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## **Parkes and the 1890 Conference**

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## Foreword

In February 1890 the Australasian Federation Conference, an informal meeting of thirteen leading colonial politicians from the six Australian colonies and New Zealand, met together at Parliament House, Melbourne to consider the possibility of Australian federation. The significance of this conference lies in the fact that it paved the way for the conventions of 1891 and 1897-8, whose members drew up the constitutional framework of a federated Australia.

The 1890 Conference was commemorated by the first of a series of exhibitions, entitled **Towards Federation**, and by a public lecture by Dr A.W. Martin, both under the auspices of the Senate Department.

This edition of *Papers on Parliament* now enables Dr Martin's lecture to reach a wider audience.

Dr Martin is well known as an historian who has written widely on federation, and as the author of *Henry Parkes: A Biography* (Melbourne University Press, 1980). He is currently writing a biography of R.G. Menzies.

**Harry Evans**  
**Clerk of the Senate**



## Parkes and the 1890 Conference

*A.W. Martin*

Perhaps we should begin by making the acquaintance of Henry Parkes in 1890, a commanding presence, much photographed — the colonies' leonine elder statesman — of whom the Englishman, Lord Carnarvon, having read 'old Parkes's speeches and pronouncements on the subject of intercolonial Federation', had just written to the Governor of New South Wales, Lord Carrington: 'With all his faults and misdemeanours he is a larger and more striking figure than any other Australian politician'.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, we can match this with a masterly portrait we have from the pen of the Victorian politician and writer, Alfred Deakin, sketching the Parkes who appeared at the Melbourne Federation Conference of February 1890. And it is with this that I would like to start. 'First and foremost of course in every eye', writes Deakin,

was Sir Henry Parkes, than whom no actor ever more carefully posed for effect. His huge figure, slow step, deliberate glance and carefully brushed-out aureole of white hair combined to present the spectator with a picturesque whole which was not detracted from on closer acquaintance. His voice, without being musical ... was pleasant and capable of reaching and controlling a large audience. His studied attitudes expressed either distinguished humility or imperious command. His manner was invariably dignified, his speech slow, and his pronunciation precise, offending only by the occasional omission or misplacing of aspirates ... He had always in his mind's eye his own portrait as

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1. Quoted, A.W. Martin, *Henry Parkes: a Biography*, Melbourne, 1980, p.391. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in what follows are taken from Chapters 15-16 of this book.

that of great man, and constantly adjusted himself to it. A far-away expression of the eyes, intended to convey his remoteness from the earthly sphere, and often associated with melancholy treble cadences of voice in which he implied a vast and inexpressible weariness, constituted his favourite and at last his almost invariable exterior. Movements, gestures, inflexions, attitudes harmonised, not simply because they were intentionally adopted but because there was in him the man he dressed himself to appear. The real strength and depth of his capacity were such that it was always a problem with Parkes as with Disraeli where the actor posture-maker and would-be sphinx ended or where the actual man underneath began. He had both by nature and by act the manner of a sage and a statesman.

The air of puzzlement, even mystery, which pervades this description is deepened when Deakin goes on to bring to our notice some of Parkes's more down-to-earth traits. 'His nature', says Deakin,

forged on the anvil of necessity, was egotistic though not stern and his career was that of the aspirant who looks to ends and is not too punctilious as to means. He was jealous of equals, bitter with rivals and remorseless with enemies — vain beyond measure, ... and with strong animal passions ... A doughty parliamentary warrior, ... he was a careful framer of phrases and insulting epithets which he sought to elaborate so that they would stick and sting. He confessed that he passed many of the weary hours in which he sat unmoved upon the front bench of the Assembly in mentally summing up his associates and opponents, fitting to each some appropriate descriptive epithet which he treasured in his memory for timely use. One lean long swarthy enemy he stigmatised as a 'withered tarantula'... [another] consisted of a 'weedy nature and a sprawling mind' ... Very many admired and not a few weaker men loved him; he brooked no rivals near his throne but all found his personality attractive and submitted more or less to his domination ... He was cast in the mould of a great man and though he suffered from numerous pettinesses, spites and failings, he was in himself a full-blooded, largebrained, self-educated Titan whose natural field was found in Parliament and whose resources of character and intellect enabled him in his later years to overshadow all his contemporaries, to exercise an immense influence on his own colony and achieve a great reputation outside it.<sup>2</sup>

In 1890 the extraordinary man whom Deakin here so vividly describes was in his 75th year. He was the Premier of New South Wales for the fifth time, having aggregated

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2. *Alfred Deakin, the Federal Story: the Inner History of the Federal Cause*, Melbourne, 1944, pp.24-6.

fourteen years in the position. He was the last politically active survivor of those politicians who, in 1856, had sat in the colony's first Legislative Assembly. The establishment of that Assembly had marked the beginning of responsible self-government in New South Wales: before then there had been a part-nominated, part-elected Legislative Council to advise the Governor, but itself lacking executive power. Parkes had been elected to it in 1848. So, in 1890, he could look back on more than forty years as an active politician — an experience and an achievement which no one else in all the Australian colonies could match. He had arrived in New South Wales in 1839 as a penniless assisted immigrant from England — from Birmingham, to be exact. The scale of the changes he had lived through in the colony is approximately suggested by population figures: when he arrived, the colony's European population was about 120,000; in 1890 it was just over a million. A sad entry Parkes made in his diary in 1892 catches at the human dimension of this. He had been walking through the streets of Sydney after presiding at a meeting to advocate female suffrage. Once home, he wrote:

Met but few persons whom I know. There was a time when I should have known 9 out of every 10. Dead and others in their place. It seems as one were walking upon graves. More than half a century since I first walked these streets. How much longer?

Such melancholy reflected better times. Parkes was originally a skilled artisan who had served his articles as a bone and ivory turner in Birmingham. Though almost completely self-educated, he had nevertheless displayed, after coming to New South Wales, an extraordinary flair for journalism and politics. In 1850 he founded — and, for eight years, edited and wrote most of — a daily newspaper, the *Empire*, which, by common consent, is now regarded as one of the most important quality journals of nineteenth century Australia. It was an astonishing achievement, brought to an end only when the enterprise collapsed in bankruptcy in 1858. Parkes was a good writer, but a poor manager.

As a politician, however, he fared better. In the 1840s and early 1850s he was a doughty fighter for the democratic principles which were ultimately embodied in the 1856 constitution, and by the 1860s and 1870s he had emerged as a formidable leader in what historians now think of as the 'faction politics' of that era. Political parties based on principles or platforms did not exist: the parliamentary majorities needed to support governments depended on the skills of personal leaders of the kind Deakin hints at in the passages I have already quoted. Remember his words about Parkes: 'Very many admired and not a few weaker men loved him'. In this case, Deakin's judgement is in fact a little harsh: there were also strong and principled men who loved Parkes. This was important: in the absence of formal parties, voters and the members they elected were concerned to find experienced leaders; sound and creative administrators who could be trusted, as the jargon of the day had it, to conduct the affairs of the colony in

the interests of the community as a whole. Of course, in reality it was not always quite like that: the community as a whole was not in fact represented in parliament; so how could members claim that what they decided affected everybody fairly? Until 1891 members were not paid and most had, in consequence, to be men of a certain degree of substance and leisure. (In this respect, let us note in passing that Parkes was, for most of his long years in parliament, something of an oddity. His sources of income were usually, to say the least, uncertain: journalism — but only occasional after the collapse of the *Empire* — some trading in imported goods, too often at a loss, and endless juggling of promissory notes. It is no wonder that he suffered intermittent bankruptcies. But what often saved him was the fact that, though members of parliament were not paid, ministers were. When colonial secretary, for example, he received £2,000 a year, at a time when clerks in his own department earned between £125 and £350. His years in office were, therefore, lucrative and, even if it did not affect his principles, there was a strong incentive to fight fiercely to win and retain office).

The relative homogeneity of parliament's composition largely insulated the political process from class tensions of the kind which would surface after the formation of the Labor Party in 1891. Proceedings were, of course, enlivened by personal antagonisms and also by that nineteenth century religious curse, sectarian animosity. But, for faction leaders like Parkes, there was considerable room for individual initiative in policy-making as was shown by the causes which are historically associated with his name like the establishment of public education or reform of prisons and mental hospitals; which brings us to today's central question: federation. Was *this* also a cause — especially in the light of what happened in 1890 — which could be called peculiarly his?

There are several mundane points for us to register first as a background to anything we can say about this. The first is to note, in terms of population size, the scale of the colonial picture. Of Australia's six colonies founded under the British crown at various times at the end of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, all but Western Australia had, in 1890, been self-governing since the late fifties. At the census of 1891 they were still, by any test, quite small communities: the largest, New South Wales and Victoria, each had a little over a million people; Queensland and South Australia came next, with less than 400,000 each; Tasmania had fewer than 200,000 and Western Australia a mere 49,000. All the people of European origin or descent in Australia totalled only a fraction over three million.

The second point to note is that, in general, each colony depended heavily for its economic sustenance on exports of primary products, especially wool. That did not, however, prevent them having individual tariff policies which made each colony a little economic island, separated as much from its neighbours as from the rest of the world. So customs duties were collected at the borders, an irksome happening which made Victoria, in particular, unpopular. Victorian government, faced with the problem of



absorbing the large immigrant population brought in the 1850s by the gold rushes, had developed, by the 1870s, a protectionist policy designed to encourage industries to employ men as the goldfields declined. This policy proved a success, so much so that Victorian manufacturers and other producers began in the 1880s — which anyway was for them a period of rising prosperity — to find their local market saturated and to seek to expand their sales in the other colonies. Victorian politicians, accordingly, began to look with a jaundiced eye at any barriers to trade within Australia. And that was to prove a major fillip to the federation movement, for everyone agreed that there could be no uniting of the colonies unless there was complete free trade between them.

So, as Geoffrey Serle, the premier historian of Victoria, has told us, Victoria's political leaders came to mount, in the 1880s, a veritable campaign for federation. As it happened, they were fortunate to have over these years two honest and capable premiers: James Service and Duncan Gillies. Both were Scotsmen. In a fine article in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Serle describes Service as 'a classic, old-world liberal', a politician who was 'constructive, diligent and business-like, with the supreme virtue of common sense'.<sup>3</sup> As for Gillies, we have a Deakin portrait which notes the physical contrast to Parkes, Gillies being:

short, stout, sturdy, florid, with cleanshaven face and close, thin hair ... clearheaded and cold in temperament, he was without even a tinge of the poetry which occasionally infused its glow into Parkes's orations ... He was a good general either in victory or defeat. Without intimate friends but loyal to his associates he enjoyed the confidence even of his opponents in his judgement and fairness.<sup>4</sup>

In 1888 Service bluntly summarised Victoria's position on the tariff question and federation. 'From first to last', he said,

the Victorian policy has been a selfish one, and it is a selfish policy now. People say that when it suited Victorians to establish protection the protectionists were supported by a great many of those identical gentlemen who are now crying out for intercolonial free-trade. It is to our political advantage now, they say, that we should have this intercolonial free-trade. The feeling in the other colonies is that this is but another movement in favour of our noble selves. It is very natural that they should have this feeling, and it is

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3. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.6, Melbourne, 1976, p.111.

4. Deakin, *op.cit.*, p.29.

no use shutting our eyes to the fact. What we in Victoria have to do is to join with the other colonies rather than endeavour to take the lead.<sup>5</sup>

At the beginning of that year, 1888, New South Wales had marked her first centenary with celebrations that lasted over a week. Their high point was a great state banquet on the evening of Anniversary Day, 26 January. The press marvelled at its magnificence and at the organisers' unprecedented feat of seating and feeding 1,000 people all at once. All the governors of the Australian colonies were there, the Queen sent a telegram, Parkes presented Carrington with a medal struck for the occasion and proposed the key toast; 'Australasia: her trials and triumphs, her union and progress in the future'. Gillies spoke in reply and seized on the apparent hints in Parkes's words: 'not a solitary proposal he may make for the union of the Australasian colonies', Gillies said, 'could fail to arouse glad enthusiasm everywhere'. By November of that year, Gillies had not changed his mind: as he put it in a public statement that echoed Service's words:

We did not desire unnecessarily to press for the lead in this matter. Victoria has offered to assist New South Wales, as it was its place to take the initiative. Victoria has offered, if New South Wales will take the lead, to follow. We have no pride except the pride of duty, and we are willing to follow.<sup>6</sup>

This was not, however, the view of all Victorians as a number of furious *Age* editorials testified. The editor of that leading newspaper, the formidable David Syme, besides being the colony's leading parochialist, was determined that nothing should happen to compromise Victoria's (to him) sacred protectionist policy. 'Mr Gillies' continuous coaxing of Sir Henry Parkes, as of a pouting child', he wrote,

is not only useless, but it is mischievous, by ministering to the morbid vanity of small minds in Sydney, who are encouraged in the notion that the other colonies are powerless to do anything without the assistance of New South Wales ... Up to the present the public affairs of [that] colony have been dominated by the mercantile class in Sydney, who have used as their tools men of inferior intellectual calibre such as Sir John Robertson, Sir Patrick Jennings and Sir Henry Parkes. It is quite remarkable that whilst Victoria during the last thirty years has produced a host of able public men, New South Wales has brought to the front few men above the intellectual standard of the parish vestrymen. We are justified in assuming that ability has been studiously

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5. Geoffrey Serle, 'Victoria's Campaign for Federation', in A.W. Martin (ed.), *Essays in Australian Federation*, Melbourne 1969, pp.88-9.

6. *Ibid.*, p.47.

kept out of the political arena by the dominant ring as being incompatible with subservience.<sup>7</sup>

And what of Parkes himself at this stage? Though it had been his practice for years to emote in a cloudy and generalised way about the glories of future Australian union, he had not yet, despite flattery and temptation from Victoria's politicians, bitten at the 1888 federation bait. With the advantage of hindsight, we know that he soon would. Let us ask that historian's question: 'why did he?'

The main clue, I think, lies in Parkes's position at this time in the domestic politics of New South Wales. For it happened that, just as the Victorian invitations were being made, the political scene in New South Wales was in the throes of great — and, for Parkes, unpalatable — change. Though its governments always used some tariffs as a source of income, New South Wales had, since the 1860s, traditionally followed a free trade policy. It was, if you like, a kind of multi-partisan policy which, in consequence, never cut across the divisions dictated by the faction system. But in the mid-eighties, partly in response to a mild recession in the colony's economy, a new protectionist movement developed, a handful of protectionists were elected to the Legislative Assembly at the general election of 1885 and, by the next election in 1887, protectionist members with a strong extra-parliamentary electoral organisation stood ready to make a formidable bid for power. Parkes declared the fiscal issue to be the great issue of the election, appointed himself the champion of free trade and took the leadership of a free trade party which had sprung up in defence of the traditional policy. He swept the poll in this election but the protectionist party still went on from strength to strength and, at the next election in 1889, very nearly won.

These events produced a revolutionary change in New South Wales politics. Here were the colony's first political parties, destined in fact to spell death to the old free-wheeling methods of faction politics. As they developed, the new parties substituted loyalty to principle for loyalty to a personal leader and produced party organisations designed to tie both party members and leaders to pre-arranged platforms. For a faction leader of Parkes's longevity, skill and arrogance, this was anathema. To be free to manoeuvre was the essence of the political milieu he had mastered; his power had been premised on the right to bargain with, or plot against, individual opponents, to choose and sack his cabinet ministers, to decide, according to some masterly political instinct and without consultation, when and how to act. As he put it in a homily to his followers in 1888, government could only work if members placed unquestioning faith in their leaders; 'you must trust them in the intricacies of Administration, or the affairs of the country will soon come to error'.

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7. Geoffrey Serle, *The Rush to be Rich*, Melbourne, 1971, p.332.

As the new system took hold, Parkes was more and more uncomfortable. He had trouble with his ministers in 1888 when the more doctrinaire of them thought he treated their beloved free trade principles too cavalierly, and after the 1889 election he at first refused to stay on as their leader. 'There are times when men are called on to sacrifice everything for their country', he wrote to his treasurer, William McMillan (himself a doctrinaire free trader who had his troubles with Parkes), 'but this would hardly be called such a time. Besides, I have sacrificed the best part of my life already'. He asked McMillan to tell his followers that he would no longer lead them: 'the ministerial majority in the late Parliament disclosed aspects of political conduct which I do not care to meet again in ministerial office', and he had decided that 'if I could honourably free myself from that worst of all slavery, I would never risk a second infliction on it'.

But when it came to the point it was unthinkable — even to the disgruntled — that anyone could replace Parkes. A party meeting was called to settle the leadership: Parkes refused to attend, and those present simply went ahead and unanimously elected him as leader. Characteristically, his will to stand aside quickly crumbled. 'It was difficult', he remembered later, 'to decline this handsome testimony of the confidence of a great party, which I had not sought and which came upon me without a single expression of dissent'.

Brave words — but the galling fact was that, for the first time in his long parliamentary career, Parkes had been *elected* to the leadership of a party: elected, instead of simply arrogating, as was the traditional practice, the position on his own initiative and then calling on others to follow him. And when he came to form his cabinet, the party's new grip over Parkes was confirmed. Always before, the prerogative of choosing ministers had been exclusively his; but now, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted, 'Should Sir Henry take his old colleagues into office again, it is regarded as almost certain that the government would not receive the support of the majority of the free trade party'. That prediction proved correct. In the new cabinet only one of the former ministers survived — J.N. Brunner, an unequivocal free trader and the favoured candidate for the leadership if Parkes could not be persuaded to accept it. The inner core of the cabinet — McMillan, Treasury; Bruce Smith, Public Works; and J.H. Carruthers — were all comparatively young men of doctrinaire views who soon showed a determination not to be browbeaten by their leader.

It was in June 1889 — three months after the formation of this cabinet — that Parkes privately announced his sudden decision to do something about federation. I say 'sudden' because, after all, there had just been a general election and, as was the custom in those days, all the ministers had gone back to their electorates for re-election after receiving their portfolios. In all the speeches Parkes had made during these contests, he had not breathed a single serious public word about federation.

The matter came up in a now famous conversation he had with the Governor of New South Wales, Lord Carrington, about imperial affairs in which the main subject was the weakness of Australian influence at the Colonial Office when compared to that of Canada. 'That must [remain] so' Parkes remarked, 'until we federate'. Then he added, seemingly apropos of nothing; 'I could confederate these colonies in twelve months'. Carrington spluttered with delight. 'Then why don't you do it? It would be a glorious finish to your life'. 'Sir Henry smiled', Carrington records, 'and said "There are difficulties"'.

But that night, writing to his daughter Annie on family matters, Parkes added — almost as an afterthought:

I have very much changed of late in my views of human life, and I have lost much of my former relish for parliamentary work. I am trying hard to get into a systematic disposal of my time with a view to employing in the best way whatever portion of life remains to me. I have definitely planned a political history in two octavo volumes under the title of 'Chapters of Autobiography'. I am also thinking in response to repeated suggestions and invitations from the other colonies of offering myself as Leader in a great movement to federate on a solid basis all the Colonies. So you see if a few years of strong life are left, I am likely to have work enough.

Next day, 15 June, Parkes wrote confidentially to Duncan Gillies, the Victorian Premier, offering to take 'some prominent or leading step in the cause of Australian federation'. He at once told Carrington what he had done but left his ministerial colleagues in the dark. 'Events move quickly', the Governor noted in his diary. 'And so the curtain goes up on what may be a very great dramatic performance'.

I find it hard not to conclude that this sudden urge to take on a new and dramatic role was connected with the outcome of the 1889 election in New South Wales. It was pretty clear why Parkes had 'lost much of my former relish for parliamentary life': party and cabinet discipline promised irksome restraints on his old, tempestuous freedom. Could it be that federation might provide a diversionary, perhaps liberating, issue — even, indeed, a new basis for personal power — as the old certainties crumbled?

Considering the pressure which outsiders — and especially the Victorians — had been putting on Parkes to take the lead on federation, we might expect that once Parkes had written to Gillies, in effect to say 'Yes', all would be plain sailing. But alas, it was not.

What Parkes proposed was that he should use his influence to convene a special meeting of representatives from all the colonial parliaments to discuss federation, draft a federal constitution, and work out the steps by which that constitution could be put into effect.

But Gillies proved quite unenthusiastic about this idea. He took almost two months to make a considered reply, and when he did, on 12 August, that reply was decidedly negative. As the Acting Governor of Victoria, Sir William Robinson, wrote to Carrington: 'Gillies is not "on" just yet, I fancy, despite two "Parkes-ish" letters from your G.O.M.'. All would be well if Parkes would join in strengthening the Federal Council, 'but he can hardly expect Gillies to join him in squirting dirty water at the Council by platforming that full fledged union should be tried for'. The Federal Council — or, to use its full title, the Federal Council of Australasia — was a body set up in 1885 as a result of the deliberations of an intercolonial convention organised on Victorian initiative in 1883. Victoria's concern at that stage was chiefly with the apparent ambitions of France and Germany in the Pacific, where the Melbourne-based protestant missions had a number of vital interests. The Federal Council's brief was to discuss and rule on these and other matters of common concern to the colonies. But the Council did not work. Its founders, nervous about the independence of each of their colonies, had given the Council neither executive powers nor any source of revenue. Without either, it was impotent — a defect exacerbated by the fact that it did not have universal support. South Australia did not join it until 1889 and Fiji, New Zealand and New South Wales held aloof altogether. Victorians found the New South Wales boycott particularly galling. Parkes, when in office in New South Wales during 1880-1, had been the original proponent of the Council but he was out of office and, therefore, not a member of the intercolonial convention which planned the Council in 1883. The non-Parkes governments of New South Wales during 1882-6 were suspicious of Victoria's motives and would have nothing to do with the Council. Parkes soon took the same view — he had changed his mind, he said, and he saw what the Council was like. It was 'a rickety body' — a weak institution whose presence could only 'impede the way [to] a sure and solid Federation'. Parkes's critics — including most Victorians — sardonically, and not inaccurately, concluded that his change of heart was evidence of wounded vanity — dog-in-the-mangerism from a man who had not played any part in the Council's actual foundation.

So when Gillies finally replied to Parkes's overtures — on 12 August 1889, as we have seen — he was certain not to let Parkes, as Robinson had put it, 'squirt dirty water at the Council'. He told Parkes that there was no point in seeking a 'new means' of proceeding: Parkes should instead bring New South Wales into the Federal Council for 'by far the greatest hope that we can have of the larger federation becoming a fact ... lies in working it out by means of the smaller federation which we have in our hands'.

Parkes simply did not reply and a stalemate resulted, neither party being prepared to budge. At this distance, the disagreement looks a silly one: petty jealousy about how to proceed towards a final goal which each party in fact wanted. But in those days rivalry and jealousy between the colonies was very real: the farmyard-like squabbles of quite small communities. In the centennial year of 1888, for example, Parkes had made the

other colonies, and especially Victoria, furious by getting his own parliament to legislate to change the name of New South Wales to 'Australia'. This wild piece of arrogance was only stopped in the end through Carrington's sensibleness and persuasive influence with his premier. We have already seen something of *The Age's* contempt in 1888 for the politicians of New South Wales: that was consistently matched by prejudices of the kind held by Sir John Robertson, in his greatest years Parkes's main rival, who habitually referred to Victoria as the cabbage garden. Though in 1889 the Victorian politicians no doubt still wanted to use Parkes's prestige in the interests of federation, they did not greatly trust him and were anxious to use the Federal Council to keep him under control. Deakin reflected the Victorian ministry's suspicion when, on 5 July (several weeks, that is, after Parkes's first approach to Gillies), he wrote to Sir Charles Dilke in England:

Parkes has recently made *private* overtures, but as he wishes [federation] accomplished only in such a manner as will recognise the hegemony of New South Wales and put all the rest of us in the position of penitents it is not likely to lead to much.<sup>8</sup>

What eventually broke the log-jam was a report completed in October 1889 — another two months after Gillies' rejection of Parkes's overtures — by a British officer who had been sent out to examine Australia's defences. This was Major-General Bevan Edwards, who recommended a series of ways in which the colony's defence forces and defence installations should be co-ordinated. Parkes at once seized on the report as an excuse to telegraph the other premiers to suggest a federation conference. Gillies replied for them all: there was no 'present prospect' of bringing about a federation. What Edwards prescribed could be achieved through the existing Federal Council: 'let Sir Henry advise his Parliament to join it'.

Not to be beaten, Parkes now set off on a secret mission to see if he could persuade Queensland's politicians to support him. I say 'secret' because, while he told Carrington all about it, he left his own ministers completely in the dark. A Brisbane *Courier* reporter who interviewed Parkes in his hotel found the 'poet-politician', as he called him, reading proofs of his latest book of verse, happy to talk about his close friendship with Carlyle but unwilling to reveal why he was visiting Queensland. A few days of intensive talks then took place; Parkes saw all the ministers except the premier, Morehead, who was ill, and had long conversations with the colony's two most revered 'statesmen', Sir Samuel Griffith and Sir Thomas McIlwraith.

'I put my case as best I could', Parkes told Carrington. He continued:

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8. Ibid., p.332.

They listened to me with amazement in their faces. I evidently sent them on new lines of thought: and the disconnected expressions that followed contained no element of dissent; and more than that, one said 'they did not think Queensland would stop the way'. I think I have made history in the last six days.

Parkes had travelled to Queensland by ship but he set off for home by train. At Tenterfield, in the electorate which he had once represented in the Legislative Assembly, he stopped off to be entertained by his old constituents. 'After what had taken place in Brisbane', he wrote to Carrington that night, 'I thought it best to take our own people into my confidence at the banquet here tonight'.

So he delivered what has come to be romanticised as the 'Tenterfield Oration': announcing to the country as a whole his readiness to convene a federal meeting under the same conditions as those he had originally proposed to Gillies — a conference of representatives from the several parliaments to consider the necessity and the means of drafting a federal constitution. Parkes added that the Federal Council, which he contemptuously referred to as that 'body which sat in Hobart', could never serve as the instrument for achieving real federation. And, in a thinly disguised threat to Victoria, he added that if any two Australian governments decided to federate, the others would stand aside at their peril. It seems doubtful whether this speech in fact achieved all the publicity or impact which is traditionally ascribed to it. Certainly, in the light of the story we have been considering, it is difficult to take seriously some of the assertions made last October (1989) to celebrate the centenary of the speech. The one I liked best was that which claimed Tenterfield as 'a sacred site' — the birthplace of the nation — where the noble Parkes, consumed with the vision of Australia's future greatness, founded the federation movement!

For a time Gillies refused to be brow-beaten, ministers in South Australia and Tasmania stood by him and, for many people in and out of politics, it seemed ridiculous not to proceed through the Federal Council. But others wondered about the possibility of a compromise to steer a path through what seemed a silly argument. The colonial governors, for example — Carrington of New South Wales, Loch of Victoria and Kintore of South Australia — took a paternal interest in their politicians and were eager for federation. It happened that they were all together in Melbourne at the beginning of November for the Cup. They took advantage of the occasion to address enthusiastic audiences about federation, and they put their heads together about the politicians. Carrington wrote from Melbourne to tell Parkes that he was convinced 'Victorians are Federals at heart'; Gillies and the people of the Federal Council had in reality the same goal as Parkes. After Carrington came home, his talks in Victoria were followed by a visit from McIlwraith (alas, we do not know whether Carrington engineered it!) and the two had long discussions with Parkes. Parkes respected McIlwraith, a fellow old-style politician: 'Parkes evidently listened a good deal to him', Carrington told his diary, 'and seems much more disposed to make some sort of



concession than he was at first'. McIlwraith urged Parke to confer with members of the Council *informally*, not as Councillors: 'right is on his side', opined Carrington, 'and, if he does not lose his head, he ought to win'.

Thus pressed by men he respected, Parke compromised. On 28 November 1889 he agreed to 'meet the members of the existing Federal Council 'as representative public men' [that is, not formally as members of the Council] to discuss the whole question [of federation] ... in the light of what is best for Australia'. This meeting took place: its outcome was an agreement for a conference in 1890 of representatives from each of the colonial parliaments to discuss the federation issue. Carrington noted gleefully:

Now Gillies can tell his supporters that he has forced the old man to recognise the Federal Council in spite of all his bluster; while Parke does not recede from the constitutional position that he has taken up, 'that a conference to frame a constitution must have Parliamentary sanction; that the members shall be appointed by the Governor in Council and clothed in authority and stamped with approval'.

We have to add here a brief footnote. This happy outcome — at least for Parke — silenced members of his New South Wales ministry who, not unnaturally, were furious about all Parke's secret goings-on. Federation, they thought, ought to have been properly discussed in cabinet. Some were fearful of its effect on free trade so far as the outside world was concerned, and most disagreed with Parke's contemptuous attitude to the Federal Council. Of one of these dissidents, Bruce Smith, Parke made a complaint to Carrington which was most revealing about himself: 'he seems to think that I ought to do the impossible thing of consulting him at every turn in my course, for which, if there were no other difficulty, life is too precious'.

A group of ministers actually plotted to overthrow Parke for his high-handed action on federation, but the old man foiled them by going public on the issue and they did not dare to come out against him. So, on one vital question, Parke had broken through the irksome party discipline. As Carrington reported it to McIlwraith: 'Bruce Smith and McMillan are keeping quiet. They are no match for Parke ... it is once more a "one man ministry", and although they are very sore, they must swallow it'.

So it was that the 1890 conference, which we celebrate this year, came to be. It was held in Melbourne. As he set out for it, Parke wrote haughtily to Carrington: 'I fear we shall have to discuss this question with men who cannot rise to its level ... We shall see how the creaky machine works ...'.

But once the conference convened, the goodwill of the other delegates melted the old curmudgeon's heart. They tacitly acknowledged his age and prestige, spontaneously made him president of the conference, deferred to him in debate and received him like

a hero at the banquet which Gillies gave in honour of Victoria's visitors. There Parkes replied to the toast, 'A United Australia' and, amid loud cheers, coined the great saying of the occasion: 'The crimson thread of kinship runs through us all ... we know that we represent a race [which] for the purpose of settling new colonies ... never had its equal on the face of the earth'.

Parkes was, then, the dignified figurehead. But it was Deakin of Victoria who finally moved the crucial, and unanimously accepted, motion: that such steps be taken 'as may be necessary to induce the Legislatures of the respective colonies ... to appoint delegates to a National Australasian Convention, empowered to consider and report upon an adequate scheme for a Federal constitution'.

In his most enthusiastic dreams, Parkes could not have hoped for more. This moment of triumph is perhaps the kindest point at which to leave Parkes. As we have seen, his path to the 1890 conference had been curious and convoluted, his motives very mixed, and the contribution of others more than he cared to admit — or even understood. But then, perhaps most ostensible political successes are like that. And, as the 1890 conference broke up, Parkes had every reason to believe that, however he had done it, he had hitched his wagon to a star that was a real winner.

It, of course, was too — but (as we know and the men of 1890 could not) the star was soon to dim for a while, and federation was still a decade away. Parkes, who died in 1896, never saw it. Can we, all the same, call him 'Father of Australian federation'? What I have been saying today has certainly to be taken into account when considering this question — but perhaps we should withhold a final judgement until we have been through the decade of centenary celebrations of things federal which appears, in 1990, still to be before us.

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