

## **Barton At Bathurst: 'Front Stage/Backstage'**

*Tessa Milne*

Edmund Barton's role in the People's Federal Convention at Bathurst in November 1896 was two-fold: in public he stood front stage, interested but detached; behind the scenes, in private, his correspondence was pre-emptive and clandestine.

'This was Friday, the great day of the States right-question. The day of great guns and great speeches', wrote the *Sydney Mail*.<sup>1</sup> It was describing the fifth day of the People's Federal Convention. Cardinal Moran, premier George Reid and Edmund Barton had, one by one, taken front stage. *The Australasian Pastoralists' Review*, its readership the rural establishment of New South Wales and Victoria, wrote condescendingly that the 'big guns' of federation:

... had all been invited, but they all with one consent began to make excuses. It was not so much that they had married wives, or bought land or oxen, but Parliaments had not ceased to sit, and imperative duties of other description kept most of them away. Without exactly sending out for the halt, maim, poor and blind, the Bathurst committee filled up space with a considerable number of delegates unknown to fame, with young barristers and others, and in this manner got safely enough to work, the gathering making up in diligence and enthusiasm what it lacked in experience.<sup>2</sup>

It noted that the 'latter days of the gathering were made momentous by the presence of Cardinal Moran, Premier Reid, Messrs Barton, O'Connor, Lyne, Smith and others, the first three delivering excellent speeches upon the subject under discussion.'

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<sup>1</sup> *Sydney Mail*, 28 November 1896, p. 1141.

<sup>2</sup> *The Australasian Pastoralists' Review*, 15 December 1896, p. 495.

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While Moran, the leader of the Catholic Church in Australia, and George Reid, the premier of the mother colony of New South Wales, brought to the Convention, albeit on the fifth day, the sanction of church and state, the charismatic Edmund Barton added a scholarly air and, by his presence, a link with the ‘official’ federation movement, with the popular movement—and, as the heir apparent to the late Henry Parkes, a link with the legendary aura of the ‘Father of Federation’. As John Reynolds suggests in his biography of Barton, ‘we find Parkes consulting Barton on things both large and small’,<sup>3</sup> including the phrase ‘One People, One Destiny’, which became the motto of the popular federation movement.<sup>4</sup> Barton had also taken a leading role in both the official and popular federation campaigns. For example, in 1891 he had attended the National Australasian Convention, in Sydney, as one of the three elected representatives of the New South Wales Legislative Council; in 1892, he campaigned in the border districts of New South Wales and Victoria where he had encouraged the establishment of Federal Leagues, and the following year he was instrumental in establishing the Central Australasian Federation League in Sydney.

Thus it was fitting that Barton stood front stage in Bathurst to address the Convention on states’ rights in, according to the *Sydney Mail*, ‘a strong, clear voice’. In his speech he worked his audience well, first congratulating the organisers and then, with unsentimental rhetoric, belittling the Convention’s critics. In response to a comment of ‘Old Granny’ he replied: ‘Well it would be a very queer Convention indeed if it did not give some ground of criticism, and, indeed, did not provide some food for amusement among its own members. In all gatherings of this description there are certain to be some ill-advised persons whose proposals are open to criticism. But such things in this case serve only as the foils by which the gem of common sense of the generality of the delegates was shown to be of brighter lustre.’<sup>5</sup>

Barton’s speech had a clear tactical structure as it moved from the issue of states’ rights, the necessity of a two-house system and the American and Canadian experience, to focusing on the specific issues of the site of the federal capital and the 1897 Convention. ‘A few words now on another and a delicate matter, and I hope I won’t tread on anyone’s corns in touching upon it.’ The crowd laughed. Barton had placed his witticism well. ‘The question’, he continued, ‘is that of the Federal capital.’<sup>6</sup> This was a controversial subject indeed, as the *Australasian Pastoralists’ Review* later cynically observed: ‘the proposal [for the Convention] savoured somewhat of a desire to give the local storekeepers and hotels a little “boom” all to themselves, and also to push into prominent notice the extremely tenuous claims Bathurst is understood to cherish in the direction of the site of the Federal City.’<sup>7</sup> Barton was indeed touching upon a sensitive local issue. ‘We must be careful in framing the Constitution not to hamper the Federal State.’ He continued: ‘If we have to make a free people we must not start them with manacles on their wrists. We have no right to fetter the choice of the Federation in the matter of the choice of the capital.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Reynolds, *Edmund Barton*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1948, p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> *Proceedings, People’s Federal Convention, Bathurst, November 1896*, Gordon & Gotch, Sydney, 1897, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> *The Australasian Pastoralists’ Review*, 15 December, 1896, p. 495.

<sup>8</sup> *Proceedings*, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

For Barton personally, and the federation movement, this had threatened to be a maverick convention, with the potential to confuse or even derail the federation campaign. It had been instigated by people outside the main federation movement, and had the potential to conflict with Dr. John Quick's Corowa resolution passed three years earlier for a legislated election of representatives to attend a statutory convention.<sup>9</sup> Nor did it adhere to such democratic aspirations, for although entitled the 'Bathurst People's Federal Convention', its delegates were invited, not elected by the general populace.

In concluding his speech, Barton looked to the future: 'What the colonies at the Convention, which I hope will meet next year, must strive for and what I have no doubt will be its outcome is a constitution of solid strength, of perfect justice and a tender humanity.' Cheers from the crowd. Barton, front stage, then concluded with the rousing lines of 'A Federal Sonnet', written for the occasion by P.J. Holdsworth, and ending 'In Union One—we claim one Destiny'.<sup>10</sup>

The *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised that 'although it may be considered somewhat late in the day for federal eloquence, the speeches delivered at the Bathurst Convention yesterday were worthy alike of the speakers and their subjects.'<sup>11</sup> Although Barton's speech was inspiring, it was too late to have any real impact on the Convention's resolutions. However, a letter from Barton to William Astley, the Organising Secretary of the Convention, dated 4 October 1896, reveals that when Barton stood 'Front stage' he had every confidence in the outcome of the Convention.<sup>12</sup> He was already aware that it had been politically undermined, and converted instead into a useful propaganda instrument with which to arouse public interest, for he had himself played a key, albeit clandestine, 'backstage' role in its organisation.

This role is evidenced in his correspondence with Astley. The tone of his letters is both manipulative and collusive. It is clear that Barton was already in correspondence with Astley, for he acknowledges receipt of two letters from him, dated 2 October and 3 October 1896, and the proofs of documents to be issued to the press: an address to the *Federalist*, letters to editors and circulars to the mayors. In the letter of 4 October, Barton set about thwarting the political potential of the proposed convention in Bathurst: 'It is stated that your Convention is to be held "for the purposes of discussing the principles and details of Federalism, of issuing a series of definitions of Federal principles and of preparing a report to be issued as a manifesto to the Australasian people on a scheme of Federation based upon the 'Draft Bill to constitute the Commonwealth of Australia' as adopted by the Convention of 1891." ' He continued:

It is here that my doubts arise. We are to have, within at any rate of a few months an elected convention held under the Enabling Act already

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<sup>9</sup> Reynolds, op. cit., pp. 98–99.

<sup>10</sup> *Proceedings*, op. cit., p. 188.

<sup>11</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 November 1896, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Barton to Astley, People's Federal Convention Bathurst papers, MSS 1163, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

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passed by four of the colonies. Will it be wise, in view of this prospect, to anticipate the discussion which must take place at the Statutory Convention, with the probable result that prominent Federalists, having attended the earlier one at Bathurst, will take into the subsequent gathering, at which the *real* Constitution is to be framed, a set of opinions so rigidly moulded that discussion with the representatives of other colonies can scarcely be expected to progress in a spirit of mutual concession or 'give and take'; such as is surely essential to the evolution of a reasonable constitution: one which *each* Colony when voting at the Referendum will regard as fair to itself? The absence of any provision in the Enabling Act for some subsequent consultative gathering, such as a Parliamentary Convention, at which differences between the delegations, unsolved at this Convention, might be harmonised, has as you know always caused me to be very apprehensive that: some colony or colonies whose representatives have been overborne and outvoted may blackball the constitution at the Referendum, & so leave us with either an incomplete & feeble Federation, or without any at all. Now the probability—or possibility if you like—of such a result will increase in the proportion in which delegates enter the convention with a set of rigid & irrevocable views. The likelihood of their doing so—at any rate some of them, will increase if they have declared themselves definitely as to the 'details of Federalism' & committed themselves—say at Bathurst to 'a scheme of Federation', whether based upon the Commonwealth Bill or upon anything else.

He then turned to the issue of the site of the Federal capital. Firstly, Barton dissociates himself personally from such provincial aspirations:

As you see, it has no reference to the selection of Bathurst as a place in which to hold an important demonstration in favour of the union, and therefore you must not allow me to be thought an objector to the proposal your League is forging so far as *that* is its object. I saw that your letters to the Press, which led to the formation of a branch of the League in Bathurst, were strong in advocacy of the selection of that city for a Federal capital. I hope that if I am able to attend your convention I shall not be considered to have become thereby a supporter of that proposal. I am not one of those who consider that it matters much and it certainly does not matter much to any of the present provincial capitals—where the seat of federal government is to be. But I think it would be rather a grave mistake to endeavour to select a capital before we have a Federation. An interim selection must no doubt be made of some place in which the Parliament of the Commonwealth is to hold its first session. But it will be the duty of that Parliament to fix the capital: and we have no business to usurp the right of the federated Australians to choose their capital for themselves.

It is also clear from this letter that Barton used his influence in the choice of delegates to be invited. Having explained that he would not be able to attend the Convention before Saturday

due to a court matter, he noted: 'By the way the leading counsel in the matter are Bruce Smith and Mr. E. O'Connor. They are both strong Federalists, and if you have not sent them invitations I suggest that you should. Even if they cannot attend, their position with regard to the movement renders it proper to pay them this compliment. No doubt you have invited McMillan. His interest in matters Federal is as strong as ever; and I think he would try hard to attend.' Barton patronisingly added: 'I almost forgot to say that I have not any objection to the use to which you have put my three guineas.' He concluded in an effusive tone: 'You are so busy that you will be inclined to cry out upon me for having written you so long winded a letter. When I begin to talk about Federation—even with my pen—it is hard to leave off, I confess.' And there was manipulation by collusion: 'I have not written such a letter as you can read to your committee,—it is too unrestricted for that. But it will give you enough information to enable you to explain my opinions.'

When Barton stood front stage, to address the Bathurst Convention on state rights, he began in a manner befitting an outsider: 'You must allow me, before beginning, to congratulate those who have promoted this successful gathering ...' It can be argued that Barton had much to congratulate himself about. The Convention successfully drew together unlikely people from across the continent, and through them and through the press coverage, it provided wide publicity for the federation movement. It also provided Barton with a front stage platform on which to appear as a scholarly leader of the movement. Backstage, he sought to influence the organisation to ensure that this Convention did not pre-empt the 1897 Convention, and to stifle Bathurst's original aspirations of becoming the site of the federal capital. Barton, the astute political tactician, manipulated the Convention for his own ends. As John Reynolds observes in his biography of Barton (regarding the election of delegates for the 1897 Convention): 'Barton now reaped one of the rewards of his missionary work for the movement. The New South Wales electors placed him easily at the top of the poll of 49 candidates. The popular Premier, G.H. Reid, had to take second place, a situation that he admitted was distasteful to him. Barton's leadership of the movement was confirmed by the final political court of appeal in a parliamentary democracy.'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Reynolds, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–100.