Introduction

When Henry Parkes delivered his Tenterfield speech in October 1889, declaring federation’s time had come, he provided the stimulus for an eighteen-month period of lively speculation. Nationhood, it seemed, was in the air. The 1890 Australian Federation Conference in Melbourne, followed by the 1891 National Australasian Convention in Sydney, appeared to confirm genuine interest in the national cause. Yet the Melbourne and Sydney meetings brought together only politicians and those who might be politicians. These were meetings, held in the Australian continent’s two most influential cities, which only succeeded in registering the aims and ambitions of a very narrow section of the colonial population.

In the months following Sydney’s Convention, the momentum of the official movement was dissipated as the big strikes and severe depression engulfed the colonies. The New South Wales government did not take the lead, as had been expected, after the completion and distribution of the 1891 draft constitution. By late 1892, the political support for federation had faltered as intercolonial relations deteriorated over a range of issues. Commercial and social barriers between the colonies created particular problems in the borderland of New South Wales and Victoria, and to a lesser extent between New South Wales and Queensland. The colonial governments were showing little interest in addressing the complex problems of constitution-making in a climate beset by economic and social upheaval. Sir John Robertson was wrong to say that federation was as dead as Julius Caesar, but it was certainly ailing. Far too many colonial Australians felt left out of the process. In the early 1890s, federation was perceived—quite accurately—as the politicians’ plaything.

Yet in the period from the establishment of the Australasian Federation League, in July 1893, to the first session of the National Australasian Convention in Adelaide, in March/April 1897, federation’s cause was steadily resuscitated. Indeed, by the time of the Adelaide session, as Helen Irving suggests in To Constitute a Nation—A Cultural History of Australia’s Constitution (1997), the ‘people had become the legitimating force behind Federation’. In this process, the Corowa Conference (1893) and the Bathurst People’s Federal Convention (1896) had significant roles. Until recently, neither one had been accorded the attention it deserved in the federation story. However, on the centenary birthdays of both the Corowa and Bathurst federation gatherings, celebratory events were held in order to publicise the largely forgotten federation contributions of each town. The results are contained in this special issue of Papers on Parliament.
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Contents

Corowa

1. Corowa and the Voice of the People
   Stuart Macintyre 1

2. When Quick Met Garran: the Corowa Plan
   Helen Irving 13

3. Loading the Gun: Corowa’s Role in the Federation Debate
   David Headon 20

4. Melba’s Puddin’: Corowa, Mulwala and Our Cultural Past
   Jeff Brownrigg 30

5. From Little Things Big Things Grow:
   Thresholds of Citizenship (1893–1993)
   James Warden 44

6. The Prime Minister’s Centenary Dinner Speech,
   Corowa, 31 July 1993
   Paul Keating 59

Bathurst

7. Return Tickets at Single Fares:
   the Bathurst Convention as a Representative National Gathering
   John Bannon 67

8. The Idea of the People
   Stuart Macintyre 76

9. Federation and the People: a Response to Stuart Macintyre
   John Hirst 80

10. Resurrecting the Federal Ideal: Mr Astley goes to Bathurst
    David Headon 83

11. Cardinal Moran, Bathurst and the Achievement of Federation
    A.E. Cahill 94

12. Barton at Bathurst: ‘Front Stage/Backstage’
    Tessa Milne 103

    Mark McKenna 108

14. A Foreign Agent Unmasked: Colonel Bell at Bathurst
    Robin McLachlan 113
15. Joseph Cook’s Contribution
   Kevin Livingston

16. ‘The Sentiment of Nationality’:
    Bathurst and Popular Support for Federation
   Jeff Brownrigg

Sources of illustrations
HYMN OF THE FEDERATION

The Corowa Conference July 31st, 1893

Where the waters of the Murray and the border cities meet,
I hear the sound of voices and the tramp of many feet
And as one the sound of voices, and as one the pulses beat
True to the Union!

Our artificial borders they have caused us many hates
That shall fade before the union which the world expected waits,
Give way the barriers! Open all ye ever-lasting gates!
Open to Union!

Not for us the bloody banner of an old king crafted land
Our foundation shall be justice—there’s is but the futile sand.
Our flag, the Christ blessed cross of stars from Gulf to Southern strand.
One in our Union!

Not ours to make a people slaves while we from bonds are free;
Not ours to make our rivers run red-bosomed to the sea;
But ours to build the basement as the sky-most tower shall be—
Strength is the Union!

Within our land no sword shall come to well the widow’s tears;
For our yeomen are our legions, and their spoils the golden ears—
We know not aught of lust of blood, nor war that slays and sears.
Peace is the Union!

Where the steel-bound promontory bars the entrance to the South—
Where the silver mirage trembles in the zenith of the drouth—
Sounds the voice of all Australia, as the voice of but one mouth,
“Speed the Union!”

With the old world wrecks to guide us
which the sands of hist’ry strew
Let us build a mighty nation that shall not
be for the few.
Let us build on till perfect—let us build
and build anew.
    Perfect the Union!

Throw down all our cruel barriers; for
without them we’re strong
To defend from our wrong others—to defend
ourselves from wrong;
And our nation, built on honor, sings a
clarion rapturous song.
    “Honor the Union!”

Randolph Bedford.
Melbourne, July 30, 1893.