

How Popular was the Popular Federation Movement?

Brian de Garis

The phrase, 'the popular movement', to describe a phase in the series of events which led up to the federation of Australia on 1 January 1901, seems to have been coined by John Quick and Robert Garran in their historical introduction to *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth*, published in 1901. It was the sub-title they used for the ninth of the eighteen segments into which they divided their account of the federation movement and, like other aspects of that account, it has shaped the way later historians have perceived the lead up to federation.

This is an appropriate time to review the 'popular movement' because its landmarks included the foundation of the Australasian Federation League in Sydney on 3 July 1893 and the Corowa Conference held a few weeks later on 31 July and 1 August. It is to be hoped that the centenaries of both events will attract some media attention for they each played their part in the making of the Australian Commonwealth. The People's Federal Convention held at Bathurst in November 1896 was another landmark in the 'popular movement', which is generally reckoned to have ended with the first session of the Australasian Federal Convention held in Adelaide in March 1897.

The concept of Australian union was as old as the reality of disunion, federation having been talked of since the time of the Australian Colonies Government Act of 1851, which paved the way for the separation of Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland from New South Wales. But for most of the nineteenth century federation was little more than a subject for after-dinner rhetoric at intercolonial meetings. In the 1880s it became a more pressing issue for a time, largely in the context of unwelcome German and French activities in the Pacific region and the unwillingness of the British Government to intervene as many colonists wished. The idea was canvassed that Britain would be obliged to take more notice of Australian views if there was a single government able to speak with a united voice; and Britain itself encouraged that attitude.

The outcome was the Federal Council of Australasia, formed in 1883, but which proved an ineffective body with hopelessly limited powers which seldom met and was further handicapped by the refusal of NSW to become a member. The failure of the Federal Council did not seem to worry anyone too much, however, for the heat went out of the foreign policy issues which had called it into being. In 1889 Sir Henry Parkes attempted to breathe new life into the federation movement, his pretext being a report prepared by a British officer, Major-General Bevan Edwards, which suggested that the continent was vulnerable to Chinese attack and that the colonies ought to federate for defence reasons. After a good deal of skirmishing between political leaders from the various colonies, this initiative led eventually to the National Australasian Convention held in Sydney in 1891, at which a constitution bill was drafted of which the present Australian constitution is a direct descendant. The immediate aftermath of the Convention was disappointing for federalists, however. Parkes confirmed the suspicions of the cynics by delaying the presentation of the draft constitution for approval by the New South Wales Parliament and before long all colonies became preoccupied with depression, unemployment, the bank crashes and local political problems. Quick and Garran concluded their account of this part of the story with the words, 'In short, the Parliamentary process of dealing with the Commonwealth Bill had broken down hopelessly',¹ and it is difficult to quarrel with this conclusion. It was at this time that the 'popular movement' is said to have taken up the running.

In using the word 'popular', Quick and Garran seem to have meant, among other things, that enthusiasm for federation increased markedly around 1892-3 and that the initiative was taken by the people as opposed to politicians. Their account of this period began;

1. Sir J. Quick and R. R. Garran, *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth*, Sydney, 1901, 150.

Sir John Robertson's boast that 'Federation is as dead as Julius Caesar' was coming to be a favourite saying of anti-federalists; but as a matter of fact the federal spirit was only just beginning to awaken. The Commonwealth Bill, though neglected by the Parliaments, had helped to educate the people. Since 1891, public interest in the question of federation had been steadily gaining ground; from 1892 onwards it began to advance rapidly...²

When he returned to this subject more than half a century later in his autobiography, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, published in 1958, Garran echoed the same theme even more vigorously, writing, 'And the ghost walked! Left for dead by the politicians, federation was brought to life by the people'.³

This emphasis on the people as opposed to the politicians is, as Allan Martin noted many years ago, rather misleading.⁴ The formation of federation leagues, the organisation of conferences, and the dissemination of pro-federal ideas through the newspapers, was in most cases initiated by politicians, though they often worked deliberately from behind the scenes. What was new was the strategy of seeking to develop grass-roots support and to keep federation at arm's length from party politics. As William McMillan wrote to Sir Henry Parkes in June 1893;

I have seen Mr Barton and I have urged the necessity of making this movement a citizens' movement. With an executive from which members of Parliament are to be excluded. It seems to be quite impossible to construct it on any other lines during the present period of our political struggles.⁵

Barton had already, seven months earlier in December 1892, made what has been described as a 'missionary visit' to the New South Wales-Victoria border region along the Murray river, the result of which was the establishment of some fifteen pro-federal leagues in the first few months of 1893.⁶ Barton's role was explicitly acknowledged by Edward Wilson, the moving spirit behind the first of these leagues, when he wrote to Barton some months later saying, 'Mr Piggin and I were the first to adopt your suggestion to form a League in the Riverina'.⁷

Moreover, Wilson continued to look to Barton for guidance, writing in June 1893 that

all we want is Organisation and a Program. At present we are running about looking for an enemy, like a lot of new recruits, and tumbling over each other: we want a General to map out a plan of campaign.

A fortnight later he re-iterated, 'tell us *what we are to do* in order to bring about the desired result'.⁸

The meeting held on 3 July 1893 in the Sydney Town Hall to form the Australasian Federation League, which came to act as co-ordinating body for a growing network of metropolitan and country branches, was not so very different. The first resolution carried by the meeting was that the League should be 'an organisation of citizens owning no class distinction or party influences' and a later resolution decreed that no member of parliament could be elected to the Executive Committee.⁹ But the resolutions had all been carefully prepared in advance by a group in which politicians such as Barton and McMillan took the lead. Later, Barton advised Edward Dowling, the League's secretary:

I hope to have your hearty help in organising a strong program of Federation meetings. We should form Branch Leagues now at all these meetings and to do so we must have things settled

2. Ibid.

3. Sir Robert Randolph Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, Sydney, 1958, 101.

4. A.W. Martin, 'Economic Influences in the New Federation Movement', *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand: Selected Articles*, Melbourne, 1964, 215-25.

5. McMillan to Parkes, 21 June 1893, Parkes Correspondence, Vol. 14, Mitchell Library, A884.

6. J. L. Whitaker, *Corowa for the Commonwealth. The History of the Border Movement*, National Library, MS.891.

7. Wilson to Barton, 30 June 1893, National Library, MS 47/2710.

8. Wilson to Barton, 13 June and 30 June 1893, National Library, MS 47/2705, 2710.

9. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 July 1893.

with the strong local men beforehand. I will set apart at least one night a week to speak for Federation ...¹⁰

It is said that Barton attended over three hundred meetings and made over a thousand speeches during the three years which followed,¹¹ both his health and his legal practice suffering in the process, though he was sometimes able to combine federalist activities in country areas with circuit court work. The network of League branches which grew up throughout New South Wales and in other colonies during these years certainly gave the cause a 'popular' face but the initiative came more from above than from below.

In Victoria, the Australian Natives' Association (the ANA) and its branches played a role similar to that of the federation leagues in New South Wales. Founded in the 1870s as a mutual benefit society, the ANA had in the 1880s become a political training ground for Australian-born males and was committed to the federal cause even before the 1891 Convention. In the period of the 'popular movement' its branches and its annual conferences regularly affirmed the importance of federation and it was represented at the Corowa and Bathurst gatherings. Like the Federation League, it kept party politics at arm's length; but also like the League, it was closely linked with leading politicians. Alfred Deakin, in particular, played much the same role in Victoria as Barton did north of the Murray. When the Australasian Federation League of Victoria was eventually constituted in July 1894, Sir John Madden, the Chief Justice, was elected President, Deakin declining this honour 'on the ground that his political connection rendered it inadvisable... for the good of the cause'.¹² Deakin did, however, become a Vice-President and, in due course, chairman of the executive, so the veneer of non-politicity was rather thin.

In describing the federal movement of the mid-1890s as 'popular', Quick and Garran probably also had in mind the procedure for advancing the cause which was first suggested at the Corowa Conference, in which both had played an active part. This conference was convened on the initiative of the Berrigan branch of the Federation League, though held at the Corowa courthouse, and was attended by seventy-four delegates, forty-three from League branches in the border region, ten from the ANA and the balance from various municipalities and organisations which included the Melbourne Chamber of Manufactures and the Imperial Federation League.¹³ Garran attended on behalf of the Sydney League; Quick on behalf of the Bendigo ANA. Conferences and conventions were common in the late nineteenth century but this one attracted attention because the Victorian Premier and Leader of the Opposition decided to pay a visit, coming up by special train from Melbourne to Wahgunyah from which they crossed the Murray to Corowa for an evening. The proceedings were, nevertheless, dull and uneventful apart from an episode late on the second day, after the Melbourne VIPs had returned home, when Herbert Barrett, a member of the Melbourne ANA Board of Directors, complained that the Conference had been all talk and no action. Although the official record does not record this, it seems that a number of young turks loudly agreed with him and that John Quick then moved for a brief adjournment during which he and a few others, including Garran, quickly drafted a resolution which had not appeared on the Agenda, which was carried unanimously.¹⁴ It read:

That in the opinion of this Conference the legislature of each Australasian colony should pass an act providing for the election of representatives to attend a statutory convention or congress to consider and adopt a bill to establish a federal constitution for Australia, and upon the adoption of such bill or measure it be submitted by some process of referendum to the verdict of each colony.¹⁵

Few seem to have attached any great importance to this resolution at the time. Indeed the Corowa Conference as a whole was laughed at by many observers, J C Neild describing it in *Cosmos* as a 'distressingly funny Federation-cum-protection function, at which Australian unity and long beers were

10. Barton to Dowling, 29 July 1894, National Library, MS 47/266.

11. John Reynolds, *Edmund Barton*, Sydney, 1948, 98.

12. *The Age*, 21 July 1894.

13. L.E. Fredman, 'A Note on the Corowa Conference of 1893', (1969) *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 49, Pt 4, 301-4.

14. Sir Robert Randolph Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, Sydney, 1958, 103-4.

15. *Official Report of the Federation Conference Held in the Court-House, Corowa, on Monday 31st July, and Tuesday, 1st August, 1893, Corowa, 1893*, 27.

discussed in one of the Murray hamlets'.¹⁶ The federation leagues in both Sydney and Melbourne had their reservations about the resolution which Quick had sponsored and twelve months elapsed before they were persuaded to endorse it. However, on a visit to Sydney, Quick saw the NSW Premier, George Reid, who had been excluded from the 1891 Convention and was generally disliked and distrusted by the leading federalists, and persuaded him to take an interest in his scheme.

The Corowa, or Quick, proposal was 'popular' in the sense that it envisaged a constitutional convention which unlike that of 1891, was directly elected by the people — or, at any rate, those of them who were male — rather than being nominated by governments. Furthermore, the draft constitution devised by the convention was to be voted upon by the people rather than simply being accepted or rejected by the colonial parliaments. The other attraction of this scheme was that it established a framework for continuing action once each colony had passed a single enabling act; further legislation would not necessarily be required so that the progress of the federal movement would be less dependent on the exigencies of day-to-day parliamentary politics.

In August 1894, Reid announced through the Governor's speech at the opening of the New South Wales Parliament that federation would 'speedily be placed upon a popular basis'¹⁷ and wrote to each of the other premiers inviting their attention to the position of the federal movement. Some of the others were wary but in November Reid followed up with telegrams suggesting a 'meeting of Premiers at Hobart in January upon questions of Federal Union intercolonial Free Trade Federal Defence and such other subjects as may be thought worthy of discussion'.¹⁸

This proposal was eventually accepted and the Premiers gathered in Hobart in January 1895 for a meeting which, in my opinion, was the pivotal event of the federation movement in the 1890s and far more significant than any of the 'popular' gatherings. In the space of a single evening Reid moved a succession of resolutions which received the support of Kingston from South Australia, Braddon from Tasmania, and Turner from Victoria and which committed their governments to; first, a new constitutional convention consisting of ten representatives from each colony, directly chosen by the electors; secondly, to the submission of the constitution so framed to a direct vote of electors; and, finally, to the enactment of the new constitution if it were to be accepted by the electors of three or more colonies. Hugh Nelson of Queensland accepted these resolutions whilst indicating dissatisfaction with the concept of approving a constitution by referendum. John Forrest of Western Australia endorsed the importance of federation but demurred from every aspect of the proposed procedure. Nevertheless, Turner and Kingston were commissioned to draft a model enabling bill which might be submitted to the parliament of each colony to give effect to the Conference resolutions and this document was endorsed later in the week.

It was to be a further two years before these decisions were implemented and the Convention elections held; and in the meantime a number of colonies had varied the provisions of the model enabling bill. But five of the six premiers who took part in the Hobart conference remained in office until 1899, by which time federation was assured, an unusual degree of political stability for those or perhaps any times. Though there were great personal and political differences between them, some level of trust or at least familiarity had been created which certainly contributed to the ultimate outcome. The procedure agreed to by the premiers was, of course, that which the Corowa Conference had recommended, a tribute to Quick's persistence as well as to the merit of his proposal. But it was their adoption of it which lent retrospective significance to Corowa.

I have not yet directly addressed the question of just how popular the federal ideal was in this mid-nineties period in the straight-forward sense of the level of support and enthusiasm. This is, of course, more difficult to assess with certainty. Edmund Barton expressed the opinion in December 1894 that:

Public feeling on this question is, to my mind, greatly underestimated by politicians, and they know not yet with how much danger to themselves. I am certain that as soon as the public of this colony have an opportunity, they will declare themselves strongly on this question...¹⁹

16. J.C. Neild, 'Obstacles To Federation', *Cosmos*, Vol. 1, No. 4, December 29, 1894, 215.

17. R.A. Pringle, 'The Workings of the Federation Movement in New South Wales 1891 — 1899: the roles of Parliament and Public Opinion', M.A. thesis Macquarie University, 1969, 114. This thesis is very helpful on aspects of the popular movement.

18. Reid to Braddon, 12 November 1894, Tasmania State Archives, P.O. 236/95, P.D. 1/69.

19. Minutes of Proceedings of Conference of Premiers, Hobart. South Australian Parliamentary Papers, 1895, Vol. 3, No. 38.

And the referenda of 1898-9 may be said to have proved him right, not only about New South Wales but all the colonies; for notwithstanding the hiccup in New South Wales in 1898 when the majority in favour of the Commonwealth Bill failed to reach the level required by parliament, the electors recorded an affirmative majority in every colony and on every occasion that they were given the opportunity to do so.

There is nevertheless a great deal of contemporary evidence of apathy in the 1894-6 period. Marian Aveling's history of the Australian Natives' Association certainly gives the impression that the sense of urgency had waned in Victoria and she cites *The Age* as commenting in 1893 that federation was 'not yet within the range of practical politics' and that 'all this windy talk about a United Australia is so much hysteria...'²⁰ In New South Wales, the emergence of the Labor Party, which tended to see federation as a distraction from the real issues, deflected a lot of political energy in other directions. Even Edward Wilson, the Federation League's indefatigable representative in the border region, reported in July 1895 that:

*The Federal flame burns somewhat dimly here just now. The freetrade government of New South Wales is engaged in erecting a species of fortress on the Murray River, in the shape of an elaborate Customs House, at a cost of more than L1000, as a perpetual menace to the hostile inhabitants of the adjacent colony of Victoria... The Building is known amongst us as 'Federation Villa'*²¹

From remote Western Australia, Winthrop Hackett had lamented to Barton in 1891 that the public feeling against federation 'amounts to absolute frenzy', and six years later a former Federation League secretary from South Australia who had moved further West reported that people there were interested in nothing but making money.²² In Queensland, the lack of enthusiasm was just as great for these two colonies did not feel ready for equal partnership with the others and had internal separatist movements to deal with. In South Australia, there seems to have been latent feeling in favour of federation but a belief that there was little point in pushing the issue until New South Wales and Victoria took the lead. In those colonies, many who professed to support federation were all too willing to squabble amongst themselves over the kind of federation that was desired. Even at the carefully orchestrated meetings which established the Sydney and Melbourne Federation Leagues, proceedings were in each case almost brought unstuck by the intervention of radicals who wanted a republican Australia or a guarantee that the future constitution would enshrine the principle of one man one vote.

When all this has been said, however, it remains true that a number of people devoted their lives through the 1890s to the attainment of federation and that, although the grass roots they cultivated were in large measure planted rather than a spontaneous growth, the ultimate harvest was an impressive one. Just how impressive is perhaps more apparent to us than it was to them because the notorious reluctance of the electorate since 1901 to countenance even the smallest change to the constitution makes the nation-wide vote in 1899 of 2.5 to 1 in favour of federating under the Commonwealth Bill seem even more striking. Why then did the enthusiasts labour so hard and why did the people respond, in the long run, so positively?

Clearly the state of the economy was a factor for, in the nineteenth century as in the twentieth, Australia entered the '90s in a depressed condition. For half a century, the six colonies had administered their affairs not merely separately but in competition with each other. Laws governing business and banking practice, weights and measures, and all the gamut of policies and practices which affect trade and commerce, including rail gauges, differed from one part of Australia to another. This was tolerable if irksome during the boom but the need for what would now be called microeconomic reform became overwhelming in the face of depression. Handing such issues over to a single federal government seemed the obvious, perhaps the only, way of achieving change. In particular, the differing tariff policies of the colonies, and especially of NSW and Victoria, could no longer be tolerated. Inter-colonial trade, by then as important to each colony as trade with Britain, had to be freed from barriers and restraints. Of course, this issue mainly concerned the business community which was not always able to convince the population at large of its importance. Those in the border regions faced the problems of border barriers in their day-to-day lives, however, which is why the Murray valley seemed a logical starting point for federal activity.

20. 'The Immediate Prospects of Federation', *Liberty*, 17 December 1894, 10.

21. M. Aveling, 'A History of the Australian Natives Association 1871-1900', PhD. thesis, Monash University, 1970, 286.

22. Wilson to Dowling, 9 July 1895, National Library, MS 47/2725.

The need for a unified economy has thus been seen as the launching pad for the popular federation movement; but it is clear that the real impetus came from the cities rather than the borders and mostly from lawyers and other professionals rather than from businessmen. For those whose primary goal was intercolonial free trade, federation was a means rather than an end; and, crucial though it is, microeconomic reform makes a poor rallying cry for nation-builders.

It is an inconvenient fact for historians, though, as it no doubt also was for the federalists, that other issues which are generally considered to have promoted interest in federation were at a lower ebb in the nineties than they had been in the eighties. Concern about the future of the Pacific had receded into the background; there was no credible threat to Australian security; and Chinese immigration was not a live issue — although fear of the yellow peril and general insecurity about Australia's isolated position at the bottom of the world were never far below the surface. These topics were all staple fare in federalist speechmaking and pamphleteering. It is hard to see why they were more potent than they had been a decade earlier when the reverse should have been true. But it is also hard to see how the debate on economic issues moved many hearts. Rival experts published long columns of statistical projections which I find difficult to make much sense of and I am not convinced that the average voter in the 1890s did any better. Rival speakers and rival newspapers flatly contradicted each other, day in day out. Most people must have been confused and I believe their attitudes towards federation owed more to instinct than to reason. That instinct seems to have been increasingly tinged with national sentiment.

Though it was not their exclusive preserve, the Australian-born were consistently to the fore in the federation movement and, by the 1890s, they were heavily in the majority and increasingly in control of the colonies. Strong though attachment to their own colony was for many, and pervasive though residual pride in Britishness also was, most colonists thought of themselves as Australians and were proud of it. There were, however, no compelling reasons why pride in Australia should be translated into the creation of an Australian nation-state in this period rather than earlier or later.

Federation was thus not the product of a popular movement in the sense of an irresistible tide of nationalism welling up from below and carrying the Commonwealth Constitution Bill of the conventions to an inevitable triumph. But the climate of opinion was such that the strong federal leadership of individuals such as Barton, Deakin, Kingston, Braddon and, in their own way, Reid and Forrest, drew a positive response. Even the anti-billites knew which way the tide was running and were at pains to argue that they too were federalists at heart — but, alas, the draft constitution was unsatisfactory or the time was not ripe.

This slow and, to some extent, subterranean groundswell was, I believe, more than a little teleological in character. Rather than being pushed forward towards federation by their history, the Australian colonists were drawn forward towards it by dreams of their destiny. 'Nothing but some appalling cataclysm of nature can prevent the progress of Australia towards a position of power and prominence in the world's history', opined Henry Gyles Turner of Victoria; whilst the Tasmanian federalist John Henry knew Australia to be 'inevitably destined to grow into a great nation, a power that will dominate the Southern Seas and take its part in the great family of nations'. Federation was seen as a step towards this destiny — as it had been for the great exemplar and role model, the United States of America.

The current talk of major constitutional change, coming as it does exactly one hundred years after the last round and in the same context of a depressed *fin de siècle* economy, irresistibly invites parallels, though I am more confident of the ability of the present to illuminate the past than of the past to illuminate the future.

One major difference between the 1890s and the 1990s is that federation could plausibly be presented as a cure for economic woes, as opening the door to microeconomic reform, whereas the present republican movement is vulnerable to the charge that it would do nothing for our economic woes and may be depicted as a deliberate distraction from them.

There may well be broad latent support in the community now for a republic, as there was then for a federal union, but it will be even more difficult to identify a compelling reason why the trauma associated with change should be undergone now rather later.

This makes it the more necessary, I suspect, for the republicans, if they are to have any hope of success, to emulate the federalists by creating a grassroots 'popular movement' at arm's length from party politics, and to do that they perhaps need to find some Bartons and Deakins; men, or perhaps this time women, who are of the political world but who are prepared to put constitutional change ahead of their careers, for a time.

Questioner — Would you like to comment on the recent press coverage of the secessionist movement in Western Australia and do you think that the costs and benefits have really been studied by such people?

Professor de Garis — I am not sure that I am fully cognisant of the press coverage because being isolated in Perth I do not see the full national spectrum of the press. It certainly has been fairly dismissive of the possibility of secession, and in my view rightly so. I am a born and bred Western Australian and like all Western Australians I believe that nobody over this side of the continent understands us properly and that we do not get a fair deal.

In my youth I used to toy with the idea that maybe secession had some merit but the late Henry Mayer, early in my academic career, argued this subject around with me for several hours on one occasion and left me totally persuaded that the costs and benefits really go the other way. Although you can make an economic case for Western Australia propping up the rest of the economy through its mineral exports, I believe that a rational balance sheet would show that there is really no benefit to Western Australia to secede and I do not believe that anybody who is voicing that at the moment is serious. So in that sense I think if the press has dismissed this fairly briskly, it is entirely justified in doing so.

Questioner — What was the percentage of people in individual colonies who actually bothered to vote in each of those referendums?

Professor de Garis — I have not got all that detail in front of me at the moment. We are talking in the days of optional voting and the percentage of people who voted in 1899, which is probably the best one to take because all the colonies were voting at the same time on the same basis then, was lower than at preceding general elections in each colony. However, in a number of colonies, plural voting still existed for ordinary parliamentary elections and it did not apply for the federation referendum. One elector had one vote on that occasion.

The exact extent to which that explains the discrepancy is something nobody has ever done the work on to be able to tell us. I am not sure that it would be possible to determine it. Although it has sometimes been argued by people who have looked at this that the turnout was low and that this does not prove immense popular enthusiasm, I think the figures nevertheless are pretty impressive. Even in the colonies where there was resistance to federation, it is broadly true that almost every constituency did actually have a majority in favour. It was not a matter of dissident minorities in one seat being coerced by large majorities in another.

Some parts of Australia were less enthusiastic than others, but the broad level of support was there. As I say, this result seems really more impressive in hindsight because of the reluctance of the electorate to change even details in the Constitution since then.

It has hard for us to appreciate just what a revolutionary change federation was because we have been accustomed to it for a long time now and there do not seem to have been any major barriers to federation. But it did involve half a dozen communities giving up their autonomy. They were totally self-governing communities. They had full sovereignty in their own hands. They really had nothing to do with each other constitutionally before 1901. They were all parts of the same British Empire but New South Wales and Victoria did not constitutionally have any greater relationship with each other than either of them did with the West Indies or South Africa.

It really was a very big change, even though it may seem to many of us to have been the logical one to endorse. In the end, I find the evidence that there was broad popular support for federation pretty persuasive, even though I do not believe that it was the outcome of what one might call a spontaneous popular movement.

Questioner — I heard that only Victoria had a majority of voters who were eligible that actually turned out. Is that not so?

Professor de Garis — That may be right. Participation rates in elections were always low. You have to look at the percentage of votes at the referendum in the context of the percentage of votes normally cast at an election. Although, as I say, they were a little lower, they were not spectacularly lower. Incidentally, the Victorian federalists did not bother to campaign much in 1899; they had had a thumping majority in 1898 and they found it hard to get the troops to turn out and do it all again when they knew their colony was going to get a vote in favour. So all the leaders of the federation movement in Victoria predicted that the actual vote would be down in 1899 and they were rather surprised that it

was substantially up despite the weaker efforts on their part. They felt that proved that there was even deeper support than they had previously understood there to be.

Questioner — In the discussions going on at the moment about change in a whole lot of areas, whether it is Aboriginal people, republicanism or whatever, the year 2000 has been focused on as an artificial target and a way of focusing attention. During the 1890s, was the turn of the century actually used as a time to aim for to bring change, or is this something that has happened in this particular decade?

Professor de Garis — I do not think it was. The federalists wanted to get it as soon as they could and they intended and expected for a long time that they were going to get it before 1 January 1901. Even at the time that the final referendum had been carried, further delay was forced on them by the reluctance of the British Government to enact the Constitution in precisely the form that the Australian colonists had approved it. So they had to send a delegation off to London and waste some months arguing with Joe Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for colonies, about one or two details concerning the High Court. I think if they had been able to get through all those formalities more rapidly they might have proclaimed the Commonwealth earlier. It was really only towards the end that the symbolic logic of beginning the new century began to get a grip on people's minds.

Questioner — Why have not the differences between the states been resolved — for example, the railway gauges — in all that time since Federation?

Professor de Garis — You need to ask the historians of the twentieth century, not the historians of the nineteenth century. It is interesting, because people argued in the 1890s that the need to clean up the rail gauges was an urgent reason for federating. J.C. Neild, the politician whom I quoted laughing at the Corowa conference, was particularly scathing in the same article on this subject. He said that people do not federate for the sake of railway gauges; it might be a nuisance but it is not that important. I suppose he was borne out by the long delay before governments finally got their act together on that.

A lot of the problems which seemed to loom large before Federation dropped into the background afterwards. I suppose it is really just a matter of the sheer expense of cleaning up railway gauges, together with the residual life that does remain in local politics and local communities in Australia. There was never any serious thought in the 1890s that the country might be totally unified, that you would have a single government which ran the whole country and no intervening government above the level of shire councils. It was always assumed that there had to be a role for state parliaments as well as federal parliament. In fact, the Constitution gave much greater and, as they saw it at the time, more important responsibilities to state parliaments than to the federal parliament.

Although a lot of the best talent went off to the federal sphere as soon as federation was achieved, there were still state politicians who were not going to be pushed around by people in the other states or by the federal government and who thought that narrow gauges or broad gauges had been perfectly good enough for their fathers and were going to be good enough for their children. It is really a part of the whole federal character of Australia which, although it has been eroded somewhat in the twentieth century — from a Perth perspective at any rate — still seems to be fairly strong.

Questioner — After Federation, the popular enthusiasm did subside. To what degree was it maintained? I think I read somewhere that Deakin, for example, felt that if there had been a vote a couple of years later it might not have done so well.

Professor de Garis — Yes, it did fall away. Part of the problem is that Australians are an undemonstrative people. There were no events which required them to give expressions of national fervour. Politics became much more complicated after Federation in many ways, and it took ten or fifteen years to sort out the relationship of the State parliaments to the Federal Parliament and to get the whole political party system realigned, because party politics had revolved so much around the tariff question in the nineteenth century. Free-traders versus protectionists was probably the most important dividing line between political parties, and that ceased to be a relevant issue at Federation. One reason why the free-traders had always dragged their heels on federation was that they could see that it was going to cut the ground from under them. So all that change and readjustment made the early federal period a businesslike one where lots of things were happening. But there were no big symbolic events to draw the community together in any way. This is why it has often been argued, though not entirely correctly, I think, that Gallipoli was more the birthplace of the Australian nation than Federation was.

As to whether it would have happened if the vote had been a few years later, I really do not know. Despite twenty-five or thirty years of studying this subject, I still do not feel entirely confident that I

really know why things happened when they did, and how they did. I can recount it, and I can give the best speculations that I can, but such a fundamental change involved so many people that it has to remain a bit mysterious. If you are studying an event where a few politicians have the decision in their hands, then you may begin to feel confident that at the end of the day you know what was going on in their minds. But federation required, not only the leadership of politicians, but it also required this mass turnout. It is much harder to explain why a whole community voted the way it did when there had been no really clear signs that that was what was going to happen. It was all a matter of gut feeling before, as well as gut feeling afterwards. I suppose what I am saying in a roundabout way is I do not have the faintest idea what would have happened if they had taken a federation vote a few years later.

Questioner — I am interested in why there was a move for federation at that time and not a republic. Can you give any thoughts on why there was interest in a federation and not a republic.

Professor de Garis — As I indicated in passing, there were individuals who believed that it ought to be a federal republic. The United States as a role model was, I think, a powerful influence. When it comes down to it I believe that the theory that if we went down the same path as America and federated we might end up like America — a great and powerful nation — was the kind of thing which people had in the back of their minds, and made them lean towards a federal union. For the same reason, some people argued that it ought to be a republican federal union. But they were a tiny minority on the left wing of politics. They were sometimes allied with the Labor Party but it was not an official Labor perspective. In the nineteenth century, Labor had other things much more on its mind than republicanism. So it really did not ever get to first base at that time. This is because the majority of Australians really were still devoted to Britain. It became fashionable in the late nineteenth century to laugh a bit at the monarchy, and the same sorts of scandals were being published about members of the royal family then, as now, which discredited some aspects of the British ties. But there were aspects of Britishness, the long cultural heritage going back to Shakespeare, which Australians wanted to claim just as much as people in England. The perceived genius of the British for parliamentary politics and democracy, the pride in the fact that British communities everywhere ran their affairs more efficiently and with less fuss than other communities — all these sorts of British values were still widely held in Australia. Most Australians in the 1890s had multiple loyalties, as I have written in other places. I believe that most Australians had a loyalty to their own colony. The rivalries between the New South Welshmen and the Victorians, between the South Australians and the West Australians, which now survive only really in football matches and the like were much stronger in the nineteenth century. People did identify with their own colonial community. They did identify themselves as British, and in some kind of growing way they also identified themselves as Australian. That is one of the reasons it was hard to get any kind of clear-cut outcome about political union. It meant giving up some of the loyalties or subordinating them to others, and in that equation the disenchantment with Britain or the desire for autonomy still was not strong enough.

Questioner — Could I ask you to go a little further along that line concerning the perception of the electorate when it faced the final plebiscite. Do you think the people understood anything of what did eventually happen — the chariot wheels of the Commonwealth, that sort of thing — or, on the contrary, did they have symbolic expectations which were vague and really saw the colonies as proceeding much as before with no great downside? Could they then have perceived anything of the way the nation would grow and the power that would move to the Commonwealth? If they had, how would they have voted?

Professor de Garis — We have got fairly clear evidence that Deakin, for example, not only expected something like the development of a powerful Commonwealth but wanted it and did not say so. He thought the first step was to get federation, take things quietly and not alarm people by talking about where this might all end up. On the other hand, the anti-federalists' strongest line was really the belief that the Commonwealth would become too powerful and subordinate the States to its chariot wheels. That line of thought was powerfully and repeatedly expressed over and over again.

I think, however, that the politicians who were saying those kinds of things were mainly concerned about the power of their State governments. The general leadership role of the Commonwealth in a broader community sense was something which was not really understood at all. They were simply saying, 'The New South Wales Parliament won't have enough money to do the things it ought to do because all the money will be with the Commonwealth'. They appeared to be fairly self-interested in the kinds of critique of possible growth of Commonwealth power which they were suggesting. Hints could easily be depicted as parochial and narrow minded.

Had people perceived where federation might have ended up, I guess probably some of them who voted yes would have voted no. It is rather like saying, if we could all understand in advance exactly what

married life was going to be like, probably not so many of us would get married, but at the end of the day many of us are glad that we did.

Questioner — You mentioned that there was relative political stability at the end of the 1890s. Do you think that was a result of apathy or a result of popular support? In turn, do you think the reason that the Constitution has been so hard to amend is a result of popular support for it or because of political apathy?

Professor de Garis — I do not think there was political apathy in the 1890s. I think it is partly a matter of coincidence that there was stability in a number of colonies at the same time. I think it is also in some way related to the growth of political parties. Pre-party politics in the earlier nineteenth century had been notoriously unstable because you need party discipline to keep your majority together. Back then, all you needed was a bit of a cabal over a drink in the bar one night and suddenly next day you find you do not have a majority any more.

Although party politics as we know it had not fully evolved at the end of the century, it was well on the way. I think a more disciplined mode of politics had been evolving for some time and that contributed to the stability. There had also been a fairly brisk turnover of governments at the beginning of the 1890s, as there always is in the face of depression, and as the economy began to improve a bit in the mid-1890s people decided to stick with the governments they had for another term. I think there were a variety of reasons for that political stability, and certainly not apathy. In fact, I suppose I would be of the view that the population at large were far more interested in politics in the nineteenth century than they are now. Certainly, if the attendance at political meetings and the number of individuals who were prepared to do things themselves of a political character is any guide, I think one would have to come to that conclusion.

As to whether it is apathy that is responsible for the difficulty in changing the Constitution, I do not think there are any real grounds for supposing that. Populations are naturally and perhaps rightly conservative about constitutional change. Unless they fully understand how it will affect them and they are convinced there is a strong case, then, provided the status quo seems reasonable, they prefer to stay with it. I think it is part of the 'if it isn't broken, let's not fix it' approach to life, which is a perfectly pragmatic and rational one. The fact that some politicians sometimes get themselves convinced that something is broken and needs fixing does not necessarily move the wider community, unless all the politicians agree to this, unless there is a broad basis for going to the community and saying, 'Look, we really do need your support. This change has to happen'.

On one or two occasions there has been that consensus and constitutional changes have been approved, but it is fairly rare. Normally when the Federal Government says, 'We want to change', the State Governments say, 'No, not on your life'; if the Liberals say they want a change, Labor says, 'Not on your life', and so referenda get drawn into the normal party politicking and/or the normal Federal-State politicking. I think that is one of the reasons why any profound change such as some people are seeking at the moment has to draw on some kind of non-party basis.