
John Napoleon Norton and the 1896 Bathurst Convention

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For those keen to find heroes for the republican hall of fame, John Norton has long been the ideal candidate for the waxworks—the radical labour nationalist and quick-witted pamphleteer with an eye for mischievous agitation and tabloid scandal. Norton had it all, so long as his brief was to fit the mould of the larrikin republican. But there was more to Norton’s political beliefs than anti-monarchism.

Like most of his contemporaries in the early labour movement, Norton was an unapologetic racist. His class-based hatred of the monarchy was surpassed only by the venom and spleen which he reserved for the ‘yellow hordes’ to Australia’s north. Although Norton spoke frequently of democratic republicanism in the 1880s and 1890s, by the time of his death he had lost all faith in the people, praying instead for a benevolent dictator who would lead the people to salvation. For most of his adult life, Norton struggled with alcohol addiction, debt, and a mouth which was seemingly immune to the laws of libel. He came to the Bathurst Convention trailed by his usual scent of scandal and intrigue, and he came as a republican—of sorts.¹

Mention of republicanism at Bathurst in 1896 mirrored the wider debate that had been occurring in Australia since 1880. Various understandings of the ‘true’ republic could be

¹ Michael Cannon, *That Damned Democrat: John Norton, an Australian Populist, 1856–1916*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1981; Michael Cannon, ‘John Norton’ in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 11, 1891–1939, pp. 41–42.

found. When Cardinal Patrick Moran addressed the Convention he took issue with the notion of a republic being tied categorically to separation and independence:

A few days ago a telegram from London appeared in the daily *Press* to the effect that within a few years Australia would assert her independence and demand separation from the mother country. [laughter] ... There can be no doubt that there is a republican spirit abroad amongst us, but this is far from implying a tendency to separation from the Imperial Crown. Nothing is more ambiguous than the word Republic in modern times. It is generally supposed to be a synonym of liberty, and yet nowhere will you find Liberty so crushed and such vexatious tyranny exercised as in some of the so called republics. The Constitutional government which we enjoy in these colonies is in the truest sense a republic.²

Moran's remarks were consistent with the tradition of the disguised republic which could be traced to Henry Parkes (circa 1850) and beyond. This was that the essence of republican government was already embedded in the British model of responsible government, of balanced, constitutional government—Kings, Lords and Commons, freedom from arbitrary rule and freedom from interference. This classical notion of republicanism had been employed as a rhetorical strategy in England since the seventeenth century. It emerged with renewed vigour after the French revolution and the American War of Independence. Fear of rivers of blood—à la Jacobean Paris—and of Yankee republicanism, encouraged the British ruling class to portray British institutions as 'essentially' republican. This was one way of keeping the revolution at bay.³ But although Cardinal Moran and the many delegates who nodded in approval agreed that the theoretical essence of republicanism was already theirs, they were not willing to embrace the republican label as one appropriate for their new federation. Theory was one thing, practice another. Declaration of an Australian republic would mean separation from mother, an act which George Reid reminded delegates would only increase Australia's vulnerability to invasion.⁴

In his final address to the Bathurst Convention, Thomas A. Machattie rejoiced that delegates had made no concessions to an untimely and 'ill advised republicanism'.⁵ This of course was the republic of separation, the republic which both Reid and Moran admitted would come inevitably when Australia was mature enough to stand on its own. Tacitly at least, they acknowledged that the future Australian republic would be independent and free of ties with Great Britain. It was this (perhaps more immediate) vision of a republic which was held by John Norton, who appeared in the list of Convention delegates as a representative of the Sydney Republican Union.⁶

² *Proceedings, People's Federal Convention, Bathurst, November 1896*, Gordon & Gotch, Sydney, 1897, p. 85.

³ Mark McKenna, *The Captive Republic. A History of Republicanism in Australia 1788–1996*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996.

⁴ *Proceedings*, op. cit., p. 92.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 191.

⁶ *Proceedings*, op. cit., List of Delegates.

In the words of John Norton, he was born in Brighton, England, on 25 January 1858 to a stonemason father he never knew and a half mad mother.⁷ The image of Norton as someone who suffered from inherited psychological handicaps was one of which he was particularly fond when asked in court to explain his appalling record of domestic violence and alcoholism. Norton arrived in Australia in 1884. The new chum quickly gained notoriety in the labour movement as publicist and agitator. In 1885 Norton wrote the introduction to the final report of the third Intercolonial Trade Union Congress held in Sydney, calling for the federation of labour in Australia.⁸ His belief in collective bargaining and the union of labour organisations carried over into the sphere of inter-colonial politics. Three years later, Norton edited *The History of Capital and Labour*, by any measure an impressive survey of industry and labour in Australia and abroad. He called for Australian federation on a national and independent basis, as a first step towards Australia's manifest destiny—'control of the world's destinies in the Southern Seas for ages to come'.⁹ Although Norton rejected the imperial connection, he was not afraid of projecting a few imperial fantasies onto his beloved republic.

After arrival in Sydney, it took only three years for Norton's reputation as a rabble-rousing republican to be established. His timing could not have been better. The twin celebratory occasions of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887 and the centenary of settlement in 1888 created the ideal circumstances for nationalist republicanism to emerge. Norton displayed his talent for duplicity in the republican riots of 1887. After he had led fellow republicans in the clever hijacking of an innocuous meeting called to organise festivities for the Jubilee, the authorities printed special invitations for a second meeting in an attempt to exclude yahoos of Norton's ilk. Norton countered by printing forged invitations, a tactic which proved successful—republicans disrupted the second meeting as well. Norton was involved in a similar strategy six years later at the inaugural meeting of the Australasian Federation League at Sydney Town Hall when, together with other Labor delegates, he managed to secure the passing of a motion calling for Australian federation on a 'democratic and republican basis'. As in 1887, this republican resolution was overturned, another meeting was called, the republicans were barred and any hint of disloyalty was erased from the public record.¹⁰

Open discussion of the separatist republican alternative during the conventions of the 1890s was either repressed, ridiculed or adroitly organised out of the framework of discussion. Although Norton and a few resilient nationalists tried to maintain the rage after the high point of republican sentiment in the late 1880s, by the time of the Bathurst Convention, Norton was one of the last vocal republicans in the Labor Party. He may well have been the only remaining member of the Sydney Republican Union. Many of Norton's former colleagues had given up on the dream of a white republic, preferring instead to concentrate on more practical and achievable labour reforms as members of parliament under the crown. In

⁷ Cannon, *That Damned Democrat*, op. cit., p. 4.

⁸ *Official Report of The Third Intercolonial Trades' Union Congress, October 1885*, Trades and Labour Council of New South Wales, Sydney, 1885, p. xii.

⁹ John Norton, ed., *The History of Capital and Labour in all Lands and Ages*, Oceanic Publishing, Sydney, 1888, p. xi.

¹⁰ McKenna, op. cit., pp. 138 and 198.

Norton's eyes they had sold out; the comfortable life of a parliamentary career had turned them into 'namby pamby and respectable republicans'. In short, they had become inevitablists—complete independence was too far fetched an idea to waste one's time and energy on.¹¹

These pragmatic attitudes may have disappointed Norton, but he carried on throughout the 1890s as the republican editor of the *Truth*—a late nineteenth century precursor of *Who Weekly*, with a dash of the *National Enquirer* thrown in for good measure. The *Truth* was tabloid, slanderous, racist, muck-raking, gossipy, and popular. Under Norton's editorship, the *Truth* referred to Queen Victoria as 'flabby, fat and flatulent', and her son the Prince of Wales as 'a turf swindling, card sharpening, wife debauching rascal'.¹² Eight weeks before he graced the floor of the Bathurst Convention, Norton penned his most notorious editorial—'God Save The Queen'. Norton's Sex Pistols' anthem was written in haste, 'at midnight with a wet towel around my head'. From the colourful turn of phrase in the editorial, it seems more likely that the wet towel was several bottles of cheap plonk. Norton described the Queen as a 'semi senile old woman'. Other members of the Royal family were 'podgy faced lecherous bastards, bigamists and wife beating boozers'.

Ironically, these words were not dissimilar to those which would later be used to describe Norton towards the end of his life as he entered his decline into alcoholism. The editorial was vulgar farce. For his trouble, Norton was charged with 'wickedly vilifying and scandalising Queen Victoria' and 'holding her up to ridicule and contempt'. Norton conducted his own defence, declaring in court that he was a loyal Australian and republican, quoting impressively from Cobden, Bright, Spencer and Macaulay. After the jury was unable to reach a decision, the crown dropped the case.¹³ Norton arrived in Bathurst surrounded by the publicity to which he was accustomed. Buoyed by his success, he saw himself with customary modesty as a 'champion of the people'.¹⁴

In the proceedings of the Convention Norton was far from idle. He was active in procedural matters and had obviously lost none of his persistence and courage. On several occasions he placed his two republican motions on the floor: popular election of the Governor-General and complete legislative autonomy for the new nation. They met with little success. The proposal to elect the Governor-General was greeted with a spontaneous and thunderous chorus of 'God Save the Queen'.¹⁵ We might therefore set Norton's appeal for popular sovereignty against loyalty to Queen and Empire. Perhaps this is our chance to paint Norton as the people's champion, the brave crusader fighting a lone battle against the tide of Imperialism. But this analysis would be misleading.

Imperial loyalty and popular sovereignty were not mutually exclusive. Under the crown, a limited notion of democracy had developed in the Australian colonies. By international

¹¹ *ibid.*, chapter 9.

¹² *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, p. 41.

¹³ Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *Proceedings*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–22.

standards it might be considered progressive. The people were included and consulted (at least partially) in the process of achieving federation. At Bathurst, John Norton stood and reminded delegates that ‘federation was the most exalted ideal which patriotism can dictate for the Australian people.’¹⁶ Norton’s invocation of the people deserves close scrutiny.

He had a liking for rhetorical flourishes which reinforced his self-image as the champion of the people. There was much of the demagogue in Norton. He was fond of standing up for ‘the people’ and he possessed the necessary arrogance to think the people would listen to him. Like his fellow Labor colleagues and their opponents, he had learnt the lesson of modern democracy—every political campaign must be grounded in the rhetoric of popular sovereignty. While Norton sought to legitimise his campaign for a ‘White man’s republic’ by dressing it up in American paradigms of popular participation, as with most politicians of the day, his notion of the people was selective and patronising.

Shortly before his death in 1916, Norton wrote in a letter, which he marked ‘confidential’, that ‘the great deeds of history were not done by caucuses, Parliaments or meetings, but by single individuals.’ John Norton, the great democrat and republican, ‘the people’s champion’, had carried dreams of Napoleonic grandeur for most of his life.

When the auction of Norton’s estate was held at his Maroubra home, ‘St. Helena’ in 1916, among the list of valuable items for sale were many portraits of Cromwell, Caesar and Napoleon. One of them was the painting of Napoleon (or was it Norton?) in full coronation dress. It greeted Norton, for many years, as he entered the ‘grand gallery’ at ‘St. Helena’. And that was not all. There were also 36 statues and busts of Napoleon in bronze and 43 in marble. It seemed Norton’s contemporaries knew him well. They referred to him as John Norton—the Nortonian.¹⁷

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *Catalogue of the Valuable Furniture, Works of Art, Collection of Pictures & Napoleonic Relics held at St. Helena Maroubra Bay, the Residence of John Norton, 1 and 2 August 1916, (Mitchell Library Sydney).*