

# Federation and the NATIONAL CAPITAL

**F**ederation of the Australian colonies had been discussed as early as 1847, but it was not until the 1880s that the movement gained any serious momentum. First, the 'Federal Council of Australasia Act 1885' established the Australasian Federal Council (which New South Wales refused to join). On 24 October 1889 Henry Parkes – Federation's highest profile advocate – delivered a speech at Tenterfield, in northern New South Wales, where he declared that the time was ripe for a federal government.

The impetus for Federation focussed on the ideals of a new nation and the economic and military advantages likely to follow from a centralised system of government. Parkes' sentiments were strongly supported at the Australasian Federation Conference, held in Melbourne in February 1890 and then, more significantly, at the National Australasian Convention in Sydney just over a year later. Appropriately, Parkes presided over this convention, where debate centred around his resolutions, which set out the first principles of an Australian Constitution. At the Convention banquet, Parkes famously proposed a toast to 'One People, One Destiny'.

The move towards Federation received further boosts at numerous conferences: Corowa in 1893; Bathurst in 1896; and in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne in 1897-8 for the Australasian Federal Convention. In spite of many alterations, and altercations, this Convention adopted an amended Commonwealth Bill, paving the way for it to be put to the people of the colonies by referenda.

The third and fourth days of June 1898 were fixed as the dates on which four of the colonies would vote on the Bill. Queensland did not participate and Western Australia waited to see what the other colonies would do. All four colonies voted in favour, but the statutory vote of 80 000 required in New South Wales to pass the Bill was not reached. This failure to achieve the necessary minimum vote in the most influential state gave New South Wales Premier, George Reid, the opportunity to seek concessions from the other premiers. Thus, a premiers' conference was convened in Melbourne in January 1899 and discussion concentrated on the resolutions put forward by Reid.

One of his prime concerns was to have the federal capital in New South Wales, a concession he gained, but only at a price: it must be outside a radius of 100 miles (160km) from Sydney. At the next referenda, all colonies voted in favour of Federation. Ironically, those living closest to what would eventually be the future capital – Canberra – did not favour Federation. In the Queanbeyan electorate, 770 voted against and only 623 for the Commonwealth Bill.

The final step necessary to achieve Federation was to present the Australian Constitution Bill to the Imperial Parliament in London. The Bill had an almost uninterrupted passage through both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Queen Victoria gave the Royal Assent on 9 July 1900. She issued the Royal Proclamation constituting the Commonwealth of Australia on 17 September 1900. The date selected for the commencement of the Commonwealth was 1 January 1901, but the opening of the Commonwealth Parliament did not occur until 9 May 1901.

Soon after the 1899 referenda, action was taken to select the federal capital site. Alexander Oliver, President of the Land Court, was appointed to investigate a site for the capital.

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Advertisements in metropolitan and provincial newspapers invited persons to bring to the notice of the Commissioner any area of 64 000 acres (25 878 hectares) that might be suitable as a site for the capital. The response was overwhelming, and Oliver quickly set to work to visit the nominated areas.

One of the early groups to respond to the advertisements was the Queanbeyan Federal City Committee. Ultimately, Oliver reported that any one of three sites – Orange, Yass or Bombala-Eden – would be suitable for the Seat of Government, but his final statement was that Southern Monaro was entitled to first place.

Despite Oliver's painstaking work, colonial bias, controversy and backroom politicking continued to delay the choice of the national capital site. Finally, on 9 October 1908, members of the House of Representatives voted for Yass-Canberra by 39 votes to Dalgety's 33. The Senate also supported the Yass-Canberra vote.

The next task was to determine the best site for the capital city within the Yass-Canberra area. Prime Minister Andrew Fisher obtained the services of surveyor Charles Scrivener, on loan from New South Wales, and established an Advisory Board, of which Scrivener was also a member. Scrivener completed a report on possible sites in the Yass-Canberra area in about two months and, in March 1909, the Advisory Board made its recommendations to the Minister for Home Affairs.

Scrivener had favoured Canberra for a number of reasons, including the availability of water for drinking and the fact that the flood plain of the Molonglo River could be dammed to form an ornamental lake in the centre of the city site. The Advisory Board followed Scrivener's recommendations.

Thus, on 1 January 1911 – exactly a decade after the Australian colonies became states in a Commonwealth – the Federal Capital Territory of 910 square miles (2 356 square kilometres) came into existence after legislation was passed by both the Commonwealth and New South Wales Parliaments.

*Lyall Gillespie*

## Further Reading

- Lyall Gillespie, *Canberra 1870–1913*, AGPS, 1991
- Roger Pegrum, *The Bush Capital*, Hale and Iremonger, 1983

