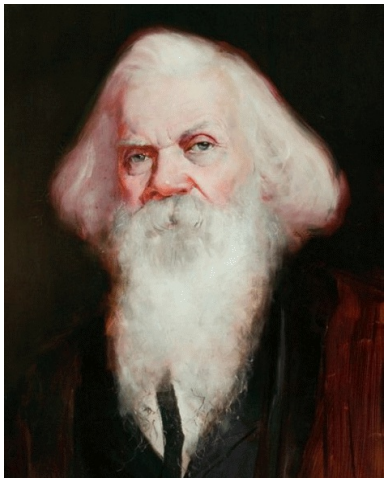


Impelling the continent towards nationhood

FamilyVoice Australia, February 2021

... what we are doing by this great movement is not for us,
but for ... the untold millions that will follow us;
until this land of Australia shall gather within its bosom
all the fruits of the culture of the world, all the lessons from the
philosophy of the world, all the high examples from the brilliant courage
of our great forefathers; and until the flag of freedom shall be planted
here so firmly, and guarded with such a fervid patriotism,
that all the powers on earth shall never assault it.

- Remarks **Sir Henry Parkes** delivered to the New South Wales House of Assembly on 7th May 1890, (noted in *Honour to Whom Honour is Due* by Bruce Smith, Sydney: McCarron and Co, 1899, p14).

Prior to Britain's colonial activity across the Australian continent, the indigenous peoples consisted of about 250 people groups, which exhibited their own cooperative ventures (and rivalries) but without singularity of nationhood. While the colonial leadership was instructed towards *amity and kindness* towards the indigenous peoples, it perceived no indigenous structure of central government and was therefore unable to negotiate a treaty (unlike the situation in New Zealand). Many pioneer colonists dealt most unjustly towards the indigenous people, but nevertheless were instrumental in the hand of God to share the Gospel, along with literacy, human rights, technology and modern healthcare.

From 1788, Britain gradually established six Australian colonies, that operated as distinctive and largely self-governing political entities. However, their individual autonomy brought serious difficulty relating to defence, transport and commerce:

- The continent faced problems of defence, owing to the lack of a national military force;
- Incompatible railway gauges (track widths) restricted movement across the colonial borders;
- New South Wales held to a protectionist approach which restricted trade;
- Each Colony had its own currency, coinage and postage stamps.

In response to such problems, the possibility of unifying the Australian colonies was discussed in 1847, but it was not until the 1880s that the movement gained any serious momentum. It was recognised that the distinctive nature of each of the six Australian colonies must be preserved, while national cooperation was also required. Hence the concept of a federation (a group of states).

Eventually a common Christian ethos undergirded the movement towards unifying Britains's six Australian colonies, especially based on Psalm 133:1 - *Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!* (King James Version). That text provided a biblical basis for Christian leaders to commend and urge the federal movement.

As the culture was highly Christianised, most of the federal advocates gladly endorsed the Christian basis of the federal enterprise. Hence, Sir Henry Parkes, who later would became recognised as the Father of Federation (though he would not live to see its achievement), made this oft-quoted remark:

> *... we are ... pre-eminently a Christian people – as our laws, our whole system of jurisprudence, our Constitution – everything that we have which is precious – are based upon and interwoven with our Christian belief ... .* [*Sydney Morning Herald*, 26th August, 1885 p6]

However, federal ambitions continued to struggle until Parkes gave his famous speech on federation on 24th October 1889, that became known as *The Tenterfield Oration*. His remarks at a dinner in the northern New South Wales town of Tenterfield, renewed enthusiasm towards unification. Addressing only a small audience of 80 people at a banquet in the School of Arts, his speech impelled the people of Australia towards unity, as he called for a convention on federation, and urged the formation of a "great national government for all Australia".

While only short quotations of his speech are preserved, in the form of newspaper reports, the public reaction encouraged Sir Henry Parkes to renew his efforts to achieve a conference of the colonies.

That especially occurred in Melbourne (in 1890) when Parkes led the first Australasian Federation Conference. In its meetings, Sir Henry suggested the name *Commonwealth of Australia* for the nation.

The views of Parkes gained support at the Melbourne conference and at the National Australasian Convention in Sydney in March 1891. Appropriately, Parkes presided over this convention, where debate centred around his resolutions, that set out the principles of an Australian Constitution. At the Convention banquet, Sir Henry Parkes made the following remarks while proposing the toast:

> *We who see that the time has come for Australia to form a great federation simply say that the time has come for union… We say that the time has come when there should be only peace and goodwill and agreement between these great colonies… We seek to break down the barriers which have hitherto divided us. … I ask you with unreserved feeling, with true hearts, earnestly engaged in this work to drink "One people – One destiny."* [11th March 1891]

The convention wrote the first draft of the Constitution, in part as the Queensland Premier Sir Samuel Griffith led a team that revised the document while sailing on the Hawkesbury River, west of Sydney.

Then in Adelaide on 14th April 1897, Western Australia Premier Sir John Forrest made this statement as one of many people whose contributions to the Australasian Federal Convention helped the cause:

> *We are all one people. We all belong to the same nation, and we do not want to live under different laws and be separated by hostile tariffs and imaginary lines drawn across a map, separating one colony from another, but we should form one great Commonwealth, and all federate together.* [*Official Record of the Debates of the Australasian Federal Convention*, p574]

Despite a growing interest in federation, many people became uneasy about the lack of recognition of Almighty God in the emerging draft constitution of the new nation. Thus, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (14th April 1897) referenced Presbyterian minister Rev'd W. Mathison as follows:

> *... if that constitution were framed without reference to the existence of the Deity it would be a stigma and a shame upon Australia, and if this should happen he trusted the people of the colonies would decline to accept such a constitution.*

Delegates at the Australasian Federal Convention eventually agreed to an amended Commonwealth Bill for a Constitution which (in its Preamble) would recognise Almighty God. The draft Constitution was submitted to the people of the Australian colonies, who voted in favour of its adoption.

Since the start of Federation, the Commonwealth Constitution has featured a Preamble containing the following strong statement, that effectively was re-ratified by the voters at a referendum in 1999:

> *The people ... humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth under the Crown ... and under the Constitution ....*