

***For Peace, Order, and Good Government:***  
**Speeches at the Launch of the Senate Exhibition**  
**29 March 2001**

**Senator Margaret Reid**

Mr Evans, Mr Speaker, senators and members, very distinguished descendants of the first parliamentarians—and I shall mention some that are represented here—Mr Souter and Mrs Souter, very distinguished audience, and staff of the parliamentary departments. Descendants of Senator Hugh De Largie, Senator George Pearce, Mr Donald Cameron, Mr Alfred Deakin, Mr Patrick McMahon Glynn, Sir George Reid, Dr Charles Carty Salmon and Mr Dugald Thomson, and a descendant of Mr George Upward, the first Usher of the Black Rod, are here tonight, wearing a particular badge giving the name of their ancestor. You are particularly welcome, and add considerably to this occasion.

And it was on precisely this day a hundred years ago that the citizens of New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania went to the polls to cast a vote for the first Australian Parliament. Can you imagine how they felt? And the next day, it was quite safe of course for South Australia and Queensland to go to the polls because there was not the slightest chance that they had any idea at all what their sister states had done on the previous day. It is fitting that we look at the Parliament a hundred years on; its founding, its members, and its achievements.

It is interesting for those of us who are members of this great institution to reflect upon the experience of our predecessors one hundred years ago. From my point of view, it is difficult to comprehend the first meeting, where there were no standing orders, or any body of precedent which had grown, and which we now have. Of the 111 members, 87 had in fact come from state parliaments, and I am not quite sure whether that helped or was a hindrance, because each of them seemed to assert that *their* standing orders and precedents were the best ones to follow. But they did get there in the end. Perhaps it was through the wisdom and the stature of Sir Richard Chaffey Baker and Sir Frederick Holder, the presiding officers, that they managed to

achieve so much. Those two, of course, were both South Australians. And, as always, they had experienced and competent Clerks to assist them with their deliberations.

I wonder if we could reflect for a few moments though, on what a discerning observer who was there in 1901 and at the centenary sitting of Parliament in Melbourne in 2001 would see as the differences, leaving aside top hats and frock coats—I don't expect any of them on the 9th of May 2001, but one never knows.

A discerning observer in 1901 would have seen that the chambers of the Victorian Parliament dwarfed the 36 senators in the Legislative Council, and the 75 members in the Legislative Assembly. And in 2001, he will observe that the 76 senators fit in reasonably well, but the 148 members of the House of Representatives are going to be very snug indeed. It will not be a long session.

He might reflect upon the fact that in 1901, the total population of the electorate of a member of the House of Representatives was about 50 000 people, and today it is 130 000 people. So the increase in membership of the Parliament has not been at the same rate as the increase in population, but then I think there are many ways in which we are able to communicate with our electorates these days that certainly were not open at the time.

A discerning observer in the gallery would have noticed in 1901 that there were no women, in either chamber. He would probably reflect a little on the fact that it took another 42 years before there was one in each of the chambers. And today, he will see that that is quite different—but still nothing like the numbers that I think many might have expected would have happened in that time. Women are still under-represented, but there is a trend to increase the number, and I certainly look to the time when gender will no longer be an issue or something that we talk about.

Our discerning observer looking down would have seen in 1901 that half the members and senators were born in Australia, and all except two of the others were born in the British Empire, and broad Irish and Scots accents were common in that Parliament. In 2001 he will observe that only one-eighth of parliamentarians were born overseas. But it is interesting to reflect upon the places they come from—China, Cyprus, Fiji, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, The Netherlands, New Zealand, the United States of America and Zimbabwe. This is a very different nation.

The journalist Walter Fitchett wrote in 1901 of the first parliamentarians as 'men who have earned their bread and in many instances built great fortunes with toil of brain and pen, as well as of hand and muscle.' There may be less hand and muscle today, although there was in fact a higher proportion of lawyers in the First Parliament. If you want to know more about the members of the first Senate, you will have to read the *Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate*, which deals with all of them. It is a book worth reading if you are captivated by the things that have gone before.

Our discerning observer, as he sits and think about things, will reflect on the fact that 17 acts were passed in 1901, compared with 210 in the year 2000—we *did* have a busy year, didn't we? But Parliament sat for 115 days in 1901, compared with 75 in 2000, so we obviously do it more quickly.

What were they doing for all those long hours of sitting? The answer is revealed in the *Hansard*. In the first days of the Parliament, they had to determine how to do things, how to proceed, and most of the arguments were actually advanced in the debate. People did persuade each other on the floor of the Parliament, and that is not so much the way that things happen these days. Many, many hours were spent, and no time limits were imposed on speeches in the Senate—or, I think, in the House of Representatives. Even when they first restricted the time for speeches, it was to one hour.

Another difference of course is that the First Parliament started with empty statute books. We still have some laws on our books that were passed a hundred years ago. There were many things that had to be done in the First Parliament.

But how different was the life of the politician of the time? The House of Representatives sat in every week in the seven months between 21 May and 13 December 1901, and the Senate adjourned only for one week, in October. A train was provided on Friday evenings to take New South Wales members to Sydney, but representatives from Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania—I think a few Victorians must have escaped to their own homes because they were in Victoria—the rest of them stayed in Victoria. Some of them were wealthy and were able to stay in clubs and hotels; most of them stayed in humble boarding houses. The circumstances they lived in were fairly modest indeed. The parliamentary salary was 400 pounds a year, which was about twice the income of a tradesman, and they had only a very modest provision for travel and other expenses. That is a *very* different life from the way we are able to conduct ourselves today. We in Canberra, like those in Melbourne in 1901, go home every night.

But this exhibition really is a triumph for the Senate and for those who have worked upon it. I particularly want to thank, and I am sure you would want me to as well, the curator, Kay Walsh, her assistant curator, Amanda Hill, and other Research Section staff including Sue Blunden and Wayne Hooper. The exhibition designer, Andrew Rankine and his team, have done an excellent job. It has been beautifully constructed by Design Craft of Queanbeyan, and the panels printed in a very professional manner by the Exhibition Centre of Queanbeyan.

The Senate really does these exhibitions extremely well. We put great emphasis on seeing that people can get to know about the Senate and the Parliament through exhibitions and through lectures and writing. And perhaps on top of the list, is the Parliamentary Education Office, which the two chambers run. Young people can come here and find out about the Parliament. It is important that those coming after us understand what a good functioning parliamentary democracy we have. This year we hope they will get to know more about how it all came about, and this exhibition is a part of what they will see in that process. I do congratulate all who have been involved in presenting it for us and with great pleasure, declare it open.

### **Gavin Souter**

This takes me back to 1988, when a book that I had written with a lot of help from people who are here tonight, was launched by the Governor-General at the time, Sir Ninian Stephen, in the Senate courtyard of the provisional Parliament House (when it wasn't yet the Old Parliament House).

This exhibition also takes all of us back to 1901, when the first of Australia's thirty-nine parliaments to date was opened in Melbourne by the Duke of York, who later became King George V. Some might regard one parliament as enough, but fortunately, this venerable and vital institution has the knack of reincarnation. Like Houdini, it escapes all predicaments, returning from dissolution and general election—not unscathed, but always ready to have another go.

I would like to commend the Senate Department's exhibition, but I won't attempt to cover aspects of Parliament's first two and half years, which are portrayed and recounted here so well. Instead, I am going to mention three practitioners of one of the occupations most preferred by the 111 legislators who formed the new Commonwealth's First Parliament—not the 28 lawyers, who were predictably the largest group in the Parliament, but 18 journalists. They were the second largest group, well ahead of 12 farmers, graziers and pastoralists combined. Many of these men (the first 16 parliaments had only one gender) were newspaper editors, well accustomed to the politics of federation and anxious to practise what they had been preaching.

The first of the three journalists I want to mention, although a distinguished editor, was not in the First, or any other, parliament. I have to declare an interest here, for John West was the first official editor of Australia's oldest surviving newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*. This is a paper on which I once worked and which, in this year of so many symbolic zeros—the centenary of Federation, the Bicentenary of Matthew Flinders, the Millennium and also, I suppose, a Fortieth Parliament—the *Herald* will reach the rare old age of 170.

Although West was long dead by 1901, he had done a lot for the cause that culminated in the Federal Parliament. As long ago as 1854, under the pseudonym of John Adams, he wrote 17 articles for the *Herald*, and his former paper the *Launceston Examiner*. Entitled 'Union of the Colonies', this influential series has recently been published in book form, with a foreword by the Governor of Tasmania, Sir Guy Green. With understandable partisanship, His Excellency argues that the popular description of Henry Parkes as the 'Father of Federation' is a misnomer, for essentially the same proposal—inspired by West—had in fact been made thirty-five years earlier.

That's as may be of course, and I know that Sir George Reid has claims to that title as well. And in any case, no DNA case can prove that sort of paternity.

But during West's 20 years at the *Herald* he did continue to campaign strongly for federation, and in 1851 he had designed a flag for the Australasian Anti-Transportation League which was almost identical with the one finally chosen for the Commonwealth during the life of the First Parliament.

My second journalist certainly *was* in that First Parliament, and during the second session he became Australia's second Prime Minister, succeeding Sir Edmund Barton on his move to the newly created High Court. Throughout the First Parliament and even while Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin—unknown to his colleagues—was the Australian Correspondent for London's *Morning Post*, anonymously writing a

political column, for which he received five hundred pounds per annum—one hundred pounds more than a backbencher’s salary in the Parliament. He wrote well, but not without some bias. Admittedly, the Australian Correspondent often criticised Mr Deakin’s party, and Mr Deakin himself—but as his biographer, the late J.A. La Nauze put it, he never gave the impression that the country was or would be better served by his rivals.

Finally, another columnist who, although not a parliamentarian, often attended the First Parliament—in the Press Gallery. David Maling, chief leader writer for the *Argus* in Melbourne and Chairman of the Commonwealth Press Club, wrote under the pseudonym of Ithuriel from *Paradise Lost*. Ithuriel was one of the angels described by Milton as a ‘strong and subtle spirit’ sent by Gabriel to search out Satan, who, having entered Paradise in the form of a toad, was becoming too friendly with Eve. One light touch of Ithuriel’s spear was enough to reveal the Fiend, and David Maling’s pen seems to have been similarly effective.

Not that there were really any fiends in the first 111. Maling, Deakin and others found plenty to criticise, but they did not disagree with the Governor-General, by then Lord Tennyson, who in proroguing the First Parliament, said:

A complete record of your achievements touches most of the great problems that confront the people of Australia. You have faced their solutions zealously, boldly and with marked success.

In its 59 acts, the First Parliament addressed such crucial matters as tariff, excise, immigration and the establishment of an Army and a High Court—not necessarily in that order. The *Morning Post*’s Australian Correspondent was pleased to describe this as ‘fruitful’, and to report that the reconstructed ministry—that was to say, *his* ministry—‘closed the session without any visible loss of prestige.’

Ithuriel’s farewell to those leaving Paradise was less respectful. He wrote:

Experience has proved that you are what an auctioneer would describe as a ‘mixed lot’. You comprise some of the strongest, subtlest men in Australia, and others of whom the irreverent Byron would say:

*Like the fly in amber, we but stare  
And wonder how the Devil you got there.*

And so Paradise was lost—only to be regained by another set of parliamentarians at the 1904 general election. Some were again strong and subtle, others still inexplicably preserved in amber.

As Forrest Gump reminded me the other night, life is like a box of chocolates—you never know what you’re going to get. But with Parliament, of course, we do have some say in the matter, for we are the manufacturers, and we put them in ‘the box’. Parliaments do, of course, tend to replicate their electors, and we certainly are a mixed lot.

The Second Parliament sat for another two and a half years, but that is another story, and not as interesting as the one told so well by the Senate Department here today.

I hope you will spread the word that this exhibition is well worth a close look for the light it sheds on an institution which, from its earliest days—although its makers had borrowed in many ways from Westminster, Washington, Ottawa and Switzerland—was very much a distinctive, Australian, Parliament.