

## **Return Tickets at Single Fares: the Bathurst Convention as a Representative National Gathering**

*John Bannon*

On Monday 16 November 1896 at 10.40 am, about 150 delegates, quite a few less than the predicted 250, assembled for the opening of what was to be known as the People's Federal Convention<sup>1</sup>. Held in the heart of New South Wales as an initiative of the local mayor, an impressive roll call had been attracted to what was presented as an intercolonial conference of the popular movement in support of federation.

In his inaugural presidential address, on the second day of the Convention, Dr Machattie, mayor of Bathurst, described those present as 'delegates from all parts of Australasia' and 'representatives of the Australian colonies'. This, he declared,

has resulted in a People's Convention national in character whose deliberations will be carefully watched by hundreds of thousands in these colonies, and millions of our own blood ... in the dear old Motherland.<sup>2</sup>

This was certainly at odds with W.M. Hughes's (then a Labor member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly) characterisation of the delegates as comprising the result of 'the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Register* (Adelaide), 17 November 1896; *Age* (Melbourne), 17 November 1896. The number enrolled would have been nearer the higher figure, but a number of listed delegates did not come until later.

<sup>2</sup> Address on morning of Tuesday 17 November, *Proceedings, People's Federal Convention, Bathurst, November 1896*, Gordon & Gotch, Sydney, 1897, p. 78.

---

diligent scraping of parochial nobodies from all parts of the colonies',<sup>3</sup> or Haynes's description of them in the same debate as 'palpable schemers'.<sup>4</sup>

The organising committee clearly aimed to attract a large contingent from outside New South Wales. Dr Machattie, on its behalf, wrote to a number of newspapers in the colonies to publicise the event and encourage attendance.<sup>5</sup> For instance, his letter of 31 October was published in the *Adelaide Register*, thanking the press for their support in publicising the Convention and quoting Josiah Symon's endorsement of it as an 'educative and stimulating force'. 'The Committee', he said,

has done its best. If [people] don't rise to the present occasion their indifference proves that Bathurst has been more than right, for it will be an admission that they are generally in need of federal education.

Concessions for travel obtained from railways commissioners and the cheap living expenses provided incentives to attend, he concluded.<sup>6</sup>

Travel concessions had been a source of some dispute. When Victorian premier Turner anxiously sought South Australian premier Kingston's attitude to Bathurst, he was told that not only was the provincial government not sending any official delegates, but that rather than free passes, the railways commissioner was only prepared to provide 'return tickets at single fares on production of proper certificates' to accredited delegates.<sup>7</sup>

The press certainly gave support in South Australia. On the eve of the meeting the *Register* devoted an editorial to praising both the concept as 'the most important popular demonstration ever arranged in the colonies in support of federation', and the organisers for displaying 'splendid enterprise, liberality and tact'. Bathurst had 'set a remarkable example to other Australian centres by a practical self-sacrificing manifestation of the Federal spirit.' An important feature in its view was that a large majority of the delegates would not be members of Parliament but rather:

...men responsible only to themselves [and therefore] able to discuss federalism independently of any fear lest their opinions may affect political parties or personal relations with their constituents.<sup>8</sup>

There was awareness of the dispute in New South Wales over Bathurst's pretensions:

---

<sup>3</sup> *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates*, 11 November 1896, pp. 4986–7.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4989.

<sup>5</sup> These letters and many press releases and other material were all drafted for him by the indefatigable secretary William Astley. See David Headon's article on William Astley in this issue of *Papers on Parliament*.

<sup>6</sup> *Register* (Adelaide), 7 November 1896, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Kingston to Turner, telegrams, 30 October & 31 October, 1896, State Records Office, South Australia, GRG 1896, 24, 28, 314, 317.

<sup>8</sup> *Register* (Adelaide), 14 November 1896, p. 4. The reference to 'men' in the case of South Australia was inaccurate as women not only had the vote but had exercised it, without catastrophic effect, in the general election earlier in the year. They also had a right to stand for Parliament. Five months later Catherine Helen Spence was to be the only female candidate for election to the Constitutional Convention.

We ignore the petty insinuations that ever-enterprising Bathurst is merely advertising its claims to be chosen as the political capital of United Australia.

The official proceedings list 213 delegates as in attendance, while Quick and Garran list 209.<sup>9</sup> Many of them, including the New South Wales premier, George Reid, and a number of the colonial postal ministers only attended for a part of the Conference, and apart from set-piece addresses did not contribute to the decision making. There was a wide representation of organisations and interests, but almost half of the delegates were representing local government—and of those, 73 came from municipalities and town councils, and 21 from district or borough councils, making a total local government representation of 94. The next largest group was from the Federal Leagues (50). The Australian Natives Association (ANA) sent fifteen delegates, and there was multiple representation from the commercial travellers, chambers of commerce and of manufacturers, progress associations and the Australia National League. The Labor Electoral League, Republican Union, Single Tax League, Social Democratic League, Mechanics Institutes, Citizens Committees, and Australian Order of Industry each had one delegate.

The large proportion of local government representatives is not surprising since the Committee had made a major effort to attract them either in their own right or as the sponsors of federation leagues. Letters were sent to municipal and district councils in all the colonies pointing out the importance of the cause of federation and the significance of the Bathurst Convention in advancing that cause. This letter from Bathurst was given active consideration by a number of councils. For instance, in the northern South Australian railway town of Petersburg<sup>10</sup> residents held a meeting to decide whether a delegate should be sent. The Mayor, J.W.G. Alford, was a strong supporter of federation, believing that South Australia would be likely to benefit more than the other colonies, and his own town more than anywhere else in South Australia because of intercolonial free trade and uniform tariffs. In commending the Bathurst initiative, he said that he:

was not personally acquainted with the gentlemen whose names appeared on the subcommittee of the Bathurst League and had no idea what were their political opinions but he had no hesitation in saying he believed they were men of thought, learning, and intellect.<sup>11</sup>

The meeting carried a motion that Petersburg and districts should be represented and that the Mayor should be nominated—but that the expenses ‘should not come out of the funds of the Council’.<sup>12</sup> Mayor Alford did not attend. At the same time it was reported that the Mayor of Hobart, Mr Watchorn, would be attending—but like his northern country counterpart he did not make it. There may well have been many others who intended to go and for various

---

<sup>9</sup> See *Proceedings*, op. cit.; John Quick and Robert Randolph Garran, *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1901, pp. 257–260.

<sup>10</sup> Its name was changed to the less germanic ‘Peterborough’ during the First World War.

<sup>11</sup> *Observer* (Adelaide), 31 October 1896, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

---

reasons did not. On the eve of the Convention, the *Register* attempted to explain such absences:

If attendance is down it is because it is not a good time. In South Australia's case some leading men who greatly desired to attend have been prevented by other engagements.<sup>13</sup>

The attempt to attract intercolonial delegates and the propaganda of the Bathurst Committee continued unabated until the opening of the Convention. The same edition of the *Adelaide Observer* which carried the report from Petersburg also carried the Committee's latest press release, issued following the granting of free passes by the New South Wales railways, and which predicted a large attendance, including seven ministers of the Crown from different colonies, the 'now definite' presence of the somewhat equivocal George Reid and a dinner party with the Bishop and a ladies' garden party, all making it 'the most distinguished social event in the country district'.<sup>14</sup> In his letter thanking the press for their promotion of the Convention, the Chairman added this last minute plea:

I think you will agree with me that there is absolutely no reason why any district throughout the colonies should remain unrepresented.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, as will be detailed below, this was actually not so clear to many districts in the smaller colonies.

The largest group, after local government and the Federal Leagues, included those individuals specially invited to attend. They were divided into nineteen invited 'members' and twelve invited 'guests'. It is not clear what the distinction was between them. Among this distinguished group there were a number of political heavyweights from the mother colony, New South Wales: Edmund Barton, Richard O'Connor, George Reid, William Lyne, Joseph Cook and John See. In total there were nineteen current members of Parliament in the gathering at some stage during the week. Other invitees included Cardinal Moran and the republican journalist John Norton. As well as Moran, there were thirteen other clergymen of various denominations. Ten of the delegates had been part of the much smaller, earlier 'People's Convention' at Corowa in 1893, including Robert Garran, John Quick and B.B. Nicoll, the New South Wales President of the Federation League.

So it was indeed a large and representative gathering, but the extent to which it was truly 'national in character', as claimed by the president, can only be judged by examining the presence and role of the delegates from colonies other than New South Wales.<sup>16</sup>

The representation from the other colonies comprised a meagre 31 delegates or about 15 per cent. Of them, 21, or nearly 70 per cent, were from Victoria. The rest was made up of three South Australians, three Queenslanders, three Western Australians, and one Tasmanian. There was no New Zealander to allow the broader description of 'Australasian' to be applied

---

<sup>13</sup> *Register* (Adelaide), 14 November, 1896, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Register* (Adelaide), 7 November 1896, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix for list of names and origins.

to the meeting. Twelve of them came from local government—in the case of Queensland, the whole representation. Victoria sent a significant group of ANA members, the seven of them making up a third of the Victorians and nearly half of the ANA representatives overall. The two non-ministerial delegates from Western Australia were both from the Federal League. In other words, there seems to be considerable imbalance in organisational representation from the various visiting colonial delegations.

But the most obvious imbalance is in the overall numbers. The 170 New South Welsh delegates clearly comprised the bulk of the conference. The Victorian group of 21 was significant enough, but geographical spread from Victoria was lacking. Six delegates were from greater Melbourne, five and four from Ballarat and Bendigo respectively, four from places on, or with a close connection to the Murray River border, leaving only Seymour and Warburton outside those three areas. The western districts and the south east had no one to speak for them. Consistent with their small numbers, the geographical representation from the other colonies left a lot to be desired, particularly in the case of Queensland.

To Quick and Garran, who were both present and actively participated in the Convention, there were two factors of more importance than the origin and numbers of the delegates. One was the widespread public interest in the People's Convention. 'It was', they claim, 'reported by the press and followed with interest throughout Australia.'<sup>17</sup> The other was the broad range of interests represented—all, of course, committed to the federal cause, but defining it in different ways. William Lyne, then Leader of the Opposition in New South Wales, had drawn attention to this in his address to the Convention, following Reid, on the fifth day, Friday 20 November. 'Conservatives, Liberals, ultra radicals, and even Republicans' had managed to conduct a 'credible debate', he said.<sup>18</sup> The fact that this disparate group had unanimously agreed to focus their discussion around the text of the 1891 Commonwealth Bill had, in the view of Quick and Garran:

helped to dissipate the atmosphere of suspicion which ... had always hung around the Commonwealth Bill. It was redolent of 'Toryism', 'Imperialism', 'Militarism', and other unpopular qualities.<sup>19</sup>

This may well be correct, but neither high public interest nor the range of organisations represented support the claim of a truly national gathering.

It must also be said that the coverage of the Convention outside New South Wales was not comprehensive. Most papers carried a daily summary from their Sydney correspondents but little in the way of extended recording of debate or editorial comment.<sup>20</sup>

It could be said that the actual numbers are not as important as the influence that the non-New South Wales delegates had in debate and on the outcome. Here the picture is slightly better. The sole Tasmanian delegate, J.G. Davies, as a member of the Tasmanian Assembly and its Chairman of Committees, was elected to be one of the seven Vice-Presidents and

---

<sup>17</sup> Quick & Garran, op. cit., p. 163.

<sup>18</sup> *Proceedings*, op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>19</sup> Quick & Garran, op. cit., p. 163.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, the *Melbourne Age* and the *Adelaide Register* usually provided only a three-inch column.

---

subsequently to chair the Convention's committee sessions. Professor Gosman of Melbourne was also elected a Vice-President. John Quick of Bendigo was a member of the organising committee. This embrace of the out-of-staters was a little inconsistent, however, with action on the first day, when a motion to incorporate a letter from the Queensland Labor League's Provincial Council Secretary, Albert Hinchcliffe, into the proceedings was amended to simply 'receive' it. In the light of the many gubernatorial and judicial messages incorporated, the treatment of this missive apologising for being unable to send a delegate, but stressing the support of his 7000 members and rejection of the Queensland government's approach to federation, was pretty cursory.

A much greater weight and intercolonial significance was given to the Convention by the presence of three non-New South Wales cabinet ministers, John Gavan Duffy (Victoria), John Alexander Cockburn (South Australia), and Edward Charles Wittenoom (Western Australia), but a number of points need to be made:

- first, their presence was fortuitous in that they were in Sydney at that time to attend a pre-arranged meeting of postal ministers and officials from all the Australian colonies and New Zealand. The invitation to Bathurst was in effect an opportunist move by the organisers. Of them, only Cockburn of South Australia was much identified with the federal cause, and, as noted previously, his government had explicitly decided not to be officially represented.
- secondly, the Queensland and Tasmanian ministers were not with them. There is particular significance in the absence of their Queensland colleague because one of the most pressing issues at the time, as George Reid attested in his address later in the week, was whether Queensland was going to join a Federal Convention on the Hobart lines. The fact that a minister from that colony did not think it worthwhile to go to Bathurst highlighted the already very meagre Queensland representation which consisted of two members of a local government board in Gympie and another from Croydon Council. Andrew Joseph Thynne was the Queensland Postmaster-General, with an interest in federation stemming from his membership of the Queensland delegation to the 1891 Convention. He had also represented Queensland at the Ottawa Colonial Conference of 1894.<sup>21</sup> But on this occasion he could not be induced to go to Bathurst. Not only did he think that 'Federation is not a burning question in Queensland' but, more ominously, that 'ill-will has been created [there] by telegrams published to the effect that pressure was being put on Queensland by the other colonies.'<sup>22</sup>
- thirdly, they were only there for part of the afternoon and one of the evening sessions, so had little impact on the proceedings. On his return to Adelaide (he arrived home on the same day the conference wound up) Cockburn commented favourably on the 'sympathetic letters ... pouring in', and the banners 'presented by ladies interested in the cause', but confessed how limited his presence had been. He was lukewarm in his comments, saying that while 'it will result in a fresh awakening in the Federation question', nevertheless he was concerned about a danger arising 'from the fact that the representatives belonged to

---

<sup>21</sup> See *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 12, p. 228.

<sup>22</sup> *Observer* (Adelaide), 21 November 1896, p. 11.

the more largely populated colonies [and therefore] the safeguards necessary for the protection of the smaller populations may be somewhat overlooked.<sup>23</sup>

In any case, when the opportunity to emphasise the national nature of the gathering arose on the Tuesday, and it was proposed that the Convention adjourn that evening to allow ministerial delegates to the Postal Conference to address a public meeting, the motion failed. The Ministers did, however, address the Convention in session that evening by special leave. Their addresses prompted a motion desiring them to convey the Convention's wish 'for an early meeting of the Statutory Convention for the purpose of arranging a Federal Constitution.'<sup>24</sup>

Apart from these addresses, of the non-New South Wales group, only Quick, Turner of Prahran, Professor Gosman (whose motion incorporating a prayer in recognition of the Supreme Being was withdrawn) and Professor Morris had spoken by the time the Convention met for the third day's proceedings. It may have been frustration at this that caused Noel Augustin Webb, the Mayor of Port Augusta, to obtain leave to make a general address, as one who had travelled 1500 miles to get there, carrying messages of support from a number of South Australians including Josiah Symon and Charles Tucker, the Mayor of Adelaide. A young (he was just 30 years old) lawyer, who had been so successful in his first term as mayor that he was re-nominated unopposed in his absence at the Convention, Webb was one of only three South Australians who attended the Convention, the others being R.G. Thiselton from the metropolitan seaside council of Brighton and J.A. Cockburn, whose appearance with his fellow ministers from the Postal Conference, referred to above, was very brief.

N.A. Webb's presence makes a good case study. After his admission to the Bar in Adelaide, he moved to Port Augusta. By 1896 he had been in practice there for nearly ten years. The other leading lawyer in town during this time was Strickland (Pat) Kingston, the older brother of the South Australian Premier and leading federationist, Charles Cameron Kingston. Prominent Port Augusta citizens including Frank Kirwan, who had edited the local newspaper, had recently moved to the goldfields of Kalgoorlie and were playing a leading role in advocating the federal cause. They maintained links with their former town. In the tradition of Kirwan, federation was strongly supported by the local newspaper, the *Port Augusta and Quorn Dispatch*, and Webb was highly praised for his advocacy of the cause and given access to the editorial columns on occasions. In particular, he was a strong advocate of the east-west railway, which he believed would only be built by a federal government. In May 1896, at a ceremony commissioning a new telegraph line, Webb had spoken of his hope of getting the railway built to Western Australia.<sup>25</sup>

Like the citizens of Bathurst, many in Port Augusta (located at the top of Spencer's Gulf) saw their town as the future capital of Australia. It had been proposed that the South Australian government donate country in the lower Flinders Ranges, including Port Augusta, as a 'Federal State'. Apart from the predictable claims about the climate and railway junctions, the defence argument was used:

---

<sup>23</sup> *Observer* (Adelaide), 28 November 1896, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> *Proceedings*, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Port Augusta and Quorn Dispatch*, 1 May 1896, p. 4.

---

Being close to the land centre of Australia [it] is perfectly secure from sudden attack by sea or land ... Should a hostile fleet ever endeavour to conquer the continent it would have to come more than 1000 miles further after seizing Albany or Newcastle before it came within striking distance.<sup>26</sup>

The young mayor had a vision of his town as a major city in a united Australia, declaring:

Every development of the resources of Australia, every step that is taken towards the federation of the colonies only hastens the proud day when Port Augusta must become one of the queenliest cities of the south ... situated at the head of that waterway which reaches into the heart of Australia; the town which is the point at which the railways to and from WA, NT, Queensland New South Wales and Victoria must all meet, must become mighty, flourishing and important ... [it] is destined by nature to become the emporium of the vast interior.<sup>27</sup>

It was not surprising then that when Council finally considered the letter of invitation from Bathurst to a convention they said was ‘certain to be representative in constitution, influential in membership and educative in effect’, it decided to send the mayor.<sup>28</sup> Stopping in Adelaide on his way to the Convention, Webb was also appointed as their representative by the Federation League of South Australia.

Reports of their delegate’s speech drawn from the *Bathurst Daily Times* were prominently reprinted in South Australia. The community would have felt vindicated by the Bathurst judgement of Webb as:

an Australian of a good type mentally and physically of the men who, still young and vigorous in all their faculties, are coming to the front as leaders in public life ... we congratulate Port Augusta on the possession of such an intelligent and patriotic ‘chief magistrate’.<sup>29</sup>

Back in Port Augusta by December, Webb prepared a report for the Council on the Convention and the next month wrote a very favourable review of Robert Garran’s *The Coming Commonwealth*, in which he spoke of the friendships and contacts made in Bathurst.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately for his vision of Port Augusta’s destiny as the ‘queenliest city’, Webb left the town a few months later to take up the offer of a legal partnership in Adelaide.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> *Port Augusta and Quorn Dispatch*, 28 February 1896, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Speech to welcome the Governor, *Port Augusta and Quorn Dispatch*, 16 October 1896, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 30 October 1896, p. 4; 6 November 1896, p. 4; 13 November 1896, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 27 November 1896, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 22 January 1896, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Webb became Deputy President of the South Australian Industrial Court in 1916, and then in 1922 was appointed to the Federal Arbitration Court. At the time of this appointment he reminisced about the Bathurst Convention, mentioning Barton, Reid and O’Connor, Judge Roliny, who had become a judge of the NSW Arbitration Court, John Quick and Robert Garran. *Mail* (Adelaide), 15 July 1922, p. 2.



Webb at least made his speech. The other delegate from South Australia, Robert George Thiselton, apparently remained silent. Later to be mayor of Brighton and the owner of the Brighton tramway, he had been a member of the Council for four years at the time of the Bathurst gathering. Aged 35, his interest in federation probably stemmed from his early life farming and contracting in the north of South Australia, including spending some time looking at opportunities in the Northern Territory. He was at the inauguration of the railway to Port Augusta and contracted for railway sleeper supply in the north before moving to the Brighton district and taking up farming. His attendance as a delegate was important enough to be recorded in a biographical note a decade later, describing the Convention as having the object 'to educate the people of Australia, through their delegates, in the principles and ideals of Federation.'<sup>32</sup>

On the day following Webb's address, Quick again took an active part, and Stephen from Queensland moved an amendment on the Crown's right to refer matters to the Privy Council. The fifth day began with a motion tabled by Professor Morris of Melbourne, urging Queensland to pass the Enabling Bill. He must have left by this time, as it was moved by another delegate on his behalf, as was the case with another of his motions on the last day. Ironically, the motion referred to the Convention as comprising 'delegates from various colonies and places distant from each other', in that a set piece series of speeches was then delivered on states rights, the only speakers being from Sydney. Cardinal Moran was followed by Barton, R.E. O'Connor, Reid, Lyne, Jennings, John See and D. O'Connor, before the Convention adjourned to a garden party given by the Ladies' Committee. Later that evening it reconvened to debate the Finance report, the chief author of which was another Sydney delegate, J.T. Walker, who was to become, partly on the strength of his involvement at Bathurst, the only person without experience of parliamentary office to be elected as a delegate to the Convention of 1897/8.

The final day of the Convention began with the delegates spending 'much valuable time discussing how to expedite business'.<sup>33</sup> It then saw a flurry of motions put to the vote, again dominated by the New South Wales delegates. Peacock from Western Australia moved a motion demanding early union, which was carried. The motion of J.T. Hood, from the ANA in Melbourne, for reciprocal recognition of legislation among the colonies before federation, was defeated. Delegate Wilkinson from Sydney spoke on behalf of the people of Queensland (their delegates having already left) and it only remained for the vote of thanks, moved by Barton and seconded by O'Connor, to be carried to underline that, good intentions notwithstanding, the 'people' of the Bathurst People's Convention were really the people of New South Wales.

---

<sup>32</sup> H.T. Burgess ed., *The Cyclopaedia of South Australia*, Adelaide, 1909, Volume 2, pp. 85–6.

<sup>33</sup> *Age* (Melbourne), 23 November 1896, p. 6.

---

## Appendix

### List of Delegates from Colonies other than New South Wales

(drawn from the *Proceedings* list of all delegates)

#### *Victoria*

Bell, Alexander.	Ballarat	Town Council
Blyth, Chas.	Sebastopol	Borough Council
Brown, E. C.	Eaglehawk	Town council
Callander, Wm.	Cobram	ANA
Curnow, J.H.	Sandhurst (Bendigo)	ANA
Duffy, J. G.	Melbourne	Invited Member
Gosman, Prof.	Melbourne	FL
Hogg, H. R.	Melbourne	ANA
Hood, J. T.	Fitzroy	ANA
Howe, George	Seymour	Shire Council
Ingle, James	Sebastopol	ANA
James, William	Eaglehawk	Borough Council
Kitt, William	Warburton	Shire Council
Morris, Prof, E. E.	Melbourne	Invited Guest
Niven, W. F.	Ballarat	FL
Quick, John	Bendigo	Invited Guest
Rohner, William	Cobram	ANA
Ryan, James	Wodonga	FL
Sharpe, John	Sebastopol	ANA
Turner, John	Prahran	Municipal Council
West, John	Shepparton	Citizens Committee

#### *Queensland*

Chippendall, W.	Gympie	Widgee Divisional Board
Flood, J.	Gympie	Widgee Divisional Board
Stephen, Consett	Croydon	Municipal Council

#### *South Australia*

Cockburn, J. A.	Adelaide	Invited Member
Thiselton, R. G.	Brighton	Municipal Council
Webb, N. A.	Port Augusta	Municipal Council

#### *Western Australia*

Peacock, R. W.	Perth	FL
Wittenoom, E.H.	Perth	Invited Guest
Young, Rev. Canon	Perth	FL

#### *Tasmania*

Davies, Lieut. Col.	Hobart	Invited Member
---------------------	--------	----------------

**FL = Federal League**

**ANA = Australian Natives Association**