

The Centenary of Australia's Federation: What Should We Celebrate? *

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The Australian nation was born on the first day of 1901. The brand new Commonwealth held about three and three quarters of a million people—slightly more than Switzerland then held. At this time the new nation was experiencing the worst drought recorded in the European history of the continent. Australia was also at war against the Boer republics, and in 1901 several young Australians won the Victoria Cross for bravery in South Africa.

The nation was overwhelmingly Christian but in 1901 some outback towns held both a synagogue and a mosque—from memory Coolgardie was one such town. The new nation was overwhelmingly British in descent but not as overwhelming as it tended to assume. Thus there were large but uncounted numbers of Aborigines.

Australia at this time was astonishingly urbanised by world standards. Melbourne and Sydney, of similar size and each holding half a million people, stood higher on the list of the world's largest cities than they stand today. The recent growth of cities in the third world has been on such a scale that Melbourne and Sydney are, measured by population, less important now than they were in 1901. There was another unusual facet of population in 1901—four of the top 11 cities were inland cities. Now only one of the top 11—Canberra—is inland.

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At the start of the last century the average standard of living was close to the highest in the world—for those who had full-time jobs. For the unemployed minority there was little help: Australia's welfare state was just beginning, and Queensland had just experienced for a couple of days the world's first Labor government.

Australia, and the whole western world, were so different in 1901, and many Australian attitudes and assumptions were so different to ours, that the founders of the Commonwealth would not altogether approve of what we see as national triumphs. Nor would they necessarily agree with what we see as failings, during the nation's first century. That will also be our fate when our Australia is reviewed and audited by Australians in 100 years' time.

In a democracy nothing is more certain than that the tides of popular opinion and the tides of learned opinion will continue to ebb and flow.

A precarious federation

The coming together of the six Australian colonies in 1901 had a touch of the miraculous. Alfred Deakin, who was to be three times prime minister, was convinced that the federation had only 'been secured by a series of miracles.' At the end of the first year of the Federal Parliament one leading politician, Glynn of South Australia, confided to his diary that the federation was seen as so pockmarked by failure that, if a new referendum were held, the people of Australia might have voted to disband the federation.

The High Court, so vital to the new Commonwealth and its relations with the six states, was one institution that was postponed as too difficult. When at last in May 1903 the attempt was made by the Barton government to create the High Court, a loud shout of opposition arose. When it was pointed out that the High Court would be the 'keystone of the federal arch', many politicians said they did not want such an arch. Alfred Deakin had to threaten to resign until finally some of his Victorian colleagues came into line. So the bill butted its difficult way through both houses, with the new High Court finally reduced from five judges to three.

Federalism

On the eve of this century, Australians, by popular vote, deliberately chose to become a federation. For a democratic country occupying a huge area and possessing difficult lines of communication and wide regional differences, the federal system is the best known solution. All those who hope that one day the states will be abolished are either hoping in vain or living mainly in Sydney and Melbourne and Canberra.

Like all known political systems, Australia's federation has fallen far short of perfection, but it has been relatively effective. It has even been copied by nations where at one time the concept was seen as alien. Aided by the piloting of Mr Tony Blair, a version of the federal system has unexpectedly taken root in the United Kingdom.

Today, the powers of the federal government, compared to those of the states, are far larger than Barton, Deakin or any father of federation would have envisaged. Two world wars, aided by the High Court, have done much to enthrone the Commonwealth

over the states. The states have also helped. In 1942, a wartime year, John Curtin as prime minister introduced uniform taxation in place of the old arrangement whereby each state levied its own income tax. What was intended during the crisis of war to be only a temporary loss of each state's independence became permanent.

Irrespective of its inadequacies, the federation, and its division of powers between the centre and the states, has proved to be a formidable achievement. One measure of its success is that only once has it experienced acute strain. That was nearly 70 years ago when the state of Western Australia resolved to secede—or to use the threat of secession as a bargaining counter. In the course of the coming century another secession movement will probably arise somewhere far from Canberra. A federal system is at heart a web of compromises, and some fragility will always be present.

In at least one sense, federalism has failed. The essence of the federal system is that the Commonwealth mainly looks after matters of national concern and the states look after matters of regional concern. As Australia possesses a wide range of climates and terrains, and as each region has a different mix of geographical assets and liabilities and sometimes a different mix of people, and as each region has different traditions and maybe a slightly different set of values and priorities, there is a case for each major region possessing its own state government. The sad fact is that the newest state in Australia is Queensland, created more than 140 years ago. Australia has created no new state since 1859: the United States in contrast has created close to 20. For a land of this size we do not have enough states. We thus miss one of the advantages of federalism.

Some of the nation's leaders in recent years have insisted that Australia is part of Asia, including the Indonesian Archipelago, but Australia still has not one capital city in the northern half of the continent. Darwin of course is only half a capital city. Even when the new state of Northern Territory is formed, Darwin, because of the allocation of Senate seats, will not possess in the nation as a whole as much political influence as even Launceston possesses.

Democracy and independence

By 1901 Australia was one of the foremost exponents of democracy in the world: it still is. Admittedly women possessed the vote only in South Australia and Western Australia; but at that time the females in no European country had the right to vote. In addition in 1901 most Aborigines—but far from all—were kept out of the electoral system.

The frail political rights of Australian women were soon amended, and at the federal election of 1903 Australia became the first nation in the world in which women could both vote for and stand for Parliament. But no woman won a seat in the Federal Parliament until forty years later.

In 1901 there had been another restraint on democracy in Australia: this was the rule that its foreign policy should be conducted in harmony with Britain's. On the other hand it must be said that in the first few decades of the Twentieth Century Australia's leaders, irrespective of whether they were Labor or Liberal, believed that a tight alliance with Britain was very much in Australia's economic, political and cultural interests. In the context of those decades those leaders were almost certainly right. In

recent years some historians have lamented that in 1914 and again in 1939 Australia's prime minister of the day automatically followed Britain's lead in declaring war. But in any tight alliance, any worthwhile alliance, nearly every decision to go to war is really made far in advance of the war itself. What Mr Menzies said and did in 1939 was not exceptional, was not colonial in mentality.

By the end of World War One, Australia in effect was an independent nation with a seat and an independent stance at the Paris Peace conference. Indeed it could be argued that in some ways Australia then was slightly more independent than it is in today's era of international covenants.

In asking what should be celebrated next year, a very high place—maybe the highest—should be given to the nation's long tradition of resolving disagreements by discussion and ultimately by the people's vote. In 1975 an acute and unprecedented political crisis was solved in that way.

As democracy in the world is a very young form of government and still an experimental form of government—more experimental than we realise—we should sometimes think about it. Democracy in the last resort depends on the losers accepting their defeat rather than plotting revolution or taking up arms. A live democracy depends partly on a culture, a set of public attitudes, in which defeat, whether in sport or politics, is accepted firmly and even graciously. That is worth emphasising because our sporting culture—such a strong ingredient of national culture—sometimes over-emphasises victory at the expense of defeat.

War and defence

The Commonwealth of Australia was created partly so that the new nation could effectively defend itself, on sea and land, in the face of threat. Beyond doubt the creation of the Commonwealth enabled Australia to defend itself more effectively and to take part more effectively in its international alliances. In any celebration of the Commonwealth's centenary a high place must be given to its role in increasing the nation's security. Pacifists, understandably, may disagree with this statement but they themselves are amongst the main beneficiaries of a free nation's effectiveness in defending itself.

In celebrating a centenary we should remember not only Gallipoli and the heroic events but the dangers averted. We should remember the Second World War.

Australia was better prepared for the First World War, which was largely fought far from home, than for the Second World War which was fought at the front door. Between 1941 and 1945 many Australians became prisoners of war partly because the country's defence forces were equipped—especially in the air—much less adequately than that of Japan. Australian soldiers were well equipped for Gallipoli but were not well equipped for Singapore.

Whereas in the years before the First World War both Labor and non-Labor believed strongly in defence, and the Labor party even believed strongly in compulsory military training, Australia was politically divided towards defence and foreign policy in the late 1930s. Australia's preparations for the Second World War proved inadequate.

Whereas England faced its acute military threat from Hitler with a united government, Australian politicians shunned the idea of a united government. In the initial two years of war, the personal and party and factional divisions in Canberra were acute. Indeed the Federal Parliament early in the war could be said to possess two warring Labor parties, and several warring Country or National parties. The nation also possessed one Liberal Party (then called the UAP) which could not conceal its internal rifts. In crisis the nation, politically, was deeply divided. This is not to cast the bulk of the blame on the nation's leaders, some of whom were heroic. Public opinion and the attitudes of political and non-parliamentary activists were equally at fault.

To play the game of politics strenuously is almost a hallmark of Australian democracy, but at a crucial phase of the war the sheer vigour of democracy might be said to have weakened the nation's preparations for war. I must emphasise that I make that statement with no intent to blame one political party more than others. The wartime leaders—Menzies, Fadden and Curtin—were great men in their different ways.

The nation learned a lesson from the war of 1939–45. So much that happened in national life in the following quarter century—the encouragement of a larger population, the fostering of self-sufficiency in manufacturing—came from that sense of shock experienced when Darwin was bombed, Rabaul was captured, Papua was invaded, and Australia itself seemed in peril.

The economy

By world standards Australia's economic performance since 1901 has been above average in most decades, but one should not be too jubilant.

Australia was probably much more successful in the years 1850 to 1890—a period stretching from the first gold rushes to the last gasp of the urban boom. The other long period of relative success was the 30 years extending from 1940 to 1970. That 1940–70 period was marked by a very low level of unemployment, and in each year it was nearly always lower than that of the USA. For most of the 1990s Australia has achieved an impressive rate of economic growth though the unemployment is still high.

Of the six founding states of the Commonwealth, which state has gained the most and lost the most financially from the federation? New South Wales and Victoria have gained the most financially, in my view. They have usually had the biggest say in the federation; in addition their economies have gained most from federal economic policies. The Commonwealth is run from the Hume Highway because the southeast corner has the bulk of the population.

Western Australia, and to a lesser degree Queensland, are entitled to feel some doubts and to vent considered criticisms. They were the last to decide to enter the federation, largely because their huge untapped base of natural resources promised them a relatively fine economic future, irrespective of federation.

Western Australia has had at times the strongest cause for complaint. Indeed, Western Australia tried to secede, both houses of Parliament being equally concerned, after

five years' experience of the new Commonwealth. It tried to secede again in 1933 when 44 of the 50 lower house seats voted for secession.

What were its grievances? Its capital city, Perth, was the most remote by far from the seat of federal power. It felt its isolation acutely. As an inducement to enter the federation, it was promised a railway in place of the long and rough sea voyage across the Bight. The railway did not arrive until 1917—16 years after the birth of the Commonwealth.

Even after the railway came, Western Australia felt isolated from the rest of Australia, and still does. Western Australia's other grievance was that it depended much more on primary than on secondary industry, but the tariff and other economic policies of the new Commonwealth favoured secondary industry, the activity in which Melbourne and Sydney, and to a lesser degree Adelaide, were strong. This was a powerful reason for the secession movement in Western Australia. Since the 1970s the economic policies of the Commonwealth have been more favourable to Western Australia, but many would say that the Native Title Act has reduced substantially that gain.

My own view is that Western Australia's economy—and probably Queensland's too—would probably have advanced even more in the last 30 years if it were an independent nation, and if it were allowed more licence to shape its own economic policies to suit its own special needs. But I say that with some reserve; and I am speaking only of economic matters. In various political and social ways Queensland and Western Australia have gained enormously from membership of this federation.

Western Australia and Queensland are the states which traditionally, with their huge area and long coastline, are most interested in defence; and they have certainly gained from a united national defence policy. They could have been in a grave plight in the wartime years of 1941 if, as two isolated and independent nations, they had had to defend themselves against the Japanese. Britain of course would have given some help, and the Commonwealth of Australia probably would have given some help.

In a federation there will always be losers and winners. And from time to time some of the losers become winners and some of the winners become losers.

My own view is that the political power base of Australia, the south east corner, is less interested than it should be in the needs and interests of the outlying states of the Commonwealth.

New Zealand in the last two decades has been a special gainer from the creation of the Commonwealth. New Zealand sent delegates to the early federal discussions in the 1890s and some of its leaders at first thought that their country might gain by joining the proposed Commonwealth and the common market it offered them. Indeed the Australian Constitution still has a sentence envisaging that New Zealand might one day join in.

In the 1980s, unexpectedly, New Zealand began to join the Australian common market and now is virtually a full member: a fact known by nearly everyone in New Zealand but by few in Australia. Since one of the vital and original aims of the

Commonwealth was to set up a huge common market in 1901, New Zealand belatedly has shared in the rewards of that market without having to take part in a referendum and without having to join the Commonwealth. New Zealand today would be in even more serious economic difficulties but for its access to the Australian market and the right of its people to migrate freely to and fro across the Tasman.

All in all, the Australian economy—and New Zealand's too—has gained much from the creation of the Commonwealth. That is something worth celebrating.

Aborigines

Aborigines for a long period were not gainers from the creation of the Commonwealth. For much of that time they continued to live on the fringe: they were seen as outsiders in their own homeland. In the last 30 years, however, they have gained. The gains have not been anywhere near as considerable as they hoped, but gains there are.

If Australia still consisted of six or even three sovereign states, the attempts to improve the Aborigines' wellbeing, health, status, self esteem and opportunities would have been fewer and less determined and less comprehensive. One of the noticeable gains in the last thirty 30 is the academic and public recognition of how long Aborigines have inhabited this continent and what they achieved. Even that gain owed much to Commonwealth initiatives and especially the work of the Australian National University.

I should add that here I am not asking the crucial and complex question: how much have Aborigines gained and lost from the coming of Europeans in the last two centuries? That question lies outside the topic of this address. Rather I am looking only at the century since federation and simply asking whether the Commonwealth in later years has been effectively encouraged, by Australians both black and white, to try to usher in a new era for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

The environment and nationalism

Nationalism, a complicated phenomenon, has not increased on all fronts since 1901. On the other hand, the sense of feeling at home in a highly distinctive set of landscapes—and that is a vital form of nationalism—has increased substantially. The typical Australian does not feel as much at home in this land as does the typical Aborigine still living in traditional lands, but the sense of belonging has grown for the typical Australian. The creation of the Commonwealth, and the accompanying feeling of affinity with a whole continent, is something that should be celebrated.

Since 1901, the average Australian's concern for the environment has been transformed. Uluru—alias Ayers Rock—reflects the swing in attitude. It was of little appeal to Australians as late as 1950, partly because it was inaccessible. In its ability to fire the imagination, it ranked well below such popular landmarks as the Dog on the Tuckerbox at Gundagai and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. And yet today, the Rock is one of the best known Australian symbols, possibly ranking with the Opera House in Sydney. I am not sure whether it completely fires the imagination of most Australians. I am not sure whether it quite matches the emotional superlatives of the tourism publicity, but it has a national prestige quite unimaginable half a century ago.

The extraordinary increase in the affection or tolerance of the typical Australian towards wildernesses is partly a mirror of the continuing rise of Australian nationalism and the sense of belonging. When I was a child, wilderness was a frightening word in the Australian vocabulary: it is now a friendlier word. That in itself is a profound change.

The new attitude to the environment is also a reflection of the damage done to soils, plant and animal species, and parts of the landscape in the preceding two centuries. The sense of damage, the attempt to reckon the damage, is a recent occurrence.

And yet much of the damage reflects the fact that Australia has been so successful as an economic pioneer—and successful in the face of acute difficulties, whether distance, aridity, puzzling geology, hungry soils and unfamiliar vegetation. The devising and applying of new technology—whether the coming of aircraft, new metallurgy or big dams—has underwritten so much economic development in Australia in the last two centuries and has led to the supplying of large quantities of food, fibres and minerals to other nations. At times when food was scarce and malnutrition widespread, tens of millions of people gained from Australia's economic development. The harm to the environment is the other side of the coin. We tend to see either the head or the tail of the coin—and not both sides—when we debate such topics.

Most Australians see their nation's history in the Twentieth Century as a pronounced success, though they will not necessarily agree on what has been most successful. Many Australians will single out athletic nationalism—the nation's achievement in producing so many heroes in war and champions in sport. Others will argue that Australia's special achievement is a way of life which combines an abundance of space by world standards, a relatively favourable climate and a high degree of prosperity and leisure—it should be noted that some of these good things came without us working for them. Another group will see high merit in Australia's vigorous democracy or its ingenuity in coping with physical obstacles.

In contrast, a minority of Australians see their nation's failures as so conspicuous that they outweigh the merits. They can point to the plight of most Aborigines until recent times and the neglect of the environment. I doubt whether these defects really outweigh the merits, but opinions will differ.

My view is that by world standards Australia has had a very successful history since 1901. Few nations have had more success, especially when the obstacles are considered. The nation's failures are also many, and some are beyond dispute. And yet this remains a place of enormous hope and opportunity. Edmund Barton, before he became the nation's first prime minister, captured that sense of opportunity and privilege too. He penned the stirring words: 'For the first time in history we have a nation for a continent, and a continent for a nation.'



Question — Your point about Launceston and Darwin and the number of states that have been created in America, made me think of Canada. Canada, which federated in 1867, has had five more states created since it federated, and in 1982 it put through a Constitution Act, which referred to the need for a bill of rights, the rights of aborigines and also education. Do you not think that Australia should take a leaf out of Canada's book and bring in—in the next 20 years I hope—a Constitution Act, to update the need for a bill of rights, the needs of aborigines and also possibly the need for a flag which reflects our life and the environment?

Geoffrey Blainey — My view is that there's much to be said for a bill of rights. It's great to have rights which are proclaimed and which the nation honours. On the other hand, I have considerable doubts. You see, we had a bill of rights before the Federal Parliament for a long period in the 1980s—the longest time, I think, any bill had been debated by the Federal Parliament—and it was eventually rejected. My view is that while a bill of rights has many advantages—especially in inspirational terms—it sets out a whole lot of values and claims, many of which are from time to time in collision with one another. And once you have a bill of rights, the High Court will decide, when two rights are in collision, which right should have precedence. In my view, in a democracy, that is a task for, and the responsibility of, the Federal Parliament, rather than the High Court.

So while a bill of rights has certain advantages, it weakens democracy by taking away from an elected house, and putting in the hands of a learned and unelected house, one of the most important of all decisions a nation can make: its main values and priorities.

The comparison with Canada is very interesting, and I should know the answer to this: why it is that—except for the recent attempt to create self-government in the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory's recent march towards what I ultimately assume will be statehood—so little has been done. Of course, the existing states are strongly opposed to the creation of new states. Queensland and Western Australia especially don't want new states, because the new states would be cut out of their territory, and make them less productive.

It is inconceivable that in the next five or ten years the Northern Territory will not become a separate state, and once that happens—although it won't have full Senate representation—I would think a new state movement will blossom in North Queensland. North Queensland has a much stronger argument for a separate state than the Northern Territory, because it has a larger population and a much stronger economic base. But North Queensland of course has the big problem that Cairns and Townsville are rivals like Melbourne and Sydney, and one wonders whether Charters Towers or some other poor benighted town will have to become their 'Canberra'.

Question — Can you comment on the role of the High Court in the shaping and direction of Australia and its Constitution? Can you also comment on compulsory voting and how it shapes Australia's destiny?

Geoffrey Blainey — Australia pioneered compulsory voting, and if it wasn't the first in the world, it was close to it. It started as a state experiment and of course the Federal Parliament took it up. It was a Tasmanian backbencher who introduced

legislation in the 1920s to introduce compulsory voting in federal elections. I have read his speeches, and he said that once everybody had to vote, 'it would lead to a transformation in public knowledge.' I have yet to see that transformation, but maybe my eyesight is not as good as that of the revered 1920s member of Parliament.

I don't particularly favour compulsory voting, but we've got it and I have a fifty-fifty attitude towards it. It pronounces that as a citizen you have responsibilities, and one of these responsibilities is to vote. Another advantage with compulsory voting, is that a federal election day has been turned into a kind of 'national day', and election night is a special kind of night, with a lot of national feeling, as well as partisan feeling, in the air. It really is a very special occasion in Australia, such as most European countries and Britain don't have on their election days. But I remain uneasy about the idea of compulsory voting. We make citizenship easier to acquire in Australia than in almost any other country in the world, and then we straight away compel new citizens to vote.

Question — And the role of the High Court?

Geoffrey Blainey — I've been an Australian historian for a long time—I began to write my first book in 1951, and I've written all kinds of histories—but I didn't realise for a long time that the High Court was so important. I don't think it quite catches our imagination until every now and then we either see something that it does that we strongly approve of, or that we object to. I sometimes think that the High Court sees itself as the third parliament, rather than the High Court that was envisaged by the founders of the Commonwealth. I suppose you can't stop the High Court occasionally seeing itself as the third parliament. I would have to say that, generally, we have been well served by the High Court, but I think democracy is endangered if a High Court sees itself increasingly as a third parliament—and therefore a superior parliament.

Question — I was interested in your comments about Western Australia and Queensland possibly having the best case for seceding. I may be wrong, but I don't believe they were doing particularly well up to 1901, and they certainly weren't doing particularly well when they had their own taxing power. It's only virtually since they have had extra returns under the Commonwealth taxing arrangements that they've done spectacularly well.

Geoffrey Blainey — I'm quite happy with some of those comments. Western Australia did miserably in the Nineteenth Century. They even actually invited Britain to send convicts there at a time when eastern Australia was saying: 'We've had enough of your convicts.' Western Australia was hoping that their shrivelled economy would grow a little if convicts increased the purchasing power. But in the 1890s of course, Western Australia had those great gold discoveries, and when it made the decision to join federation it was booming. Likewise Queensland, by the 1890s, was doing better and had greater optimism than either Victoria or New South Wales. So I think that those two states came into federation believing that they could, if they so desired, have stayed outside of it.

My view is that it was much better for Australia if they stayed in the federation. But I have no doubt that there have been decades in the last half century when both Western Australia and Queensland would have been decidedly better off if they could have

shaped their own economic policies, providing they managed to use some of their surplus revenue to pay somebody else to defend them.

Question — In celebrating the centenary of federation, is there a risk of repeating the error that seemed evident in the republican drive in the 1990s, in that it's asking the Australian people to know more about their Constitution, and like it better? Do you think there's a risk that the celebration of federation and its centenary will perpetuate some of this resentment at elite-driven nationalism in Australia?

Geoffrey Blainey — I suppose in a sense, it was elite-driven, but most activist movements are by some definition elite or elite-driven. If I had to comment on the republican movement of the 1990s (of which I wasn't a member) I would say this. In the 1890s when the people of the six colonies made the ultimate decision on whether they should federate or not, the belief was strong that you not only had to listen to supporters of federation, and the kind of Australia they wanted, but you also had to listen very closely to the complaints of people who didn't think they wanted a federation, but who had a vote and whose voice was entitled to be heard.

The Constitution that our nation finally received, and which was put into effect on 1 January 1901, was really a series of compromises. No group, no state, got its own way. Throughout the debates in the Convention and the debates that took place in mechanics' institutes and schools of arts, people said: 'This is our country, and even if we're not sure whether we're going to vote for the Commonwealth or not, we're entitled to have our doubts and our grievances listened to.'

To me, a hallmark of the republican movement in the 1990s was that it was not interested in the opposition. When Mr Keating set up his first committee led by Mr Turnbull to do the initial shaping of the republic, there was no place for non-republicans. He said right from the outset that this must be a controlled movement. I was a member of the Constitutional Convention, and while I opposed the proposed republic, my mind was not fixed when I went to the Convention; and from time to time, even though I was not persuaded by their model, I made suggestions that I thought would make it a better model. In other words, if they were going to win, it was best that they had a better kind of republic than the one they were proposing.

There was no way under the sun that outsiders at the Constitutional Convention could influence the mainstream republican movement. And that's one of the reasons why they lost. If you are going to reshape the nation, you have to make concessions to the potential losers as well as produce a model that your own side will glory in. This is not often said, but one of the reasons why the Australian Constitution has been so rarely changed—when change has been put to the people at referendum—is that the Constitution reflected a series of compromises, rather than the victory of one or other group of the 1890s. And that compromise component is one of the reasons which has made it enduring, and rather difficult to change.

