

Chapter 9

Australian Colossus Sir Henry Parkes, 1815-1896

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Henry Parkes never stood in the city of Canberra. It is a city that incorporates many commemorations of him – Parkes is now a suburb, there is “Parkes Way” and “Parkes Place”, he is immortalised in both the provisional and the New and Permanent Parliament House. Parkes in New South Wales became a town in 1873 for completely different reasons, long before Canberra’s efforts. He is even represented in Tom Roberts’ “Big Picture” though Parkes had been dead for five years by the time of the opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth in Melbourne in May 1901 and even longer by the completion of the portrait.

History shows that Australia’s political game of Federation is more akin to a rugby league “State of Origin” clash, or one of the numerous intra-state “derbies” in Australian Rules football – Carlton versus Collingwood, Adelaide versus Port, West Coast v Fremantle, and now Sydney versus Greater Western Sydney. And, in keeping with the AFL/Federation tradition, Tasmania does not even rate a mention.

If you have ever tried to explain Australian Rules football to a foreign visitor, you have already lived the strategies, complexities, uncertainties, inconsistencies, passions – sheer hatred sometimes – loyalties and personalities inherent in our Federation culture; in choosing Griffith over Deakin, Forrest or Inglis Clark.

And when decisions of others do not accord with ours, they, like those of an umpire, are just plain wrong. Any Federation discussion is founded on a precarious “field of play.”

Any Federation discussion also needs to recognise the many people who dedicated their careers to ensure we have a better understanding of this pivotal period of Australia’s political history; we must continue to use their work to tell the Federation story, to challenge it and to develop it further.

In the year 2015 that recognises the bicentenary of the birth of Sir Henry Parkes, this address seeks to commemorate him and to provide a better understanding of Parkes the man, his motives and his legacy in the context of Australia’s greatest peacetime achievement – Federation.

Parkes – Father of Federation

“Henry Parkes – Australia’s Father of Federation”: it is a cliché; a trite, stereotyped expression that has lost all meaning or impact.

To his contemporaries who bestowed this “title” upon Parkes, to be called the “Father” of the Federation movement was an indescribable honour from people who had fought for (and against) the cause of Federation beside him and in his footsteps after him. They knew first-hand the complexities, failings, mistakes and personal circumstances of his life. They also knew his ambition and drive even if they did not know what drove him. They made this choice.

Today we would call him a “high maintenance individual”; he was “manic depressive”, which would account for the enormous “highs” and “lows” of his behaviour. There was nothing simple or small about Parkes. He was a larger than life character, the likes of whom we do not see in Australian politics today (arguably there was no “like” character in the NSW Parliament of the second half of the nineteenth century either).

He deserves far more than to be relegated to mere cliché and, if we are prepared to “listen”, we stand to benefit greatly from the experiences and example of his life.

Parkes – the record

If being a cliché has a value, it is that Australians are occasionally aware of the “Parkes” name and even his moniker, “The Father of Federation.” Few know of his work to introduce secular education in New South Wales, the major advances in rolling out the railway network and the many, many other policy achievements in the name of the people of New South Wales. Even fewer know that, even 126 years after he last held the stage, he remains the longest-serving premier of New South Wales.

In March 1853, Parkes stood for his first election – he lost. It would be his first and last unsuccessful campaign for a seat in Parliament until 1895. He did lose elections for particular seats from time to time during this period. Elections in New South Wales at this time were held over a number of days which enabled a candidate who lost a seat in one electorate to nominate for and possibly win in another electorate. Parkes represented the electorate of Tenterfield for some years (1882-84) following defeat in East Sydney.

He was first elected to represent the seat of East Sydney in 1854. In all, he successfully stood for election on 27 occasions (although there were reasons other than electoral defeat that forced him to leave Parliament). He was a fixture of the NSW Parliament for more than 41 years. He represented nine electorates, a reality of the electoral system of the day. During his time in the Legislative Assembly he served on 227 parliamentary committees. During those 41 years, he was premier for 11 years, 9 months and 13 days.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, he could ill-afford the loss of income which membership of Parliament entailed. In 1858, Parkes declared bankruptcy with estimated debts in today’s money of around \$20 million. It would be the first of three bankruptcies in his life.

He did not derive an income from parliamentary work until 1866 when he became Colonial Secretary in the government of Sir James Martin.

What drives such a man? Deakin writes of his “life of struggle” but even his elegance in writing does not capture the immense scale of such a life as Parkes’s (see Appendix 1).

Parkes’s early years

Henry was born on 27 May 1815 in the Moat Cottage, Canley, on the estate of Stoneleigh in Warwickshire, England. He was the seventh and youngest child of Martha and Thomas Parkes. Thomas, a tenant farmer, was at least the third generation of Parkes on the Stoneleigh estate.

Stoneleigh was and remains an idyllic little English village just outside Coventry. Each day Parkes and his siblings walked some four miles to and from the Stoneleigh Parish School. Life was considered “comfortable” in the context of the times.

When Parkes was born Thomas was about to make what would prove to be a fateful decision. He decided to move to a larger house and increase the amount of rented land that he farmed, quadrupling his rent. This decision was made on the back of what we now know were inflated prices caused by interrupted trade with Europe during the war between the United Kingdom and Napoleonic France.

What Thomas did not know was that the war was about to end and, with it, the inflated prices he needed to pay the rent. By 1822, the Parkes family was forced from Stoneleigh. Parkes subsequently wrote: "From the time my father left Stoneleigh, I might date the commence[ment] of suffering and hardship which soon resulted in bleak and lasting destitution."

Parkes was seven years old; the Parkes family separated, forced to seek work to survive. Parkes stayed with his father, travelling to work wherever they could find it. During the next few years, Thomas Parkes had various jobs, making ropes in a factory, breaking rocks to build roads, making and carrying bricks, and farm labouring during harvest season.

The family eventually found their respective ways to Birmingham. Thomas, owing to actions of a conniving relative, was jailed for his debts. Martha and her children managed to eke out sufficient income to maintain a home in Moseley Street.

Martha secured an apprenticeship for Parkes with an ivory turner. He also attended lectures at the Birmingham Mechanics' Institute, his first formal education since Stoneleigh. Any additional knowledge he gained afterwards was from his independent reading. Indeed, it fuelled his lifelong love of books and learning. This made their loss through bankruptcies in later life all the more painful.

Birmingham at this time was the heart of the political reform movement that brought about the Great Reform Act of 1832, the starting point of extending suffrage in England. It exposed young Parkes to much broader possibilities; it showed him that individuals like Thomas Attwood could make a difference in the lives of others and inspired in him an energy and a vision that fuelled his drive for social reform and good government for his entire life.

In Birmingham, Parkes also met the woman who became his wife of nearly 52 years. He married Clarinda Varney at the Old Church in Edgbaston on 11 July 1836.

Within two years they left Birmingham for London in search of better opportunities. Without success, they decided to leave everything they knew and everyone they loved for the promise offered by life in the colony of New South Wales. They arrived in Sydney on 25 July 1839.

1839 – it would be 15 years before he was elected to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly and 27 years before he was paid for his parliamentary work.

Lacking any formal education, through poverty, the imprisonment of his father and forced separation of his family, the deaths of his first two children with Clarinda and recurring financial hardship, this is the man who ultimately became a great Australian politician and statesman.

Federation

Is Parkes really the "Father of Federation"? Yes or No? For many, there is no place for nuance in providing an answer. Popular folklore has it that Parkes visited Queensland to discuss the Federation question. He dropped into Tenterfield to thank the people for their support in making him their local member. He also had in his possession a report on the defences of the Australian

colonies undertaken by Major-General Bevan Edwards.

On 24 October 1889, at a banquet held in his honour, he gave a speech. That speech is now known as the Tenterfield oration. In it he called “for the creation on this Australian continent of an Australian Government.” It led quickly to the Federation Conference in Melbourne in February 1890 at which the delegates agreed to convene in Sydney in March 1891 at a Convention to draft a constitution for a federated Australia. They were successful.

The diary of events presented above is fanciful; while accurate as the facts stand, it is a simplistic representation and provides no insight into the motivations and events that actually occurred, the large cast and changes in public positions on the Federation issue, the animosities, jealousies, manipulations and “party” manoeuvres.

Returning to 1891; it is 9 April, the Convention has successfully drafted a Constitution and it has been agreed that it will be presented to the legislatures of the colonies for consideration. Everyone is waiting on Parkes, the premier of the senior colony, to take the lead. According to John Bannon:

The Commonwealth Bill establishing federation, which had been adopted by the 1891 Convention, was now before all of the colonial parliaments. Anxious to avoid a recurrence of the problems caused by New South Wales’s failure to join the Federal Council (which continued to meet throughout this period), it was agreed that others would move only after the senior colony had considered it. Parkes was expected to pursue the matter vigorously, but seemed unable or unwilling to do so.¹

Parkes was, however, faced with significant political upheaval on two fronts in Sydney which demanded his immediate attention; one took the form of “the arch-plotter against Federation, Mr. George Houston Reid”; the other, a fundamental and permanent shift in the structure of NSW politics – the formation of the Labour Party.

The Legislative Assembly of New South Wales was dissolved for an election in June 1891. The new Labour Party elected to the Legislative Assembly at this time was born principally of the Great Maritime Strike of 1890, its members having decided that social and industrial change would be best pursued through a combination of industrial action and direct parliamentary representation. In their first election, they won 35 seats, approximately 23 percent of the Assembly; Parkes’s forces, the Free Traders, won 36 percent and the Protectionists, 33 percent. In a legislature largely unfamiliar with formally structured parties, the new Labor Party now held the balance of power (NSW Elections results, 1891 election).

Formalisation of party structures started as early as the 1885 election. The general acceptance mid-century of free trade by all parliamentary representatives was breaking down, leading to formation of parties: “As they developed, the new parties substituted loyalty to principle for loyalty to a personal leader and produced party organisations designed to tie both party members and leaders to pre-arranged platforms”.²

22 October 1891 was the last day Parkes would be premier. Unbeknownst to him, it would be his last opportunity to advance the Federation cause in an official capacity. He was 76 years of age. George Dibbs, a man who supported a protectionist trade policy, would take over in his third term as premier until 2 August 1894 when he was followed by Mr George Houston Reid at the head of a Free Trade ministry.

For the record on Federation

Parkes considered the words of William Charles Wentworth in 28 July 1853 as the starting point of the Federation discussion, followed by Edward Deas-Thomson on 20 October 1856 and a committee of the Legislative Assembly of Victoria presided over by Gavan Duffy in 1857.³

He further stated in a letter of 30 October 1889 to the Premier of Victoria, Duncan Gillies:

For more than twenty years I have had the question of Australian federation almost constantly before me; and I cannot be accused of indifference to it at any time, merely because I had become convinced from earlier examination, while others were adopting the scheme of the present Federal Council at a later period, that no such body would ever answer the great objects of Federation Government.⁴

Stephen Dando-Collins cites Parkes's "earliest proposition for Federation" as 1867: "I think that time has come when these colonies should be united by some federal bond of connection".⁵

The New South Wales parliamentary records indicate that Parkes was a member of a committee that considered the Federation of the Australian Colonies in 1860. We know that he gave the speech at Tenterfield on 24 October 1889, followed by the "Crimson Thread" speech at the banquet in Melbourne on 6 February 1890. There were many others.

The first record I have identified referring to Parkes specifically as the "Father of Federation" is the commemoration magazine for the Inaugural Federation Day, 1 January 1901. It included an article written by Robert Garran. It stated simply: "Sir Henry Parkes G.C.M.G. The Father of Federation".⁶

There are other references. In 1901 Sir Charles Dilke wrote:

Sir Henry Parkes, who had been the real author of the Federal Council movement, stood aloof from it for many years and crushed it. Some of us thought his action had retarded the cause of Federation in Australia. We may now, in looking back, admit that Sir Henry Parkes' conception of a grander movement, more rapidly attaining to maturity, has been justified by the event.⁷

And Edmund Barton's first biographer recorded that:

Parkes' interest in the Federal union of the Australian colonies commenced very early in his political career. He was the first public man to make Federation a question of practical politics in every Australian colony, and even in New Zealand. His success in calling together the first National Australasian Convention [Sydney, 1891] earned him the title of "The Father of the Australian Federation".⁸

And J. A. La Nauze, eminent historian of the making of the Constitution, has contended that:

Not to beat around the bush, let us name the undoubted Fathers, and dismiss the undoubted non-qualifiers. We must first include Parkes. There can be various explanations of his actions in 1889, but the more closely one examines the events of that year, the more certain it is that there would have been no 1891 Constitution but for his initiative, and his refusal to accept rebuffs. He was no technical Constitution-maker, but his Resolutions of

1890 and 1891 set the process of gestation going. The name “Commonwealth” was his; and more significant (though the matter is very complicated in detail) Section 92, with its ominous phrase “absolutely free”, has its origin in his second Resolution of 1891.⁹

But there are others. The view of Sir Frederic Eggleston, for example:

Holman of New South Wales was a man who, in my imperfect knowledge, reminds me of Watt. His constructive achievements were substantial, his popular appeal was great, and he was one of the few men who, by sheer eloquence, could sway elections. Sir Samuel Griffith was a man of similar type; Sir Henry Parkes, a demagogue, without any constructive side, gets the credit of being a pioneer of Federation, though his influence on its form was almost negligible.¹⁰

Dr A. W. Martin believed that it is something that can be re-considered:

Can we, all the same, call [Parkes] the “Father of Australian federation”? What I have been saying today has certainly to be taken into account when considering this question – but perhaps we should withhold a final judgement until we have been through the decade of centenary celebrations of things federal which appears, in 1990, still to be before us.¹¹

Lessons of history – politics, human nature, and Federation

Were Parkes’s actions in the New South Wales Parliament of 1891 right, wrong, or at least reasonable?

As Parkes explained his position in the extract from his memoirs set out in Appendix 2, how could he have done anything else? He faced a political situation in which the dynamics of the New South Wales Parliament had fundamentally changed. A significant third force, the Labour Party, had arrived; its strength was such that, if dissatisfied, it could hand the keys of government to the Opposition. He also recognised the “popular” support the people of New South Wales had clearly indicated, at the elections, that priority should be given to these issues. He chose to do so.

He also faced a (now) dissenting member of the Government siding with the Opposition for what appears to be motivated by political strategy alone. He wrote:

Of course, wherever an element of (political) weakness exists, there will appear men of political cunning and tortuous courses to use it for wrong purposes. It may be to their own advantage, or to the advantage of any cause in which they profess to believe, but it may serve to gratify their ill-will in some direction, or their simple love of confusion.¹²

Politicians are politicians and Parkes was one of the best of them; they are actors governed by rules and incentives by which they pursue popular support – votes – in the quest for or maintenance of power – Government. Always have. Do now. Always will.

Is it reasonable to expect political leaders to take actions which they believe are not in the interests of their jurisdiction for the sake of a “higher goal” for which they are not accountable? Human nature compels us all to act “in our best interests.” It is more a question of what we believe our interests to be in a given set of circumstances.

Federation – political compromise

But to analyse, criticise or synthesise (if I may use the term), a complex political organism seems beyond the functions of a body with many voices and conflicting wills, and in which the most competent and the most incompetent have equal weight in a general vote.¹³

Parkes was talking about the New South Wales Legislative Assembly. But his observation applies to any discussion of Australia's Federation arrangements. Achieving Federation in 1901 brought together six separate jurisdictions each with their own incentives and pressures, in a compromise to achieve a goal they ultimately believed was in their own individual best interests. Why?

Australia's Federation remains a compromise and now consists of nine jurisdictions: six Original States, two self-governing territories and the Commonwealth. The events of the 19th century culminating in 1901 stand as evidence that hard political decisions by those with competing interests can be made and need to be pursued however impossible they may appear.

Mistakes were made, or were they?

When is something “a mistake” or a “broken promise”; or, alternately, “something that doesn't go to plan” or “changed when additional information becomes available or unforeseen events occur”?

Who leads?

Parkes reasonably questioned the lack of action on the part of the other colonies in approving the draft 1891 Constitution: “In the other colonies no better progress has been made; in most of them nothing whatever has been done.”¹⁴

Parkes potentially could have garnered additional support within his own jurisdiction had he been able to argue that New South Wales was at risk of losing its “senior colony” status on the Federation issue. Similarly, from the perspective of the other colonies, it was reasonable to wait.

The Commonwealth Bill establishing federation, which had been adopted by the 1891 Convention, was now before all the colonial parliaments. Anxious to avoid a recurrence of the problems caused by New South Wales's failure to join the Federal Council, it was agreed that others would move only after the senior colony had considered it. Parkes was expected to pursue the matter vigorously, but seemed unable or unwilling to do so.¹⁵

Parkes was not to know this “agreement” had been made by others.

Personal characteristics and circumstance?

Doris Kearns Goodwin sheds instructive light on this question in her acclaimed study of Abraham Lincoln's presidency of the United States:

Throughout the nadir of Lincoln's depression, Speed stayed at his friend's side. In a conversation both men would remember as long as they lived, Speed warned Lincoln that if he did not rally, he would almost certainly die. Lincoln replied that he was more than willing to die, but that he had “done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived, and that to connect his name with the events transpiring in his day and generation and so impress himself upon them as to link his name with something that would redound to the interest of his fellow man was what he desired to live for.”¹⁶

Parkes himself wrote:

My great object throughout my life will be so to impress my name and my character and my influence on this country that I may be remembered when I am dead and in my grave.¹⁷

Many have judged Henry Parkes's behaviour as choosing to focus on his ambition and his vanity. Ambition of itself is something that should not be derided; the better question concerns "what that ambition seeks to achieve?"

In many ways, Henry Parkes is Australia's Abraham Lincoln – to the benefit of us all they spent their lives driven by the ambition to be "judged" by their peers as "worthy." Of Parkes's vanity, remember Deakin's description:

- ". . . the commanding figure of Henry Parkes, than whom no actor ever more carefully posed for effect".
- ". . . always in his mind's eye his own portrait as that of a great man . . ."
- ". . . because there was in him the substance of the man he dressed himself to appear."

Deakin was correct up to a point. But consider also Parkes's own perspective:

The spirit of my later boyhood was so cowed by the sneers and taunts of those who daily gazed upon my destitution that I scarcely dared to look a happy boy in the face.¹⁸

The experiences of childhood shape who we become in life. Parkes, for whom lack of money was a constant companion through life, was surrounded by contemporaries who had never experienced such things. Surely we can understand that what we may see as "vanity" is actually the "cowed boy" desperate to maintain the illusion to cover his self-consciousness; to be worthy in the eyes of others.

Ironically, it was this very background that made him the success he was in colonial politics, his ability to appeal to the hearts and minds of the people and a sincere desire to improve their lives.

The role of "the people" in Federation

Parkes closes his Federation account in 1892 lamenting the lack of political action to advance the 1891 draft Constitution and calling on the people to continue the fight:

Let the Australian people, from sea to sea – East and West, North and South, take heed of this, and if the question is too big for their Parliaments, let them take it into their own hands.

Let it never be forgotten that it is not the approval of the few men who form Parliament of the day, but the ratification by the people who constitute the nation, either through their representatives or by their direct voice, which is required.¹⁹

Robert Garran, who served as the Secretary of the Attorney-General's Department for 32 years, concluded *The Coming Commonwealth*:

But though the Constitution is much, it must not be supposed to be everything. It is, in itself, merely the means to an end; merely the dead mechanical framework of national unity. The life and soul of the union must be breathed into it by the people themselves. When a Constitution has been framed and adopted, the work of Australian union will have been begun, not finished. The nation will be a nation, not of clauses and sub-clauses, but of men and women; and the destiny of Australia will rest with the Australian people rather than the Australian Constitution. The work now in hand – the making of a Constitution – is great and important; but it is the beginning not the end.²⁰

While reproducing the “miracle” of Federation, as Deakin put it, remains elusive, the two things we know are most likely to result in “failure” are the exclusion of the people of Australia from the debate and the lack of advocates to continue to prosecute the case to the Australian people on a consistent basis. Broad understanding and momentum are the only keys that will unlock Federation reform for the present generation and beyond, whether the focus is taxation, Commonwealth-State relations, indigenous recognition or the many other national debates Australia needs to have.

We should take heed of the lessons of history as our governments undertake a further Review of the Australian Federation lest we again recreate the factors of 1891, again losing all momentum presently generated.

The value of history?

With luck and help from living friends, the dead can teach us to speak a new political language. They can instruct us in unorthodox ways of thinking, different feelings about life’s meaning; the dead can even suggest new ways of resolving current public problems, . . . When the dead manage to teach us to think again, to act differently, . . . they live on powerfully, into the present. They become living legends. They prove that the past is continuous; they show that yesterday is today, always present, an ingredient of the future.²¹

But legacies, however great, need constant care and attention. We need to value the achievements of our legends enough such that they continue to be “living” for us. We need constantly to remind ourselves of our leaders, of their achievements and, just as importantly, of the barriers that they overcame and the environment in which they achieved. We need to choose to take their memory and inspirations with us.

Appendix 1 - Deakin on Parkes

First and foremost of course in every eye was the commanding figure of Sir Henry Parkes, than whom no actor ever more carefully posed for effect. His huge figure, slow step, deliberate glance and carefully brushed-out aureole of white hair combined to present the spectator with a picturesque whole which was not detracted from on closer acquaintance. His voice, without being musical and in spite of a slight woolliness of tone and rather affected depth, was pleasant and capable of reaching and controlling a large audience. His studied attitudes expressed either distinguished humility or imperious command. His manner was invariably dignified, his speech slow and his pronunciation precise, offending only by the occasional omission or misplacing of aspirates. He was fluent but not voluble, his pauses skilfully varied, and in times of excitement he employed a whole gamut of tones ranging from a shrill falsetto to deep resounding chest notes. He had always in his mind's eye his own portrait as that of a great man, and constantly adjusted himself to it. A far-away expression of the eyes, intended to convey his remoteness from the earthly sphere, and often associated with melancholy treble cadences of voice in which he implied a vast and inexpressible weariness, constituted his favourite and at last his almost invariable exterior. Movements, gestures, inflexions, attitudes harmonised, nor simply because they were intentionally adopted but because there was in him the substance of the man he dressed himself to appear. The real strength and depth of his capacity were such that it was always a problem with Parkes as with Disraeli where the actor posture-maker and would-be sphinx ended or where the actual man underneath began. He had both by nature and by act the manner of a sage and a statesman.

His abilities were solid though general, as [were] his reading and his knowledge. Fond of books, a steady reader and a constant writer, his education had been gained in the world and among men. A careful student of all with whom he came in contact, he was amiable, persuasive and friendly by disposition. A life of struggle had found him self-reliant and left him hardened into resolute masterfulness. Apart from his exterior, he was a born leader of men, dwelling by preference of natural choice upon the larger and bolder aspects of things. He had therefore the aptitude of statecraft of a high order, adding to it the tastes of the man of letters, the lover of poetry and the arts, of rare editions and bric-à-brac, of autographs and memorials of the past. His nature, forged on the anvil of necessity, was egotistic though not stern and his career was that of the aspirant who looks to ends and is not too punctilious as to means. He was jealous of equals, bitter with rivals and remorseless with enemies – vain beyond all measure, without strong attachment to colleagues and with strong animal passions – weak in discussion of detail, unfitted for the minor tasks of administration, apt to be stilted in set speeches, and involved in debate, he yet was well qualified for the Premiership by great and genuine oratorical ability. A doughty parliamentary warrior neither giving nor asking quarter, he struck straight home at his adversaries with trenchant power. He was a careful framer of phrases and of insulting epithets which he sought to elaborate so that they would stick and sting. He confessed that he passed many of the weary hours in which he sat unmoved upon the front bench of the Assembly in mentally summing up his associates and opponents, fitting to each some appropriate descriptive epigram which he treasured in his memory for timely use. One lean long swarthy hungry-looking enemy he stigmatised as a “withered” tarantula. An academic radical from Victoria, possessed by what he regarded as impractical enthusiasms, was more mildly entitled “professor of Democracy.”

Dibbs consisted of “a weedy nature and a sprawling mind.” He had a copious flood of sometimes coarse vituperation which he was prepared to pour upon any who crossed his path at critical times, and lighter touches of genuine and happy humour emitted under pleasanter circumstances. At times his irony was of the grimmest and most merciless. Very many admired and not a few weaker men loved him; he brooked no rivals near his throne but all found his personality attractive and submitted more nor less to his domination. It was not a rich, not a versatile personality, but it was massive, durable and imposing, resting upon elementary qualities of human nature elevated by a strong mind. He was cast in the mould of a great man and though he suffered from numerous pettinesses, spites and failings, he was in himself a full-blooded, large-brained, self-educated Titan whose natural field was found in Parliament and whose resources of character and intellect enabled him in his later years to overshadow all his contemporaries, to exercise an immense influence on his own colony and achieve a great reputation outside it.²²

Appendix 2 - The political vicissitudes of Sir Henry Parkes, 1891-92

The President declared the Convention dissolved on April 9, 1891. More than fourteen months have passed away since that date, and no step worthy of Government or people has been taken by the Australian Parliaments to bring under consideration the labours of the body which they themselves created for this high duty. Let us endeavour to discover the cause of this strange negligence. There is no evidence that the interest in the question among the people has in any degree abated. The thinking portion of the populations, in the churches, in official circles, in the public press, have grown warmer in support from closer acquaintance with the project of union. Why, then, this delay?

I will take the case of New South Wales. The Government, which I had the honour to lead, lost no time in convening Parliament. The financial year is from January 1 until December 31, and Parliament met on May 19, forty days after the rising of the Convention, and when there were seven months and twelve days, covered by constitutional provision for the public service, in which to transact the business of the country. We had two chief reasons for calling Parliament together thus early: (1) To allow ample time for the consideration of the draft Bill of the Convention, and (2) to ensure the passing into law of a Bill to establish a system of local self-government for the country districts. Other important business was announced, but these were the principal measures of urgency. It seems to me impossible for any man to deny that the conduct of the Government was prompt, open, and straightforward. ...

On the same day, when the Address in reply was moved in the Assembly, I gave notice of a motion for the consideration of the draft Federal Constitution, which would have brought on a regular debate on the work of the Convention, and afforded every opportunity for members to propose amendments. But this did not suit the arch-plotter against federation, Mr. George Houston Reid, who had made up his mind not to allow, so far as he had power, an open and unprejudiced discussion of the momentous question. In the previous Session Mr. Reid, after endeavouring to elicit opposition, and failing in his endeavours, had voted for the delegates to the Convention: but he made no secret afterwards, first, of his cynical doubts, and then of his open hostility. His position would have been trying to a sensitive nature. He nominally belonged to the Ministerial side; he talked bitterly against the Protectionists on the Opposition benches; he professed to be anxious for a Local Government Bill - indeed he had lately threatened the Government in a noisy public meeting if they did not produce a measure of that kind. But he could not restrain himself sufficiently to wait for my motion, which he knew would be the first business. I was the leader of the House, and I had been the duly elected President of the Convention; even if it had not been my rightful place, common courtesy would have allowed me this particular business, which I was prepared to do the first moment possible. But Mr. Reid calculated that, if he took a course which would embarrass the Government, he was sure of the assistance of the Protectionist opposition. So Mr. Reid moved an amendment on the Address. He knew that if his amendment were carried, Ministers would either resign or advise a dissolution. But neither his anxiety for the Local Government Bill, nor his sense of duty, was powerful enough to hold him back. He had brooded over his amendment for days past, had exhibited it to admirers male and female, and had dreamed of the laurels of victory. In making his motion, Mr. Reid was fluent, as he always is - fluent as a water-spout after a heavy rain; but his speech was barren of thought, and where not vituperative, simply dull: Mr. Reid was mistaken in his

calculations; a large number of the Opposition, knowing well the sentiments of their constituents, voted against him, and his amendment was lost by 67 votes against 35. What was Mr. Reid's next act? The Opposition, thinking that they saw an advantage in the excitement of the moment, took the extreme course of voting against the Address itself, which of course, if successful, would have been the severest vote of censure, and Mr. Reid, mastering his intense anxiety for the Local Government Bill, joined in that purely factious vote.

After these wasted two days at the opening of the Session, Ministers met in Cabinet to consider the prospect rather than the situation. The Triennial Parliament had only a little over eight months of its life to run out. The heat and temper displayed in the last division which sought to expunge from the records the Address in reply to the Governor's Speech, and other evidence within our knowledge, satisfied us that the tactics of our opponents would be to prevent us from doing useful work, to demoralise us, and then force us to the country, – that, if any pretext could be twisted to serve the purpose, the picture would be drawn before the eyes of the electors, that we had consumed our time in the “fad” of federation (a favourite term of our opponents), and had neglected the legislation so urgently required for the advancement of New South Wales. Two nights had already been spent in debating federation, and it appeared to us, under the altered state of circumstances, unwise to bring on another debate, until some progress were made with the urgent business which belonged exclusively to the colony. The Cabinet came to a decision in accordance with this reasoning. The leader of the Opposition, Mr. Dibbs, now came to the front with a direct motion of want of confidence. No one could complain of this as a party move, but the case was different with Mr. Reid; he, according to his own profession, was a Free-trader of Free-traders; had personally concurred in the formation of the Government, having first been invited to join it; he now walked boldly over, with one or two other disunionist Free-traders, to swell the solid vote of the Protectionists. In that division the two sides were equal, the Speaker giving his casting vote against the motion. This lost to that Parliament all chance of dealing with the cause of Australian union. A few days afterwards the Assembly was dissolved.

East Sydney, Mr. Reid's constituency, returns four members. In the general election, Mr. Reid, who hitherto had always been first or second, was now left last on the poll, with a respectable distance between him and the third man. All the Ministers, with one exception, were returned at the head of the poll. Many circumstances, but chiefly the advent of the Labour party, contributed to confuse the issue of the elections. But in no part of the colony, where the case was clearly put, was the feeling less strong and enthusiastic in favour of federation. I spoke on the subject in various parts of the country – in Sydney, in St. Leonard's, at Lithgow, at Goulburn, at Wagga, at Albury, at Deniliquin, at Jerilderie, at Nerandera, and at other places; and while I received unstinted marks of approval, I met with no feeling of dissent.

The new Parliament met in July, and Mr. Dibbs was at once prepared to try his fortunes with another motion of want of confidence. I believe my colleagues shared my own feeling, that, with the new element in the House, we had an unknown region before us, and that we were not over-anxious to win on Mr. Dibbs's motion. To me it seemed that it might be well to let him and his friends try their hands with our new masters. But the bulk of the Labour members decided to support the Ministry, and the division gave us a decisive majority. The Labour party behaved honourably enough. They had been elected to obtain legislation for their fellow-workers, and they

would not have been honest men if they had not pressed for the introduction of the measures to which they were pledged. So far as we were concerned, we needed no pressure, as most of the Bills so loudly called for were already prepared in our hands. With the Labour force in our majority, we had to choose between proceeding with the legislation, which both we and they believed to be necessary for the well-being of the masses, and giving up office with a large majority in our favour. It was unreasonable to expect the Labour members to agree to our setting aside all provincial matters – I use the term for the purpose of distinction – all provincial matters, however important, for the great national question of federation. We decided to place federation third in our programme of Parliamentary measures, and so it stood when we had to retire from office. In reality, it was morally impossible for us to deal with federation between May 19 and October 22, when we ceased to be Government.

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Endnotes

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