



Australia's centenary of Federation: a mystery and a muddle?

BY DAVID HEADON

Students of Australian Federation were hopeful that, with the onset of the centenary, the country would engage in a long overdue debate on its system of federalism. This has not happened. With some exceptions, the malaise of previous generations persists—despite the opportunity provided by 1 January 2001 and the ensuing twelve months.

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As if to reinforce some of the stark facts of Australian political, social and cultural history since Federation in 1901, Australians in the year 2000 tried their best to forget the Commonwealth's imminent centenary birthday.

Yes, there was an excuse. The nation, after all, was gearing up for its biggest international showcasing opportunity since globalisation and the world of IT had become a reality: the Sydney Olympics.

But the Federation centenary and the hosting of the Games did not *have* to be mutually exclusive propositions. Australians just accepted that they would be.

Cathy Freeman, Michael Klim and the rest of the marketable black and bronzed Aussie athletes completely overwhelmed any possibility of thoughtful empathy with the bearded white men who, one hundred years ago, created a nation.

Students of Australia's Federation story were not surprised, though they were hopeful in the weeks and months between the end of the Olympics and 1 January 2001—the exact centenary birthday—that some informed commentary would finally emerge.

The more idealistic amongst the small band of Australian Federation aficionados even imagined a genuine if truncated debate on the evolution of their country's original Federation experiment—a

necessary, though belated forum on the state of Australian federalism.

Such optimism was naively conceived. Throughout the whole of the last century, the Australian Federation narrative had so few storytellers that there is, now, a dearth of received wisdom. Little wonder, then, that those commentators who emerged between November 2000 and January 2001—from politicians like New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, to historians and even noted authors—could only dance around the edges of a debate Australia has yet to have.

Federalists "shrouded in obscurity"

The Great Federation Silence has its own melancholy story. It was not until well after the conclusion of the Second World War that one or two Australian historians began to comment on the curious Federation history void.

The first of these, the late L. F. Crisp, still arguably our most astute Federation voice, put the problem with characteristic clarity when he wrote, in 1952:

"... unlike the Americans... Australians hold their founding fathers, for all their success, in no special reverence or regard. Many of them are already forgotten. Few are quoted, and then infrequently... Yet there are times when Australians could do with a little more consciousness of their political roots, only to find, when they reach back, that they have cut themselves off by neglect from the facts and spirit of those times".

Sixteen years later, historian Geoffrey McDonald reiterated Crisp's argument, noting simply that "in contrast to the United States, Australians do not remember their federalists: they are shrouded in the obscurity of a forgotten past".

In the decades after these provocative but accurate comments were made, little really changed. Indeed, their essential validity remains. Those of us who have observed, with increasing frustration, the indifference of most fellow Australians when faced with the significance of this unique cultural and political milestone, can scarcely be consoled by recalling that our forebears exhibited the same behaviour.

However, with the fanfare of the centenary now well and truly upon this generation, how does one explain the continuing struggle to secure the Australian public's meaningful participation? What has prevented a long overdue debate on federalism and Federation?

There appear to be at least four reasons.

First, for many Australians, like maverick historian Jonathan King, the process of federating in the 1890s was no struggle-against-the-odds yarn deserving an honourable place in our collective memory. Rather, according to King, it was "the most long drawn-out, no-action talkfest in history. It was riddled with inter-colonial conferences, boring speeches, non-committal committees of inquiry, expensive banquets and long, soporific train journeys back home sleeping off the tax-paid port".

Hardly a scholarly view, this, not one founded on facts, yet one which has certainly found currency in a country where, at the moment, politicians are held in even lower regard than bankers, journalists and used-car salesmen. The recent republic referendum was a casualty of this irrational mindset.

Second, despite the very recent, and mightily welcome, publication of a few excellent books on the Federation saga (works by Helen Irving, John Hirst and

Geoffrey Bolton among them), the telling of the essential narrative has for far too long been extracted from a small number of flawed accounts by long-dead Federation “fathers” such as Alfred Deakin and Bernhard Wise.

Third, as former Australian ambassador Richard Broinowski wrote in a recent letter to the *Canberra Times* newspaper, when we recall key Federation personalities like the then Attorney-General (and later Prime Minister) Billy Hughes, Governor-General Lord Denman and Minister for Territories, King O’Malley, we realise that their well-documented, jaundiced social views helped to shape national aspirations in 1901. They vigorously espoused racism and an aggressive imperialism. The tide is well and truly out on the more virulent Victorian cultural imperatives that motivated a number of our Federation founders.

Fourth and finally, as stated recently by the present Clerk of the Australian Senate, Harry Evans, the commonly held view that Australia has a Westminster system of government is as damaging as it is absurd. Evans regards this “Westminster mantra” cliché as one which many Australian politicians have promulgated because it subtly supports “prime-ministerial absolutism”.

For Evans, Australia will only have a worthy debate on the state of its political system when it rejects, once and for all, what Lord Hailsham called the “elective dictatorship” and the “imperial prime-ministership”, and it restores the primacy of the system of checks and balances demanded by, and initially achieved by, the Federation founders.

A great silence

A bare handful of writers has advanced an opinion on the state of federalism in Australia *ca.* 2000. We might now legitimately talk of the *Great Federalism Silence* down under. We seem to have lost contact with its roots and realities.

While the best of the “ABCs of Federation” summaries were produced, predictably, by two of Federation’s most knowledgeable contemporary historians, based on their books—Helen Irving,

drawing on her *To Constitute a Nation: A Cultural History of Australia’s Constitution* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) and John Hirst, excerpting from his *The Sentimental National: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth* (Oxford University Press, 2000)—the most engaging contribution in this category for me came from Paul Kelly, the *Australian* newspaper’s International Editor.

Consistently the most incisive journalist in the country during the republican referendum campaign, Kelly in his article entitled “Practical, visionary, enduring”—which ran in the *Australian* on 30–31 December 2000—wrote in some detail about the importance of the 1901–14 period to the consolidation of Australian federalism.

It was, Kelly wrote, “a vigorous phase of national-building”. More importantly, he took Australia’s best known historian Manning Clark to task for his dismissive attitude towards Federation. Clark regarded Federation as a disappointment because “the bourgeoisie had triumphed”. Kelly in turn takes issue with Clark, maintaining that “the centenary . . . has bequeathed a wiser assessment”.

Certainly the scope of Kelly’s contribution sharply contrasts those contemporaneous articles which pursued issues more pertinent to the immediate present rather than try and relate the complexities of the past to a vision of the future.

The limited intellectual and imaginative range of the majority of centenary retrospects only served to highlight those accounts which went an extra yard or two.

One of these was controversial historian Geoffrey Blainey. While it must be said that Blainey largely took the safe option, saying that Australia remains “a place of enormous hope and opportunity” and that it has much to celebrate, he did advance his opinion on the federalism question: for a democratic country occupying a huge area, “the federal system is the best-known solution”. Blainey’s most contentious point he saved for last: “There is a case for each major region possessing its own state government. The sad fact is that the newest state in Australia is Queensland, created more than 140 years ago”.

No commentator that I have come across has yet accepted the challenge of responding to Blainey’s speculative suggestion, but a few at least advanced opinions on the federalism debate in this country.

The “beginning of an argument”

Australian leader writer Mike Steketee put the case that while Australia’s democracy is “one of the most enduring in the world”, this “does not make it an efficient system of government, with the Constitution bequeathing a bugger’s muddle of overlapping and divided federal and state responsibilities. Anachronisms and contradictions . . . remain to be resolved”. What a pity Steketee did not expand on the “bugger’s muddle” that everyone knows to exist in Australia.

Even more’s the pity that the Federation experts called on to comment at the centenary abrogated their responsibilities, and generally chose to ‘dumb down’ their message.

Federalism is the debate that Australia has yet to have.

Perhaps the wisest words on the Federation instinct came from one of Australia’s wisest citizens: our finest living novelist David Malouf. In a typically thoughtful piece, published in the *Australian* on New Year’s Day, Malouf began by stating that “Federation was the beginning of an argument about what sort of nation we were to be. . . .” It was a theme worked up by a few commentators. Unlike all the rest, however, Malouf could deftly embrace the Olympic experience within his grasp of Federation and its history:

. . . the Sydney Olympics really was the apotheosis of Australia’s national achievement and the revelation, to ourselves as much as to others, of an achieved national style. That was, in many ways, our real celebration of Federation.

As Australia debates its distinctive system of federalism, in the twenty-first century, it is to be hoped that the participating politicians can bring a similarly imaginative grasp to the table. ☺