Boards established at the Commonwealth and State levels intervened in the market place to ensure that workers received "fair and reasonable" wages and conditions.

The highly interventionist labour legislation of the time was subsequently to breed a restrictive and defensive mentality towards industrial innovation within the workforce. Nevertheless, in its context, it was a fine outcome of Federation nationalism. It expressed the ideal that the national community, via the state, should take responsibility for ensuring that there really were no second class citizens in Australia. This and other achievements of the era have been lost sight of or rejected outright by contemporary commentators. Ordinary people still hold to a vague pride in their past. But it is a struggle. This gulf between people and cultural leaders was to contribute to the rejection of the Republican campaign, as I now hope to demonstrate.

The Republican issue

Some 55 per cent of the Australians who voted at the November, 1999 Republican Referendum opposed the proposition that an Australian should be Head of State. This is a major puzzle, since opinion polls before and after the Referendum showed that most Australians favoured an Australian becoming Head of State. The plum was ripe for the picking. Yet the Republican movement failed to capitalise on these favourable circumstances. The Republican leaders, themselves, have put the blame on their opponents. They are accused of campaigning on the absence of a direct election option to mobilise opposition. This, the Republicans see as unprincipled, since the Monarchists did not want any form of Republic.

There is some basis for this interpretation, since according to a careful post-Referenda opinion poll, just over half of the electorate who favoured direct election (as opposed to parliamentary appointment or the maintenance of the existing Monarchical arrangement) voted "No". These "direct electionists" were well down the track to accepting the Republican proposition, yet when it came to the vote, a little over half them voted "No".⁶ If a few more had voted "Yes" we would now be a Republic.

Nevertheless the "direct election" explanation for the Referendum's failure is a shallow one. One must ask why, despite all the obvious constitutional issues raised by an attempt to graft an elected President on our Westminster system, over half the electorate nevertheless favoured this option. Also, when faced with the possibility that by voting "No" they would sink any form of Republic, they were prepared to do so. An alternative explanation is that they voted in this way because they did not like the ethos associated with the Republican movement.

That movement was closely associated with former Prime Minister Keating. He put the issue on the agenda at the same time as his Government was projecting Australia down a globalising pathway, which Keating himself linked to an aggressive ideological campaign to recast Australia as an Asian oriented, multicultural community. The major leaders of the movement, including Malcolm Turnbull, Tom Keneally and Neville Wran were Sydney based and well known for their connections with this agenda. Equally, there is no doubt about popular disaffection for this vision of Australia. It was shown at the ballot box in the course of the 1996 federal election.

If this argument were correct, one would expect many voters to favour the direct election model, since under this constitutional arrangement they, rather than the political élites they distrusted, would determine who became Head of State. It is also plausible that what lay behind this distrust was differences about the desired direction for Australia.

The circumstantial evidence for this view is strong. The post-Referendum poll referred to above asked electors about their views towards Australia. This was done by asking them to respond to a series of propositions like, “I would rather be a citizen of Australia than any other country in the world”. Subsequent analysis showed that the more patriotic the voter (defined as those who strongly agreed with such propositions), the more likely he or she was to vote “No”.⁷ Conversely, voters who were the least patriotic on this dimension were the most likely to vote “Yes”. This is remarkable, because the Republican campaign was built around the simple idea that patriotic Australians should endorse an Australian Head of State. This clearly did not happen. The reason is not because “patriots” were heavily located in the Monarchist camp. They were just as likely to favour an Australian Head of State as other voters.

As noted earlier, one of the themes in Republican advocacy during 1999 was that a “Yes” vote would help symbolically to complete the emancipation of Australia from British influence. The appeal behind this message to ordinary voters, or so the Republican leaders imagined, was that once complete, this symbolic break would help launch Australia into a more progressive future. The problem from the point of view of winning a majority for this cause was that the notion of a “fresh start”, at least as associated with the Keating vision, resonated much more with those critical of Australia’s past than it did with those who identified with it.

Analysis of the socio-economic characteristics of “Yes” and “No” voters showed that it was bifurcated along metro / regional and tertiary élite/other lines. Some 55 per cent of major city voters supported the Referendum as against 39 per cent of other voters. Seventy per cent of those with tertiary education said they voted “Yes”, versus only 41 per cent of those with no post-school qualifications. Migrants (other than the UK-born) voted overwhelmingly “Yes”, while a majority of the Australian-born (52.4 per cent) voted “No”.⁸

It is doubtful that many “No” voters would have been aware of how systematically some Republican leaders were intent on exploiting the Republican cause to help advance the Keating agenda. Nevertheless, a new blueprint is in the making. Leading Republicans have been articulating a view of Australian nationalism which exorcises the humiliations of the past by declaring that the new “Australian identity” they favour will have *no* distinctive or cherished heritage. The new Republic, in this thinking, will be post-modern, free of any over-arching communal loyalty or identity. Rather, the nation will become a procedural shell built around core values of respect for diversity, democracy and the rule of law. Within this shell, citizens will be able to pursue their diverse objectives free of the constraints of conformity to any nation-wide notion of peoplehood.

It is remarkable how far this conception has advanced in intelligentsia circles. It even gained the imprimatur of a Coalition-appointed inquiry into Citizenship which reported in February, 2000.⁹ This inquiry, on which Donald Horne was an influential member, addressed the issue of Australia’s identity. Any form of nationalism as defined above was rejected. Instead, the notion of a new compact of “non-Nationalistic” values was advanced as follows:

“The Council considered it might be better to proclaim core civic values for all Australians to respect as the basis of our citizenship. In other words, it might be better to proclaim not a ‘national identity’, but a national civic ‘compact’. Such a compact could be in practice a statement that represents a form of ‘understanding’ or ‘agreement’ amongst Australians setting out [a] commitment to our shared values which have evolved over many years”.¹⁰

This was to include the procedural values described above, such as “a commitment to principles of tolerance and fairness”, and “a commitment to acceptance of cultural diversity”, as well as “the unique status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples”.

In the event, the Coalition did accept some of the Committee’s recommendations. The most notable was that for the repeal of s.17 of the *Australian Citizenship Act* 1948, which provided for the loss of Australian citizenship on acquisition of another citizenship. But the recommendation for government support and publicity for the proposed “Australian compact” was rejected.¹¹

Endnotes:

1. *2001: A report from Australia*, Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee, AGPS, 1994, p.3.
2. Stephen Castles *et al.*, *Mistaken Identity*, in *Multiculturalism and the Demise of Nationalism in Australia*, second edition, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1990, p.7.
3. This is attempted in Bob Birrell, *Federation; the Secret Story*, Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney, 2001.
4. *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 September, 1901, cited in Birrell, *ibid.*, p.287.
5. Quoted in Birrell, *ibid.*, p.200.
6. *Ibid.*, p.329.
7. *Ibid.*, p.328.
8. *Ibid.*, p.332.
9. *Australian Citizenship for a New Century*, A Report by the Australian Citizenship Council, Commonwealth of Australia, 2000.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.
11. *Australian Citizenship... A Common Bond*, Government Response to the Report of the Australian Citizenship Council, May, 2001, pp.8-9.