

Chapter Five

The Civil War We Never Had

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Modern Australia was destined for federation. This has been disputed on the one hand by the ever-hopeful band of Western Australian secessionists and on the other by modern commentators, mainly in Sydney and Melbourne, who complain that a population of seventeen million is over-governed in a polity which includes a bicameral Federal Parliament and six State legislatures; seven if the Northern Territory is counted, eight with the Australian Capital Territory. Undeniably reforming politicians such as Gough Whitlam have chafed at the difficulties of achieving political and social change under the consultative processes inevitable in a federal system. Federalism is thus sometimes equated with conservatism, and the current debate over an Australian republic owes something to a belief that a 'horse-and-buggy' Constitution designed to secure co-operation between six members of the late-Victorian British Empire is an inadequate vehicle for the nationalist aspirations of a century later.

All the same, geography dictated that Australia should be a federation. Unlike those other transcontinental examples of European expansion, the United States and the Russian Empire, Australia does not present the picture of a rolling frontier moving ever outwards towards the distant Pacific. The Australian interior was too arid. Instead, Australia began with an archipelago of isolated settlements along a sprawling coast. Sydney in 1788, Hobart and Launceston in 1803–04, Brisbane, Perth, Melbourne and Adelaide between 1824 and 1836, even the New Zealand of 1840 can be seen each as the nucleus of a separate impulse of settlement from which colonization would spread out.

These foundation city-states, each with its own hinterland, depended for their communications to a large extent by sea until late in the 19th Century. Each developed its own strong sense of local identity, so that it was thought almost inevitable that, when self-government came in the 1850s, the foundation ports each became the mini-metropolis for a separate colony. The boundaries of these colonies were drawn ineptly by clerks in the Colonial Office without sufficient regard for economic and social linkages. Thus Brisbane lost a good deal of its hinterland to the north of New South Wales, and the Northern Territory, although having much in common with the northern parts of Queensland and Western Australia, was allocated for nearly half a century to South Australia. Other facts of life such as the Nullarbor Plain and Bass Strait were given greater recognition. However shaped, once the new colonies were given established boundaries, institutional development followed speedily, so that change was never acceptable.

The British authorities in the 1850s were well aware of the disadvantages of fragmentation, and urged formal co-operation at least over such issues as a common tariff policy and a standard railway gauge. They were unheeded. Each colony went its own way at the cost of half a century of ludicrous customs barriers in the outback and more than a century of dislocation in a continental railway system built on three different gauges. By the 1880s the impact of these drawbacks was becoming evident, and federation gradually surfaced on the agenda of practical politics.

Other currents were swelling the tide of federation. Capital and labour were beginning to organise on a nationwide basis. Banks such as the National and the Bank of New South Wales,

merchant firms such as Burns Philp set up branches across Australia; and in response the shearers, miners, and other trade unions organised themselves nationally. Increasingly it made sense for the colonies to federate as a common market.

The British had never wavered from the view that a federation gave greater security to investors and deserved a better credit rating than solitary colonies. Defence was increasingly important. Not only were Australian colonists eager to prove themselves willing volunteers in Britain's colonial wars, but a growing sense of anxiety haunted Australian imaginations as China and Japan came to the fore. Federation would make for greater efficiency in defence and also allow the majority of white Australians to override any regional government too tolerant of cheap non-European labour. There would be no more 'scandals' such as the importation of Chinese workers to build the Northern Territory railway, or the indenture of Melanesians to labour in the Queensland canefields.

Less pragmatic ideals also strengthened the federal movement. By the 1880s the adult Australian population included a majority of native-born, and as males of this generation attained political prominence they spoke the rhetoric of a new nationalism; a nationalism whose symbols were provided for many by the work of the Heidelberg painters in Melbourne and the Bulletin writers in Sydney. Perhaps inspired by the centenary of American independence in 1876, publicists spoke of Australia as a nation potentially of equal growth in the 20th century, capable of supporting a population of 100 million and giving its own version of the Monroe Doctrine in the South Pacific.

This rhetoric did not always carry conviction in Western Australia. It was instructive that in 1890, when the Sydney Bulletin informed its readers that Henry Lawson was to visit Western Australia, one Perth journal responded with the comment: 'Who's Henry Lawson?' Having achieved self-government only in 1890, and having almost immediately encountered a wave of goldrush prosperity which contrasted delightfully with sixty years of penury under colonial government, Western Australians were understandably coy about surrendering their new freedom even to an Australian federation.

Above all, there was as ever the tyranny of distance. In the first session of the Western Australian Legislative Assembly the prominent politician Stephen Henry Parker put it thus:

Nature had, so far as New Zealand was concerned, created 1200 obstacles in the way of 1200 miles of stormy sea. And that is our position. Our only connection with the other colonies is by the intervening stormy sea, and the distance from Albany to Adelaide is the same, some 1150 miles ... We shall be situated at such a distance from the seat of Government that I do not think we can expect that consideration for our wants and requests which we would be entitled to.

It is relevant to remember that at that time New Zealand was a member of the Federal Convention, but the point needed making. If we take a map and imagine that all the arid interior – the country with an annual rainfall of less than 250 millimetres – was sea, leaving the South-West of Western Australia and the Kimberleys as two large islands, the similarities between Western Australia and New Zealand would seem even stronger.

Yet as a result of the referendum of 1900 Western Australia joined the Commonwealth. Historians have usually explained this by pointing to the large influx of Victorians and South Australians to the goldfields, and the pressure exerted by the goldfields' threat to secede in their turn in order to join a federated Australia. But even outside the goldfields there was a majority, narrow but still a majority, in favour of Federation. This was in no small part due to the prestige of Sir John Forrest, whose national vision and personal ambition led him to think transcontinentally despite the misgivings of many of his own followers. He bargained for concessions for Western Australia, and was allowed a phased period of tariff reduction and the promise of a transcontinental railway.

As it happened, the first thirty years of Federation revealed that there were disadvantages for Western Australia. Local manufacturing declined because of Eastern States competition; we remember that the depressed industrialists of Melbourne had been among the most fervent barrackers for an Australian common market. Some of Western Australia's economic problems were self-inflicted. It has been convincingly argued that by neglecting the rehabilitation of the mining industry, and focussing on wheat-growing and dairying, the State governments of the day probably hindered Western Australia's economic advancement. It is also noteworthy that in most of the referenda to extend federal powers, Western Australia was among the minority of States which usually voted "Yes" in favour of strengthening the Commonwealth. New South Wales, which had most to lose by federation, was by far the most cantankerous of the States at least as late as the premiership of J.T.Lang.

Within Western Australia, secession was largely the crusade of one newspaper, the populist Sunday Times. Even the allegedly unifying experience of the 1914–18 war was not enough to deter its proprietor, McCallum Smith, and in 1919 the Sunday Times re-opened its campaign, largely as a response to the high tariff policies of the Hughes Commonwealth government. Tariffs were always a grievance to a primary producing State. During the 1920s however secession made little headway, and it was not until the coming of the Depression in the early 1930s that the cause surged into prominence in the public mind.

It is instructive for us in the 1990s to note how quickly the idea took hold, since it is often argued that the relatively apathetic mood of recent years is a guarantee that secession will never again become a live issue. But in the 1930s, despite the opposition of the Labor Party and the half-heartedness of the National Party premier, Sir James Mitchell, public support shifted until, at a referendum in April 1933, 68 per cent of the voters said "Yes" to secession.

Part of this result was due to the propaganda of the Dominion League and its very able publicist, H.K. (later Sir Keith) Watson, but to a large extent it was an emotional response to the trauma of the Depression. I have argued – and although the argument has not been universally accepted, I stick to it – that the Depression, instead of leading to an increase in class antagonisms as happened in more industrialised societies, created tensions in the Western Australian community which were externalised against the Eastern States, symbolised by the extravagant new capital city of Canberra and the dangerous radicalism of Lang in Sydney.

The secessionist credo as stated by Watson stressed the virtues of consensus. Its foundations were the integrity of the British Empire, loyalty to throne, country, and kindred, and a sense of one's first duties to one's own children. Australia, Watson argued, was over-governed with seven Governors, seven Parliaments, and seven income taxes; but the solution was not unification, but reducing the number to six by removing Western Australia. It would prosper as a separate dominion of the British Empire, to the untold benefit of the neighbouring Australian States. Underlying this curious logic was the assumption that it was the duty of the good citizen to promote economic growth, to secure the welfare of his [sic] children, and to strive for a society free of the wrangling which had characterised the relations of the Commonwealth Government and the States.

The supporters of secession included many, such as Watson himself, who came from families of Eastern States origin, as well as a number of former champions of the federal movement, such as Sir Walter James, who had grown disenchanted with experience. Many families were divided on the issue; thus Alexandra Hasluck relates that she voted in favour and her husband (the future Sir Paul) against, and they both concluded that they might as well have stayed at home. Western Australia, too, had as always a larger proportion of British-born inhabitants than any other part of Australia, and Britain provided an alternative focus for larger loyalties. But the goldfields stuck to their tradition of wanting to stay in the Commonwealth, and so did the Kimberleys.

Besides, on the same day as the referendum, the voters returned a Labor government opposed to the measure, and its leader, Philip Collier, procrastinated skilfully about putting secession into effect. Eventually a delegation was sent to London with the case for secession in a jarrah casket, and a decision was sought from the House of Commons. The British wisely refused to get involved, saying that secession was now entirely a matter for negotiation between the State and Federal Parliaments.

With astute timing, this negative response was delivered in the very week of King George V's Silver Jubilee celebrations, at a time when loyalists were more than usually unwilling to question British wisdom. There was of course no hope that Canberra would consent to secession, and with returning prosperity support for the movement dwindled. With Japan's entry into the Second World War the remaining attractions of secession vanished overnight, lingering only in the widespread belief that, in the event of invasion, Western Australia like Queensland would have been abandoned on the wrong side of the Brisbane Line.

Such is the conventional wisdom, but it is possible to imagine an alternative scenario. Suppose that, instead of the pliable and conciliatory Lyons, there had been a Prime Minister in Canberra – and they have been known – insensitive to the feelings of the outer States, and abrasive and hectoring in his public statements. Suppose that Watson and the Dominion League had been less respectful of British authority. It would have been ridiculously easy for a small Western Australian force to seize the line of communication with the east and for a Western Australian government – and Labor nearly lost in 1936 – to proclaim a Unilateral Declaration of Independence. In such an event, the conventional wisdom usually presupposes that the rest of Australia would have let the West go quietly; but until it actually happened, the conventional wisdom in North America never really believed in the possibility of an American Civil War. The divisive issues unleashed by a bid for secession could not easily have been contained. At the very least, they would have been a debilitating source of weakness in Australia at the moment of crisis in 1942.

During the decades of postwar prosperity the issue largely slumbered. Following the introduction of uniform income taxation during the Second World War, most authorities taught that the influence of the Commonwealth was gaining at the expense of the States. Even the Sydney Bulletin, then at its most conservative, regarded this development as a good thing. It was not until the mineral boom of the 1960s began to tilt the balance of economic and demographic growth away from south-eastern Australia to Queensland, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory that the pretensions of the States began to revive. Geoffrey Blainey has pointed out that, if current population trends continue, within a hundred years there will be as many people living in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland as in the south-eastern States. This may not lead to a demand for the removal of the federal capital to Alice Springs, but it will have a marked effect on the balance of power within the Australian Commonwealth, and perhaps on its ethos.

The experience of the last fifty years suggests that, in matters of social welfare and social justice, Western Australia and Queensland have usually lagged behind the rest of Australia. If, as is probable, the States are to exercise an increasingly strong influence on the Australian Commonwealth as a whole, it behoves us to create a political culture which will allow the maintenance of regional diversity without at the same time handing over the country to the redneck values, which probably do not form a majority view in either Western Australia or Queensland, but which from time to time dominate political discourse there.

Now it may be argued that Australia is increasingly coming under homogenising influences which will iron out our comparatively minor regional diversities. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the independent regional networks provide largely nationwide programming,

and there is mounting evidence that the media, rather than the region or the family, shape political and cultural attitudes. Improved telephonic facilities, including the fax, have facilitated speedy communication across the continent. Above all, it could be argued that internal migration during the last two or three decades has broken down the original demographic differences between the States. But imbalances remain. Until the late 1970s there was never a Western Australian on the bench of the High Court, the body charged with interpreting the Federal compact. To this day there has never been a South Australian or a Tasmanian.

Since 1945 every Prime Minister of Australia has come from New South Wales or Victoria; in earlier years a Curtin from Fremantle, a Lyons from Tasmania, an Andrew Fisher or Artie Fadden from Queensland might hope to win that office. It is not really surprising that from time to time a sense of grievance surfaces in an outer State such as Western Australia which leads some citizens to ponder the merits of going it alone.

Under the stimulus of what were seen as the centralising tendencies of the Whitlam Government the secession movement revived in Western Australia in 1974, only to subside after Whitlam's dismissal in November, 1975. Many of its most prominent advocates were British migrants, perhaps influenced by their experience of an offshore island faced with the prospect of closer ties with the European Community; but its most prominent spokesman and financier was the fourth-generation Western Australian Lang Hancock, whose impatience was fuelled by the threat of Rex Connor's intervention in the mineral export industry. There were incongruous features in Hancock's campaign, since he was also a strenuous advocate of a transcontinental railway linking the Pilbara with Queensland; a strong symbol of Western Australian integration with the rest of the continent, and one which might support the argument that Hancock wished merely to exchange domination by Canberra for domination by Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland.

Note must be taken of the veteran secessionist Martyn Webb's contention that Hancock's support was the kiss of death for the secessionist movement in the mid-1970s. During the more conciliatory regimes of the Fraser and Hawke Governments the issue lay largely dormant. It has revived since Paul Keating became Prime Minister in December 1991, partly due to a perception that he knows little about the outer States and does not take them seriously. It is nevertheless extremely difficult to get inhabitants of Sydney or Melbourne to accept the level of emotional support which secession is capable of generating.

To counter the appeal of secession, and to improve the working of federalism, I can think of four practical measures:

1. Educate the young. The young are Australians, not secessionists. They are not on the whole conservative or radical, but generally sceptical; in the majority republican, but willing to retain the flag in its present form. But many are deplorably underinformed about the processes of government. Current research in Western Australia suggests that, although politics has been in the secondary school curriculum for more than a decade, most young Western Australians claim to owe their information about politics to television. The educational programmes designed to develop concepts of citizenship have so far proved ineffective. Perhaps this is because Australians are reluctant to explore the responsibilities and rights of citizenship. That is why they rejected the North American concept of a Bill of Rights without adequate debate. At any rate, much more needs to be done on the educational front.

2. Explore methods for delegating Canberra's powers regionally. During the last twenty years some attempts have been made in this direction. The Whitlam Government's experiment in bunching local authorities into regional zones for the allocation of federal funding had some promising features, but it was brought in without the co-operation of the States, and hence aroused hostility. It also suffered from a lack of identification with established regional loyalties. It was hard to grow passionate in defence of Zone 12. More recently, Commonwealth regional

offices have been set up, but some have recently closed for budgetary reasons. Thought has been given to the delegation of federal powers to State instrumentalities. This seems the way to go. Much low and middle-level Commonwealth decision-making could be delegated to local offices accessible to the public. For many of us, Canberra is a long way away.

3. Pay more attention to comparable societies overseas. Since 1989 the federal Senate has published two reports on the concept of Australian citizenship. Canada, with even more intractable problems than our own, has undergone a similar exercise, but there seems to have been little communication between the two. The Americans, the Swiss, and the Germans are also not without experience of federal political systems. Australians are too much given to tackling problems without an international comparative dimension. The federal delegates at the conventions of 1891 and 1897 did not make that mistake; and neither should we.

4. Legislate that nobody should become Prime Minister without living for at least two years in a State other than New South Wales and Victoria.

Endnotes: