



RESEARCH NOTE

Number 23, 2000–01
ISSN 1328-8016

1901: A Socio-Economic Profile of Australia at Federation

Introduction

At its creation, in 1901, the new federal nation of Australia had a population of 3 824 913 and its largest city was Melbourne with a population of 501 580. The decade leading up to Federation had been one of economic change and turmoil. However, by 1901 the country was enjoying a period of growth and prosperity that gave Australia one of the highest per capita incomes in the world.

GDP Per capita—1900 (a)

United Kingdom	4593
New Zealand	4320
Australia	4299
USA	4096
Belgium	3652
Netherlands	3533
Switzerland	3531
Germany	3134
Denmark	2902
Austria	2901

Note: (a) 1990 international dollars

Source: Angus Madison, *Monitoring the World Economy 1820–1992*, Development Centre Studies, OECD, Paris, 1995.

Population

In terms of population distribution Australia was already becoming a highly urbanised society. Estimates based on colonial Census returns indicate that 52 per cent of the population lived in towns of 2500 or more.¹ Compared with other similar countries this was high. Only 40 per cent of the population in Canada was considered urban and in the United States it was about 35 per cent.² Much of this urban population was concentrated in the six capital cities, which accounted for 36 per cent of the whole population. Adelaide accounted for

45 per cent of the State's population and Melbourne 41 per cent of Victoria's.³

Population - Australia 1901

31-Dec	Capital city population (a)		Share of State Pop (%)	
New South Wales	1 375 455	Sydney	496 990	36
Victoria	1 209 900	Melbourne	501 580	41
Queensland	506 721	Brisbane	120 650	24
South Australia	359 330	Adelaide	162 200	45
Tasmania	175 233	Hobart	36 060	21
Western Australia	193 601	Perth	70 700	37
Northern Territory	4 673	-	-	-
Australia	3 824 913	Six capital cities	1 388 180	36

Source: *Australian Demographic Trends*, ABS Cat No. 3102.0

The population was young. The median age was 22.5 years, but life expectancy was low. Life expectancy at birth was 55.2 years for males and 58.4 years for females. The median age is now 35.2 and life expectancy is 76.22 years for males and 81.77 years for females.

In the period 1901 to 1910, 75 887 of 100 000 males born in any given year survived to age 40. For females this figure stood at 78 000.⁴ Now a larger proportion of people survive into their 70s. Indeed a greater proportion of people now survive to age 60 than age 5 at Federation.⁵ The infant mortality rate (number of infant deaths registered per thousand births registered) was a high 103.6 in 1901;⁶ it is now 5.7.⁷

Nevertheless Australians do seem to have led healthier lives than people in other countries. The crude death rate (number registered deaths per year per 1000 population) for Australia was 10.9 in 1905. This compares with 15.5 for the United

Kingdom, 19.6 for France, 20 for Japan and 32.1 for Russia. Infant mortality was less too. For instance

the rate in England and Wales was 128 (year 1905), France 144 (year 1904) and Russia 272 (year 1901).⁸

Although in 1901 full blood aborigines were not counted in the Census it has been estimated that the aboriginal population was 94 564,⁹ or three per cent of the total population.

Of the non-aboriginal population 77 per cent were born in Australia and 18 per cent were born in the British Isles. Culturally the country was very homogenous. Whilst Australia drew migrants from around the globe the numbers were small compared with the numbers from the British Isles.¹⁰ The first statistical Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia describes the population as '*fundamentally British*'.

In terms of the contribution of migration to population growth the period around Federation was not typical of what had gone on before or what was to happen later. The economic crises of the early 1890s

had reduced net migration to Australia from a high of 224 880 in the economic boom period of 1881 to 1885 to 2487 between 1896 to 1900.¹¹

Economy

By 1901 the economic crisis was over. Economic growth was positive and the unemployment rate stood at 3.9 per cent.¹²

During the economic crisis of the 1890s Australia's economy had undergone considerable change. New rural industries of wheat, meat, dairy products and fruit were beginning to supplant the dominance of wool on the local economy. Between 1881 and 1890 these emerging industries accounted for 6.8 per cent of exports. Between 1901 and 1913 this share increased to 19.4 per cent of exports. Manufacturing also began to become much more important, although producing only for the local market.¹³

Trade was vital to the economic health of the country. Exports accounted for 25 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹⁴ Britain was by far the dominant trading partner, accounting for 54 per cent of exports and 58 per cent of imports.

Over 94 per cent of commodities exported were from the agricultural and mining sectors. Gold accounted for 28 per cent and wool for 32 per cent of all exports. Imports were dominated by manufactures, particularly textiles and clothing which accounted for 27 per cent of all imports.¹⁵

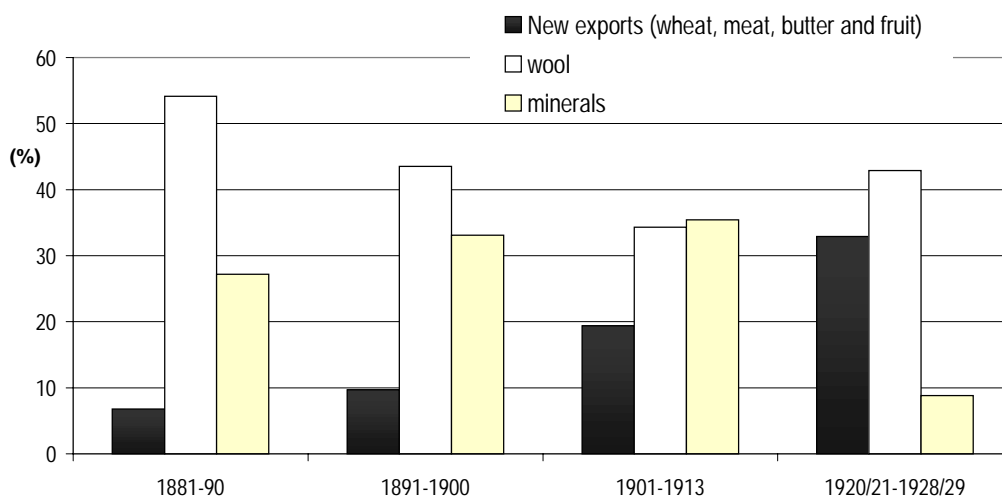
The dominance of primary industries is also reflected in the estimates for GDP and employment. The primary sector, including the pastoral, mining, agricultural and dairying industries, accounted for about 29 per cent of GDP and 36 per cent of employment.¹⁶

Summary

In sum the statistics reveal a country with a young age profile. Although it could be considered a migrant country, recent economic circumstances had stalled that source of population growth. People lived much shorter lives but, comparatively, their lot seems to have been better than that of other countries. By 1901 the economy had escaped the doldrums of the previous decade and was in the process of diversification and growth.

1. R.V. Jackson, *Australian economic development in the nineteenth century*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1977.
2. *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia No. 1 1908*, Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics.
3. *Australian Demographic Trends*, 1997, ABS Cat No. 3102.
4. Wray Vamplew, ed., *Australians: historical statistics*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, Sydney, 1987.
5. *Deaths, Australia*, 1999, ABS Cat No. 3302.0
6. Wray Vamplew, op. cit.
7. *Deaths, Australia*, op. cit.
8. *Australian Demographic Trends*, op. cit.
9. Wray Vamplew, op. cit.
10. *ibid.*
11. *Australian Demographic Trends*, op. cit.
12. N. G. Butlin, *Select Comparative Economic statistics 1900–1940: Australia and Britain, Canada, Japan, New Zealand and USA*. Source Papers in Economic History, No. 4, ANU, December 1984.
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14. Wray Vamplew, op. cit.
15. *ibid.*
16. *ibid.*

Diversification of Australian exports



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6 February 2001

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