

'Is It Not Time?'

The National Australasian Convention of 1891 A milestone on the road to federation

The Rt Hon. Sir Zelman Cowen

On March 2, 1891, the National Australasian Convention met in Sydney, and on April 9 it adopted the draft of a bill to constitute the Commonwealth of Australia. This done, its work was completed. The delegates to the Convention were representatives of the parliaments of the six colonies and there were three representatives from New Zealand. It was a distinguished body; Bernhard Wise of New South Wales, who was a member of the later constitutional convention of 1897-8, and who somehow had been invited to participate in the drafting work done under Sir Samuel Griffith's leadership for the Constitutional Committee on board the Queensland Government yacht *Lucinda* late in March 1891, characterised the 1891 Convention as

beyond all dispute the most august assembly which Australia had ever seen. The majority of its members were men who yielded to none of their compatriots in their fitness to do the work which had to be done. They had all risen to positions of eminence ... by their own merits and force of character ... their number included all the Prime Ministers of Australia and nine others ... who had held the office of Prime Minister in former Governments. They had been elected by all the Parliaments of the Colonies, and therefore, in a constitutional sense, they represented all the people of Australia.¹

Alfred Deakin of Victoria who played an important part in this, as in earlier and later meetings and conventions leading to federation and who after federation served three times as Prime Minister of the Commonwealth, spoke of it in like terms. More particularly he spoke about the inner character of the Convention of 1891.

Critics who look to the record of our debates ... will not derive ... a full view of all the circumstances which have been operating upon the minds of hon. members. There is much unstated in that record, because the delegates to this Convention have practically lived together for six weeks in private as well as in public intercourse, and from the natural action and reaction of mind upon mind have been gradually shaping their thoughts upon this great question. The bill which we present is the result of a far more intricate, intellectual process than is exhibited in our debates; unless the atmosphere in which we have lived as well as worked is taken into consideration, the measure as it stands will not be fully understood.²

This spirit was not effectively communicated to the colonial legislatures and to the people of Australia. The feelings which animated Deakin were not shared by all of his political contemporaries. So it was that, as Deakin recounted in *The Federal Story*, the 1891 Convention marked only another step in the development of the federal

¹ Bernhard Ringrose Wise, *The Making of the Australian Commonwealth 1889-1900*, Longmans, Green, and Co., London, 1913, p 116.

² *Official Report of the National Australasian Convention and Debates*, Sydney, 1891, reprint Legal Books Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1986, p 914.

principle.³ It was not until January 1, 1901, almost ten years later, that the Commonwealth of Australia came into being and then with a constitution which was the product of the deliberations and decisions of a later convention which met successively in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne in 1897 and 1898. Its draft was ultimately approved by referenda in the six colonies, and, with some amendments, was enacted by the United Kingdom Parliament, whose legislative sovereignty was undisputed, in 1900. When the later Convention addressed its tasks in Adelaide in 1897, it was formally agreed to proceed *de novo*, and not to take the 1891 bill as a starting text. There is no doubt however that, in practical terms, it was taken by the great majority of the members of the later convention as the basic draft, and a reading of the two constitutional texts clearly demonstrates this, although there were, of course, some significant differences and changes.

In its shape and style the 1891 bill owed much to the great skills and authority of one man, Sir Samuel Griffith, then Premier of Queensland. Deakin speaks of 'the simple and sometimes stately language of Sir Samuel Griffith's bill'. By 1893 Griffith had become Chief Justice of Queensland and had withdrawn from active political life and participation. While, therefore, he was not a member of the later and decisive federal Convention, he exercised influence by writings and speech, and by the private expression and communication of views. It was said that his support for the bill influenced the outcome of the referendum in Queensland which approved the bill. It was said, as well, that his influence and his drafting were influential in determining the final provision relating to the Privy Council appeal, an activity which did not please Deakin, Barton and their colleagues who were members of the delegation negotiating the passage of the bill through the United Kingdom Parliament, and locked in dispute with Joseph Chamberlain on this point.

In the course of the present decade we shall mark the centenary of the events of the 1890s which are milestones on the road to federation, and this, the 1891 Convention, is one of them. These commemorations will culminate in the celebration of one hundred years of federation. January 1, 1901 was the birthday of the Commonwealth; the birthday of a whole people, as Deakin proudly and rightly claimed. This has always seemed to me to be a most significant national occasion. I am puzzled by the judgment that there is little 'colour' in the events which produced the constitution. It is, perhaps, too much to look for popular appeal in the text of a legislative instrument, and we have never spoken of our constitutional instrument in terms comparable with those which Thomas Jefferson used in respect of the United States Constitution. He spoke of that instrument as unquestionably the wisest ever yet presented to men, as classic a piece of negotiation as it was possible to imagine. I do not think that there is profit in extended discussion of this matter. I believe however, that we have reason for pride in the skilled handiwork and historic contribution of Griffith and his colleagues in 1891 and in the subsequent work of Barton and Deakin and those who worked with them in 1897-8.

In the course of the Victorian election of 1883, the 'stalwart federalist' James Service posed the issue which I have taken as the title of this lecture. 'Is it not time' he asked 'that we should merge the name of Victorians and of New South Welshmen and South Australians into Australians?' The appropriateness of some form of association between the colonies had been raised in mid-century by imperial authorities who saw intercolonial tariff barriers as undesirable, but at that time there was little interest in such proposals. For the most part, the individual colonies were preoccupied with domestic concerns and, with constitutional progress towards internal self-

3 Alfred Deakin, *The Federal Story*, ed. J.A. La Nauze, Melbourne University Press, 1963.

government. Sir Robert Garran, whose long life began in Sydney in 1867, wrote in his autobiography *Prosper the Commonwealth*⁴ that it is hard for Australians who did not know the pre-federation days to realise how separate were the six colonies. *Australia* was a geographical expression with no political entity behind it. There was little intercolonial travel and that mainly by sea. Colonies set up customs houses against one another and they grew up as a set of stand-offish neighbours. The case of Western Australia was extreme. As a New Zealand delegate to the Melbourne Conference of 1890 put it, the 1200 miles of sea which separated New Zealand from eastern Australia provided 1200 impediments to the inclusion of his country into any project of Australian federation, and Western Australia was farther away still from the major areas of Australian population and settlement in the east. It was difficult to include under a meaningful common defence umbrella. It had its own distinctive problems largely derived from the tyranny of distance.

Be it so, the 1880s saw moves towards some closer association on the part of the colonies. Sir Henry Parkes of New South Wales, at an intercolonial conference in 1880, called for a Federal Council as a prelude to a federal organisation. In 1882 the Victorian Assembly discussed the desirability of calling a conference to explore the possibilities of federal union.

There were external security concerns and anxieties regarding the intentions and activities of European powers in adjacent areas. Action by the Queensland government to forestall German intervention by raising the flag in East New Guinea in 1883 was disallowed by the British government and there were concerns about French activities in the New Hebrides and New Caledonia. Deakin recalled his own exchanges over these matters with the Marquess of Salisbury at the Colonial Conference in London in 1887. Naval defence was a matter of active concern and negotiation; and the report by a British military expert, Major-General Bevan Edwards, late in 1889, which recommended federation of the colonial military forces was the catalyst for action by Sir Henry Parkes calling for federation of the Australian colonies. Earlier, in 1883, the completion of the rail link between Sydney and Melbourne had prompted a further call by James Service, 'We want federation and we want it now', and for a conference which, in the event, met in Sydney. Deakin's distinguished biographer, John La Nauze, describes this as an event 'with which the history of the federal movement as distinct from the federal idea really began.' Out of that meeting emerged the Federal Council of Australasia, backed by imperial legislation, but defective in that it had limited legislative, no executive, and no power to raise revenue. Garran called it a 'mouse'; it suffered from the non-participation of New South Wales, and that colony's leading political figure, Parkes, who took no part in the conference of 1883, regarded it as ineffective, as a 'rickety body' and as an impediment to real federation. In mid-1889 Parkes, having resolved to commit himself to the cause of federation, proposed to Gillies, the Premier of Victoria, that appropriate common action should be taken. The Edwards report fitted this design very well, and, as Deakin with some irony relates in *The Federal Story*, Parkes 'thought it advisable to make his entry upon the Federal stage'.⁵ Bernhard Wise writes of the historic speech, keyed to the Edwards' report, which Parkes delivered at Tenterfield some two weeks after the publication of that report.

There, on October 24, 1889, Sir Henry Parkes made the great speech, which, although its significance was not appreciated fully at the time, marks in decisive fashion the beginning of a new era in Australian politics. Others

4 R.R. Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1958.

5 Deakin, *op. cit.*, p 26.

before him had advocated Federation; but he was the first who made his appeal directly to the patriotism of the people; so that, from this day forward, the desire for Union, which had floated before men's minds as a vague aspiration for many years, took definite shape.⁶

Parkes' political colleagues in Victoria and elsewhere were more cautious, and perhaps doubtful of his motives. They suggested that it might be a better course for New South Wales to join the Federal Council and so to strengthen the existing body which was debilitated by New South Wales' abstention from membership. Ultimately Parkes' call for action prevailed over the suspicions of his colleagues, and a conference, representative of *governments*, met in Melbourne early in 1890. It was introduced by two historic speeches at the opening banquet, in one of which Parkes made the historic utterance, 'The crimson thread of kinship runs through us all'.⁷ The other was by James Service, now at the end of his career, who also coined a word image which has its historic place in our federal history.

Probably the first question, and the most difficult which the conference will have to decide, is that referring to a common tariff, or the question of a common fiscal policy ... I have no hesitation whatever in saying, that this is to me the lion in the way; and I go further and say, that the conference must either kill the lion or the lion will kill it ... I think a national constitution for Australasia, without providing for a uniform fiscal policy, would be a downright absurdity.⁸

So the image of the lion in the path was introduced into our federal history.

At Melbourne, Parkes was subject to some criticism for his attitude to the Federal Council, but his central resolution for an early union 'under one legislative and executive government on principles just to the several colonies' was adopted. Deakin moved the motions which called for steps to be taken to induce the colonial legislatures to appoint delegates to a National Australasian Convention to consider and to report on an adequate scheme for a federal constitution.

So it was that the stage was set for the meeting of the convention of 1891. It was fitting that Parkes should be designated as President of the Convention not only because he was the host Premier, but also, and particularly because his had been the great achievement which had brought it into existence. There can be no doubt of the judgment of Parkes' biographer, Professor Martin, that he had been the major and dominating figure at the Melbourne meeting. As Sir Robert Garran, who as a 'very junior barrister in waiting' observing the proceedings of the 1891 meeting, wrote in *Prosper the Commonwealth* more than sixty years later 'it was Parkes's successful leadership of the movement up to that stage (1891) that gave him the title of the 'Father of Federation'. But he was not destined to live to lead his people into the Promised Land.'⁹ Parkes was born in 1815; he was well into his eighth decade when he called for and attended the Melbourne Conference of 1890 and the Sydney Convention of 1891. He failed however to carry the project forward, after giving up on the effort to have the 1891 draft constitution bill considered by the New South Wales Parliament, and fell from office late in the year, though he remained in

6 Wise, *op. cit.*, p 4.

7 *Argus*, 7 February 1890.

8 *Argus*, 7 February 1890.

9 Garran, *op. cit.*, p 91.

Parliament as a private member until 1894. In 1896 he made a bid for re-election, but in that year he died.

To go back to March 1891, Parkes, having conducted preliminary private meetings to shape the business and particularly the form of the resolutions which provided the basis for the opening debates of the Sydney Convention, introduced them. As Deakin recorded in *The Federal Story*,

In the Convention his contributions were limited to consideration of a few first principles such as many there might have uttered and were certainly surpassed by several of the best speeches. But in Manner he remained from first to last the Chief and leader of the whole Convention.¹⁰

Deakin, of whom it was justly said that he was always an uninhibited chronicler of his contemporaries' foibles, spread himself in his portrait of Sir Henry, and these pages of *The Federal Story* are highly recommended reading. Parkes did not like competitors. The descriptions of Sir George Grey of New Zealand and Sir Henry competing with and reacting to one another are specially pleasing.

At the end, Deakin's judgement was that Parkes 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 in his own colony and achieve a great reputation outside it.¹¹

To this Deakin adds that it was always a problem with Parkes as with Disraeli (and Parkes would not have been averse to the eminent comparison) where the 'actor, posture maker, and would-be sphinx ended or where the actual man underneath began'.

If Parkes was not equipped for constitution-making, he made one important contribution to the instrument; it is he who was responsible for the choice of Commonwealth as the title of the new entity. There was recent acquaintance with the term; James Bryce's *American Commonwealth*¹² had been published in 1888 and must have been known to at least some members of the Convention. Deakin suggests that Parkes' familiarity with English seventeenth century history commended the title to him. To others, this history and the republican connotations of 'Commonwealth' made it unattractive. So John Forrest of Western Australia opposed the proposal on the ground that it referred to a period of English history 'which was not very glorious'. He preferred 'the Federated States of Australia'. In committee, Parkes' original proposal for 'Commonwealth' was rejected in favour of some such title as that suggested by Forrest, and Deakin relates that while he at first was not a supporter of Commonwealth, he changed his mind, seeing the 'rival epithets as barbarous, clumsy and unepithetic'.¹³ An energetic canvass carried the day for Parkes' proposal by the narrowest of margins, and the draft which was finally approved on 9 April was

¹⁰ Deakin, *op. cit.*, p 52.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p 28.

¹² James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, London, 1888.

¹³ Deakin, *op. cit.*, p 49.

designated as a Draft Bill to Constitute the Commonwealth of Australia.¹⁴ And so it ultimately survived and prevailed in the 1898 text and in the Constitution as finally enacted.

The course that the Convention took may be briefly related. It fell to Parkes, elected as President, to introduce a series of resolutions on which extended debate followed. Griffith followed Parkes, and from this time on he assumed a leadership role in both plenary session and in committee. In mid-March, three committees were designated and appointed: the Committee on Constitutional Machinery and the Distribution of Functions and Powers; the Committee on Provisions relating to Finance, Taxation, and Trade Regulations; and the Committee on the Establishment of a Federal Judiciary; its Powers and its Functions, the latter two reporting to the Committee on Constitutional Machinery and the Distribution of Functions and Powers. Within the Constitutional Committee there was a sub-committee concerned principally with drafting, which comprised Samuel Walker Griffith, Edmund Barton, Andrew Inglis Clark, Charles Cameron Kingston and for some time, as an invited non-member of the Convention, Bernhard Wise. Some drafting work was carried out on board the Queensland government yacht, *Lucinda*, at times Griffith's base for work and for entertainment. Wise, writing more than twenty years after the work was done, pointed to one distraction arising from the use of the *Lucinda* for these purposes. '... the occasional missing of the happiest turn of phrase by these distinguished draftsmen may have been due to the sea-sickness, which followed the surreptitious heading of the steamer out to sea, and the rise of a wind before she could return to harbour!'¹⁵ At the end of May, the Committee on Constitutional Machinery and the Distribution of Functions and Powers reported to the full Convention and debate was concluded with the adoption of the Constitution on April 9. The whole work was directed with conspicuous skill and great commitment by Griffith whose association with the federal movement had gone back to the Colonial Conference of 1883, and who was, at the time of the 1891 Convention, Chairman of the Federal Council (which covering clause 6 of the draft constitution bill proposed for extinction). Deakin, in company with others, spoke generously and in high praise of Griffith's work. 'In every clause the measure bore the stamp of Sir Samuel Griffith's patient and untiring handiwork, his terse clear style and force of expression. There are few even in the mother country or the United States who could have accomplished such a piece of draftsmanship with the same finish at the same time.' This is just, and it is clear that over the years Griffith had grown in stature and conviction. 'At its close Griffith's influence had become supreme ... No other representative rivalled him.'¹⁶ There was other special expertise which contributed to the work. Andrew Inglis Clark brought to the Convention and to the drafting sub-committee, a special knowledge and an acute observer's experience of the United States and its constitution. Edmund Barton began to acquire the experience which led him to a notable leadership role in the subsequent course of the federal movement, both in the popular movement and in the Convention of 1897-8 and what followed. At the end,¹⁷ Griffith proposed to the Convention the next step: that provision be made by the parliaments of the several colonies for submitting for the approval of the people of the colonies respectively the Constitution as framed by this Convention. This achieved, there was to be an approach to the United Kingdom government for implementing action.

14 National Australasian Convention, *Official Record of the Proceedings and Debates*, Sydney, 1891, p clxvii.

15 Wise, *op. cit.*, p 126.

16 Deakin, *op. cit.*, p 52.

17 National Australasian Convention, *Official Record of the Proceedings and Debates*, Sydney, 1891, p cxxii.

New Zealand was represented at the Convention, as in the Melbourne Conference of 1890, and in earlier colonial conferences. Deakin gave some account of the role of its representatives and notably the formidable octogenarian, Sir George Grey. Although he, and his colleagues to a lesser extent, intervened in debate in the Convention, it was quickly made clear that New Zealand, for whose membership full provision was made in the draft constitution, would not at this time be part of federal Australia. As Deakin said, she looked forward to an independent policy and separate individuality in the southern seas. In the final negotiations, leading to the enactment of the Constitution Act in 1900, New Zealand had some part and suggested some amendments, but there was no serious intention of joining the federation. A New Zealand Royal Commission in 1901 firmly concluded that 'merely for the doubtful prospect of further trade with the Commonwealth of Australia, or for any advantage which might reasonably be expected to be derived ... from becoming a State ... New Zealand should not sacrifice her independence as a separate colony, but that she should maintain it under the political Constitution she at present enjoys.'¹⁸

What then was the shape of the Constitution which the Convention of 1891 adopted? The resolutions introduced by Parkes set out the fundamental principles of a federal union - intercolonial free trade, a common tariff, federal defence and the preservation of provincial rights in provincial matters. As machinery for giving effect to such principles, a complete national government equipped with legislative, executive and judicial arms, a legislature of two houses (one representing the nation, the other the states), and the British system of responsible government was provided for.

The debates exposed divisions between small and large state interests, and the small state pressure was for a strong Senate. The outcome was a Senate with equal representation from all States. Senators were to be directly chosen by the State *parliaments*, the proposal, which was lost in 1891 and was adopted in the later constitution of 1897-8, substituted direct popular election for the Senate. The debate on the powers of the two houses was vigorous; what emerged was acceptance of co-equal powers and authority save that appropriation and taxation bills must originate in the lower house; in the Senate they could not be amended but could be rejected. Drawing on South Australian experience, it was agreed that the Senate might return bills 'suggesting' amendments. This structure, strongly debated, and with other provisions relating to such matters as 'tacking' yielded an acceptable compromise which affirmed equality of the two houses while preserving the power of the purse in the lower, popular house.

The issues of responsible government were faced for the first time. All six colonies had achieved this status, Western Australia as recently as 1890. There was a novel question of adapting responsible government to a federal structure with two houses possessed, in the main, of co-ordinate powers. Clark, an admirer of the American system, would have preferred that system's separation of the executive and legislative branches, but his view did not command support. Hackett of Western Australia doubted if it was possible to combine responsible government with a federal system. In a famous statement he forecast that 'either responsible government will kill federation or federation will kill responsible government.' The Convention adopted Griffith's pragmatic view that in this context it was best to allow things to work themselves out. Without making any elaborate written statement about responsible government it should be provided that Ministers *might*, not must, be members of either House of Parliament. The final outcome in 1901 was, again without any

18 *Report of the Royal Commission on Federation, New Zealand, 1901, p xxiv.*

attempt at an elaboration of the principles of responsible government, to provide that Ministers *must* be, or become, members of either House.

James Service had emphasised in 1890 the need for a common fiscal policy, the task of achieving this was the 'lion in the path'. Parkes set forth in his resolutions the propositions that a common tariff and intercolonial free trade were fundamental principles of a federal union. In giving substance to these propositions the Convention did not appear to have the sense of confronting any formidable lions. So far as intercolonial - interstate - free trade was concerned, it agreed to a formulation that trade and commerce throughout the Commonwealth should be 'absolutely free'. Indeed the words 'absolutely free' appeared in Parkes' proposals from the earliest days of the Convention, and John La Nauze in tracing the history of this 'little bit of layman's language' points out that the words 'absolutely free' were fully and, at that time, without question accepted as appropriate by Griffith and other lawyer members of the Convention.¹⁹ It was only when in the Convention of 1897-8 Isaac Isaacs, who made his way into Australian politics after the 1891 Convention had taken place, warned that the words 'absolutely free' were over-large for the intended purposes, that Griffith began to have doubts. The words survived, and they have given rise to a huge volume of constitutional litigation.

In terms of taxing power, it was accepted that the power to lay duties of customs and excise, then the main sources of governmental revenue, must lie with the federal parliament. There were some concerns about the preservation of state interests in protective tariffs or in free trade, but as Garran says 'the foregone conclusion was that both sides had to "trust the Federal Parliament"',²⁰ and this was a notable feature of the Convention's approach, affected, no doubt, by confidence in the leadership. There was debate over the formula for the return of surplus revenue to the states; whether it should be on a population or contribution formula, and the latter prevailed.

So far as the judicature branch was concerned, there was provision for the establishment of a 'Supreme Court' of Australia, with a general appellate jurisdiction from federal and state courts. It ultimately emerged as the High Court of Australia, and its first powerful Chief Justice was Griffith himself, from 1903-1919. What was in contention in 1891, as later in 1897-8, and right up to the enactment of the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act in 1900, was the ambit and extent of the Privy Council appeal. As already recounted, Griffith from a base outside politics had an influential, if not a popular hand in settling the form of that in 1900.

The formula for amendment differed from that finally adopted, most significantly in providing for the election of conventions elected in the states by the voters to which proposals should be referred. The convention idea was replaced by the referendum in the convention of 1897-8, and in the constitution itself.

The delegates returned to their homes, as Deakin said, full of hope and confidence in the early establishment of an Australian union. Griffith proposed steps to achieve this, but as Garran put it, the 1891 Bill had been brought into the world with no real provision for the next step. It was vaguely contemplated that it should be discussed by the various parliaments, perhaps submitted to a second convention for final touches, and then sent to the British government to be passed into law, but no such programme was specified in advance. The lesson was learned after the 1891 initiative

19 J.A. La Nauze, 'A Little Bit of Lawyers' Language: The History of "Absolutely Free", 1890-1900' in A.W. Martin, (ed.), *Essays in Australian Federation*, Melbourne University Press, 1969.

20 Garran, *op. cit.*, p 98.

had failed. The later Convention was elected in accordance with the 'Corowa' plan of 1893 which also detailed the steps which were to follow the adoption of a draft Constitution by the Convention.

The end of the story of the 1891 Convention is rather dismal. Victoria took action, and both houses debated and amended the bill. The Tasmanian legislature also considered it, but action lapsed with the prorogation of Parliament. Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia all preferred to wait on New South Wales to give a lead. There, indeed, Parkes moved with a set of procedural proposals, to be met by forestalling and critical action by George Reid. While Reid's manoeuvre failed, Parkes appears to have been thrown out of stride, and, in what Barton later called an 'error of judgement', postponed action on the constitutional bill. Shortly thereafter Parliament was dissolved, and while Parkes retained office after the ensuing election, the balance of power was held by the new Labour Party whose attention was focussed upon a variety of more immediate social and political issues, and viewed federal proposals coolly. Parkes fell late in 1891 when the Labour Party withdrew support. Age was telling on him, and it was of this time that the story is told that Parkes handed over the reins of the federal movement to Edmund Barton - 'You are young and strong - you must take up Federation.' Be it so or not, there were other heavy preoccupations in the Australian colonies. In New South Wales, federation, in Garran's words, went into 'the discard'. In Sir John Robertson's jubilant phrase, it was 'as dead as Julius Caesar'. The reality was that while there had been a great sympathetic surge between 1889 and the completion of the Convention's work in April 1891, the majority of people in the colonies were well satisfied to go on as they had done in the past, and had to be educated to accept and adopt the federal idea.

'Left for dead by the politicians,' wrote Garran in *Prosper the Commonwealth* 'federation was brought to life by the people'.²¹ That story takes us beyond our present concerns, though inevitably in this narration, I have referred to later events and decisions. Seventeen members of the Convention of 1891 had places in the later Convention, and they carried the earlier experience into its proceedings.

With this, my story is told, but I add a personal word. I welcome the opportunity to recount to fellow Australians this chapter in our national history. It is a history which I learned surprisingly late. As a student in history and law in the University of Melbourne, I was taught very little about Australian history, certainly about Australian political history and less still of the history of federating and federal Australia. I could have recounted the chronology of the Kings and Queens of England with comfort and certainty. Of their representatives in the Commonwealth of Australia I could have said nothing at all, and of the perhaps more public figures, the Australian political leaders, virtually nothing. It said something about the way in which we valued ourselves and our history, and it was in urgent need of remedy. Things are better now.

There are valuable records. For those who have the wish to go to the sources, there are the records of the proceedings of the Conventions and meetings of the 1890s. There is that remarkable compendium by two men, both of whom had their parts to play - Quick and Garran's *Annotated Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia*. Sir Robert Garran at the end of a very long life given over to distinguished service to the Commonwealth, wrote an interesting short account of the events we have been following in his autobiography, *Prosper the Commonwealth*. The talented Bernhard Wise, who was among the sea-sick on the *Lucinda*, wrote a lively account, *The*

21 Garran, *op. cit.*, p 101.

Making of the Australian Commonwealth, which he described as 'the record by an eye witness of the making of the Commonwealth during the critical period from 1889 to 1990', which appeared a little more than twenty years after the events of the first Convention. There is that very special record, *The Federal Story* which is Deakin's own account of these and following events, and it happily became available, almost fifty years ago, in 1944.

Then, since the end of the war, we have come out of the shadows with excellent general and specialist histories of Australia, and some outstanding biographical studies of the *dramatis personae* of our story. I have had some of these works at hand in providing this short, and hopefully fair, account of the Convention of 1891. I hope as we move to the commemoration of Federation Day, that there will be successors who will narrate for their fellow Australians here in Canberra and elsewhere in Australia the story of these great events.