

## Introductory Remarks

John Stone

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to this our thirteenth Conference. So far from that number having had any ill effects upon it – to date at any rate – I am delighted to tell you that, in terms of both attendance throughout and at the two Dinners in particular, this will have been our most successful Conference ever. It is to you, of course, that the credit goes for that, and on behalf of the Board of Management I thank you for your attendance. It will, I believe, be richly rewarded – as those of you who were present last night to hear our President’s address, *The Constitution : 100 Years On*, already have been.

Our last Conference, as you will recall – and as you will recently have been reminded by the receipt of its Proceedings, Volume 12 in our series *Upholding the Australian Constitution* – dealt significantly with the whole issue of national sovereignty. In my introductory remarks on that occasion, I said that the issue was one “which, I firmly believe, is taking on a more and more important significance in the minds of Australians”. It is remarkable, then, that we meet here this morning after a week in which that issue of national sovereignty has been more forcefully drawn to the attention of Australians generally than at any time, I think, since World War II. So what has been their reaction?

If one were to judge by the editorial attitudes of our so-called “quality” press, one would have to say that Australians have failed the test. True, even that section of the media continues to pay lip service to Australia’s sovereign right to maintain the sanctity of its borders; but that principle is then immediately overborne by appeals to the so-called “human rights” of the illegal immigrants involved. Meanwhile “our ABC” – and even more shrilly, “our SBS” – have gone into over-drive in their accustomed roles as Australia’s own Fifth Column.

All that is, of course, depressing. It is particularly so in this year 2001, as we celebrate the Centenary of our Federation, and of the great work – the Australian Constitution – which underlies that Federation. Yet, underneath that media and chattering class froth – or should that word be “scum”? – the real heart of Australia continues to beat. In the letter columns of our popular press, in every opinion poll so far taken (no matter how prejudicially the polling question may have been constructed), in talk-back radio particularly, we have seen a massive rallying of public opinion in support of the actions so far taken by the Government. Meanwhile the federal Opposition, after having initially provided full and praiseworthy support to the Government in those actions, has since been told by the New Class crowd who run it to “roll back” into line and put so-called “human rights” first.

All this has been happening, I remind you, as we foregather here in Melbourne this weekend for a Conference directed principally towards the Centenary of Federation. Two papers this morning, and three this afternoon, will directly address aspects of that topic. Two other papers this morning, by Keith Windschuttle and Dr John Forbes, will focus on a question – so-called Aboriginal land rights – which was never dreamed of in 1901. Today, of course, because of the judicial posturing of six Justices of the High Court in the *Mabo Case* in 1992, that matter presents not merely a leaden weight upon the operation of our economy but, potentially, even a threat to that national sovereignty to which I referred earlier.

This afternoon we shall return to the Centenary theme proper, with three papers seeking to assess the manner in which, in practice, the Federation has developed over the past century. The last of these papers, by that genuinely distinguished public servant, the Clerk of the Senate, Mr Harry Evans, which surveys *The Senate Today*, is of particular interest – not merely for its sturdy defence of one of Australia’s most important constitutional institutions, but also because the impending federal election will produce an extremely interesting contest in respect of that Chamber of the Parliament.

Tonight, and again tomorrow morning, we shall return – not so much because we wish to, but rather, shall we say, at the behest of Mr Beazley – to the republic issue, and the associated issues of the Sovereign and our Head of State. All of that before concluding with what I promise will be a most forceful paper by Professor Catley on *The New Zealand Connection* (or as he might say, disconnection). To adapt that famous line of T.S. Eliot’s, Professor Catley’s paper will ensure that our Conference will end, not with a whimper but a bang.

So that, in brief, is the menu, and now it is time to fall to. Let me therefore hand over to the Chairman for our first session, Mr Bob Day, into whose capable hands I now commit you.