

Corowa and the Voice of the People

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The parallels between the present and the past are uncannily close. The country is racked by doubt and uncertainty. The economy falters. Old ways of getting and spending no longer work. There is argument and division. The major political parties seem to have exhausted their capacity for constructive leadership. At the same time proposals for change fail to command enthusiasm.

If today the Australian republic lies becalmed in this Sargasso Sea of unrealistic expectation and fatalistic indifference, one hundred years ago the federal cause was similarly immobile. The representatives of the Australian and New Zealand colonies had met in conference at Melbourne in 1890 and agreed to the resolution of Sir Henry Parkes that a federal union was desirable. Delegations from the colonial parliaments had attended the Convention at Sydney in 1891 that drafted a federal scheme. The draft constitution was taken back to the colonial legislatures where it was criticised, amended, put off or rejected. 'Federation is as dead as Julius Caesar,' pronounced the leader of the 'Geebung' group of ultra-provincialists in New South Wales.¹

Then came the formation of an Australasian Federation League, and the decision of its branches along the river-border of New South Wales and Victoria to convene a meeting of parties interested in federation. At that conference in Corowa, in 1893, the representative of the Bendigo branch of the Australian Natives Association, Dr John Quick, hit upon the device that would break the deadlock. He suggested that the preparation of a new Bill for a Federal Constitution of Australia should be entrusted to popular representatives elected specifically for this purpose and that this Bill should then be submitted for acceptance or rejection by a general vote of the people of each colony. The Corowa Conference having adopted his

¹ Quoted in John Quick and Robert Randolph Garran, *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1901, p. 150.

scheme, he drafted an enabling Australian Federal Congress Bill that the Federation League embraced and publicised. The premiers met in conference at Hobart in January 1895 and accepted the substance of Quick's proposal. The passage of enabling legislation led to the election of the delegates to the Federal Convention of 1897-8, and eventually to the popular endorsement of its work, which was enacted in 1900 and came into operation on the first day of January 1901. The people had spoken and brought the Commonwealth of Australia into being.

The story of Corowa was quickly codified. In the standard school textbook histories of Australia, which told the children of the new commonwealth how their nation had come into being, Corowa was an act of supervention which rescued the national destiny from petty vanities. As one put it, Quick's 'guiding idea was that a fresh impulse towards federation should emanate directly from the people':

From the adoption of this scheme in 1893 dates the irresistible march of the federal movement to victory. Jealousies, personal ambitions, particularist interests, the tinkering pettiness of party manoeuvring, might sprog the wheels for a bit, but there could no longer be more than temporary hindrances.²

This account of the triumph of the federal cause was also installed into the historical record by its heroes. Sir John Quick, who was subsequently elected a delegate to the later Federal Convention and knighted for his services on the proclamation of the Commonwealth, joined with his fellow-Corowan, Robert Garran, whom he met and befriended there, to write the authoritative *Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth* (1901), dedicated to 'The People of Australia'. Its Historical Introduction ran to 250 pages and traced the history of colonial development from the Greek city states to the new world. In relating the history of the federal movement, Quick and Garran told of the fruitless efforts of British statesmen and colonial negotiations conducted over forty years down to the failure of the Commonwealth Bill of 1891. Then came the chapter entitled 'The Popular Movement', which began with 'the people' waking up to the fact that a scheme 'with which politicians and Parliaments had been dallying so long, meant the salvation of Australia'. The authors noted the work of the Australian Natives Association and the Federal Leagues that led up to the Corowa Conference. Quick's resolution there was said to mark a new epoch, which transformed federation into a popular process.³

Garran provided additional detail concerning that miraculous transformation in his reminiscences, *Prosper the Commonwealth* (1958). As he described the Corowa Conference, it was largely taken up with formalities, dinners and speeches. The curious thing, he explained, was that 'the real achievement of the Conference, and the success of the movement which it started, came not from adherence to the routine agenda, but from an inspired break-away from that routine.' As the formal speeches proceeded, the desire for something more practical grew. 'Words, words, words—can't we do something?' interjected

² Ernest Scott, *A Short History of Australia*, Oxford University Press, London, 1916, p. 295. Cf. Edward Jenks, *A History of the Australasian Colonies (From their Foundation to the Year 1911)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1912, p. 298; Alexander and George Sutherland, *The History of Australia and New Zealand from 1606 to 1911*, Longmans Green, London, 1913, pp. 188-9.

³ Quick and Garran, *Annotated Constitution*, op. cit., pp. 150-5.

an impatient enthusiast. Then came Quick's suggestion of a short recess while half a dozen delegates withdrew into a backroom. Within half an hour they came back and Quick proposed the crucial 'Corowa resolution':

That in the opinion of this Conference the Legislature of each Australasian colony should pass an Act providing for the election of representatives to attend a statutory convention or congress to consider and adopt a bill to establish a Federal Constitution for Australia and upon the adoption of such a bill or measure it be submitted by some process of referendum to the verdict of each colony.

Neither from the record nor from recollection could Garran trace any such previous suggestion. It emerged, he claimed, spontaneously from impatience with the futility of the formal proceedings and insistence on action. As Garran put it:

It was the sudden explosion of protests, largely from younger members of the Conference, that they were only talking and doing nothing, that caused Dr Quick to suggest a short recess, and the result was the drafting of a resolution that was like the striking of flint with steel to produce this new spark of inspiration.⁴

Quick himself narrated these events in recollections first published in the Melbourne *Herald* in 1926. These sketched a life of service as a Cornish immigrant boy on the Victorian goldfields who, forced by the death of his father to leave school at the age of ten, launched himself into public life through journalism and law by means of pious emulation and intellectual self-improvement. He recalled the men of affairs who inspired him: Moses Wilson Gray of the Land Convention; Richard Heales, the coachmaker, teetotaller and first Victorian liberal premier; George Higinbotham, the scourge of the wealthy lower orders; Graham Berry, the popular champion who persuaded Quick himself to enter Parliament in 1880. These former champions set the standards of public conduct. Though dead, he wrote, 'their works and influence remain behind'. Their careers intersected with formative events and their genius settled the destinies of the young nation. They showed him that 'Great men can only be created by great opportunities, and by participating in great events in the wide and attractive field of action.' Federation was Quick's field of action. Upon his defeat as a member for Bendigo in the election of 1889, he said, he took comfort from the words of Tennyson: 'That men may rise on stepping stones / Of their dead selves to higher things'; and abandoned colonial politics for the federal cause.⁵

Through his membership of the Australian Natives Association (made possible in that same year by the Association's decision to accept virtual natives) and his leadership of the Bendigo Federation League, Quick played a prominent part at Corowa. His explanation of its genesis linked the suggestion of a politician, Edmund Barton, that the Riverina form federal leagues to strengthen the hand of federalists in New South Wales, to the spontaneous ardour of nationalists. As he put it:

⁴ Sir Robert Randolph Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1958, pp. 102–4.

⁵ Edited by L. E. Fredman and republished as *Sir John Quick's Notebook*, Reg. C. Pognoski, Newcastle, 1965, pp. 13–20.

... there grew up in the electoral constituencies of Victoria and New South Wales, groups of men out of Parliament, but animated by patriotic impulse and interest in the common cause of federation, who thought the time had arrived when national unity should be made a people's cause and should be no longer dependent on the battledore and shuttlecock of colonial Parliamentary parties.

Of the circumstances that led to his impromptu resolution he gave no explanation (and his ageing memory of the terms of that resolution changed Australasian to Australian). He simply stated that the resolution was carried unanimously amid great enthusiasm. He observed the absence of the leading pro-federal parliamentarians, Parkes, Barton and Deakin. He related how he drafted enabling legislation for his scheme and pressed it upon Victorian, New South Wales and Queensland politicians. He rejoiced that George Reid, who as premier of New South Wales initiated the premiers conference in Hobart in January 1895, accepted his scheme and 'assumed the leadership of the Federal movement, which finally led on to fortune'.⁶

Finally, there is the version of Corowa given by Alfred Deakin as part of his inner history of the federal cause, written between 1898 and 1900 and first published in 1944. Deakin paid honour to Quick for his devotion. 'Dark, handsome, sturdy and intelligent', he possessed a dauntless determination and trustworthiness which he applied from 1889 to the federal cause. Deakin raised the possibility that the idea of the celebrated Corowa resolution might not have come from Quick. He suggested that the two principal objections of the radical critics to the 1891 Bill were that its authors had not been chosen by the people and that there was no provision to submit the Bill directly to the people—precisely the two shortcomings that Quick now proposed to remedy. He also said that it was Henry D'Esterre Taylor, the secretary of the Imperial Federation League (an organisation with which Deakin was associated) who suggested that remedy to Quick. (D'Esterre Taylor certainly believed this was so: he claimed afterwards that he had put forward the idea of the popularly elected convention to several of the delegates at Corowa before Quick appropriated it.⁷) There were errors and evasions in Deakin's account. He omitted to explain that he had begged off attendance at Corowa because he was working as a barrister to make good his losses as a landboomer. He attributed its genesis to the residents of Corowa when in fact the conference was instigated by a broader group of Riverina enthusiasts, and he misplaced Corowa itself as lying across the Murray from Echuca. But of the efficacy of the scheme hatched at Corowa, and of Quick's vital role in persuading Reid to take it up along with the premiers of Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania, Deakin was insistent. Corowa revived the sacred cause from stagnation.⁸

Now these versions of Corowa are inscribed in different sorts of writing: an authoritative work of reference, published reminiscences, informal memoirs, a private notebook. Each of

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 40.

⁷ D'Esterre Taylor to A. H. Loring, 7 August 1893 and to Quick, 9 October 1900, quoted in Henry L. Hall, *Victoria's Part in the Australian Federation Movement 1849–1900*, Elliot Stock, London, 1931, pp. 96–

⁸ Alfred Deakin, *The Federal Story: The Inner History of the Federal Cause 1880–1900*, 2nd edn, J. A. La Nauze (ed. and introd.), Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1963, pp. 57–9.

them is written with a particular kind of intimacy with the events it records while at the same time imbuing those events with a monumental significance. Each author claims the privileged knowledge of the participant to install himself in a process of national procreation. They use both hindsight and foresight to mark out a particular form of public history on a human scale as the visionary foresight of the founders can be seen in retrospect to have been vindicated in the fulfilment of the Commonwealth. In a little country town great deeds were done.⁹

From a contemporary perspective, the personalities of the Federal Fathers are no longer apparent, the details of their actions lost with the effluxion of time and the decline of interest in that sort of patriarchal history. Yet the story of Corowa sits nicely with the commemorative urge. It is an exemplary story of practical civic endeavour, demonstrating the efficacy of voluntary initiative. 'Corowa', we have been told recently, 'is the story of the triumph of engaged citizens over doubt, apathy and entrenched resistance.'¹⁰ It has an intimacy and tangibility lacking in the older account of compromise, negotiation and constitutional minutiae. It speaks to the contemporary preference for popular participation over the veneration of those remote progenitors, the Federal Fathers. In 1993, the Corowa Shire Council, Golf Club, RSL, Men's and Ladies' Bowling Clubs, and other local community organisations and businesses, held their National Federation Festival with military demonstrations, brass and pipe band performances, corroboree and barbeque, sky diving, helicopter rides, Koori fashion display, historical re-enactment, tractor pull, tug-of-war, grand parade (with a Tim Fischer \$1000 float award), tennis tournament, rowing regatta, bush tucker buffet, rock and country music concert, and church services, all under the patronage of Elizabeth Windsor.¹¹

It is not yet clear how the Commonwealth itself will mark the federal centenary. As the experience of the Bicentenary demonstrated, such anniversaries call forth a particular kind of public spectacle and diverse kinds of public remembrance that are not easy to control. In its search for an inclusive, uncontentious form of celebration, the Australian Bicentennial Authority merely drew attention to competing claims. Witness the official selection of 200 Greats, carefully chosen to accord with contemporary sensibilities. It gave us sportsmen and women, but not scientists; celebrities but few intellectuals; Dame Enid Lyons but not her husband Joe, who after all was the prime minister; some non-anglophones but not enough to satisfy the multiculturalists; token Aboriginals who could hardly appease the wrath of those who thought 1788 not an occasion to celebrate. It is unsurprising that the Commonwealth Parliament declined the offer of a memorial sculpture to the 200 Greats; or that the unwanted artefact still lacks a home.

But public culture abhors a vacuum, and we can expect the approaching anniversary of the formation of the Commonwealth to call forth its own birthday ceremonies, just as they did in 1951. While the final form of this program has yet to emerge, it is a fair bet that Corowa will figure prominently for its popular symbolism. Already the city of Bendigo is assiduously

⁹ See the cautionary remarks of Brian de Garis, 'How popular was the popular federation movement?' *Papers on Parliament*, no. 21, December 1993, pp. 101–118.

¹⁰ *Age*, 26 January 1993.

¹¹ *Corowa January 1993: National Federation Festival, Friday 22 – Sunday 24 January 1993*, Program leaflet.

promoting Sir John Quick as the real Federal Father, and Geoffrey Blainey has grouped him with Lalor, Deakin and Curtin as one of our few genuine national heroes.¹²

How, then, should the events at Corowa be remembered? I want to revisit the Conference and its attendant circumstances in order to draw out some aspects that invite consideration.

The form of the gathering is itself instructive. It lasted just two days, the Monday and Tuesday of 31 July and 1 August 1893. On the Monday the delegates barely had time to open their proceedings and transact preliminary business before they adjourned to meet representatives of the New South Wales and Victorian governments. Yet even that brief opening session saw a squabble among the Riverina branches over the best site for their local headquarters, a squabble that echoed the earlier rivalry between Albury and the western townships over the location of the Conference.¹³

The New South Wales party, led by William Lyne, the Minister of Public Works, arrived at 1 p.m. on a special train which travelled on the newly opened railway line, from Sydney, via Culcairn, to Corowa. After lunch, they crossed the bridge over the river to Wahgunyah in order to welcome the Victorians, who also came up by train, led by the premier, James Patterson. With him was a large party of 62 delegates and visitors, the ageing Leader of the Opposition, Sir Graham Berry; young Alexander Peacock, the president of the Australian Natives Association and already famous for his deafening kookaburra laugh; William Maloney, flamboyant socialist and Member of the Legislative Assembly, and Quick. They made their way back over the river to the Globe Hotel, where Patterson and Berry responded to Lyne's welcome.

In the evening there was a public meeting in the Oddfellows Hall, where Patterson proposed and Lyne seconded the resolution 'That in the opinion of this meeting the best interests and present and future prosperity of the Australian colonies will be promoted by their early federation.' Further resolutions at a similar level of generality were moved and carried by general acclaim until the New South Wales radical E.W. O'Sullivan and the Victorian socialist Dr Maloney proposed:

That while approving of federation, this meeting desires to state that the only federation which would be acceptable to the people of Australia would be one of a democratic country, embodying one man one vote and the direct expression of the will of the people.

This was disconcertingly specific and both speakers were repeatedly interrupted as they spoke to their proposal. Patterson deprecated its contentious nature and appealed to O'Sullivan and his 'dear little friend' to withdraw the motion. O'Sullivan obliged over the protests of Maloney.¹⁴

¹² Special issue of the *Bendigo Advertiser*, 23 September, entitled 'Birthplace of a Nation'; and Blainey, 'In Praise of John Quick', *Herald* (Melbourne) 2 January 1986, reprinted in *Blainey, Eye on Australia: Speeches and Essays of Geoffrey Blainey*, Schwartz Books, Melbourne, 1991, pp. 55–8.

¹³ Rosemary Pringle, 'The Workings of the Federation Movement in New South Wales 1891–1899: The Role of Parliament and Public Opinion', M. A. thesis, Macquarie University, 1969, p. 107.

¹⁴ *Age, Argus, Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 1893.

The conference proper resumed in the Corowa courthouse at 10 a.m. the following morning with depleted numbers. Lyne had returned to Sydney on the Monday evening, Patterson before breakfast in order to attend a budget session of the Victorian Parliament. Garran and Peacock initiated the formal business by moving ‘That in the opinion of this Conference the best interests and the present and future prosperity of the Australian colonies will be promoted by their early union under the Crown ...’ That last phrase, ‘under the Crown’, again provoked Maloney. He declared Australia was marching towards a republic. Amid cries of ‘No, no’, ‘Question’ and ‘Chair’, the chairman called him to order. ‘If that sort of question ... was not allowable’, Maloney persisted, ‘he would say that he trusted the federation of Australia would go forward and bring about a civilisation that would wipe out poverty from our midst.’ One or two other delegates ventured to make remarks on the same lines but were not allowed to proceed. Another Labor man wanted the conference to endorse the principle of one man one vote, but he was ruled out of order. The original motion was put and carried.¹⁵

Then came Quick with a resolution embodying the aims and objects of the Federation League. He immediately put the emphasis on popular initiative: ‘The main principle is that the cause should be advocated by the citizen and not merely by politicians.’ Indeed, even before that fateful interruption, ‘Words, words, words—can’t we do something?’, which led to the short adjournment and his impromptu additional resolution, Quick was talking of an Australian Congress constituted by popularly elected delegates as a means of breaking the deadlock. D’Esterre Taylor went further: ‘He ventured to say that if the present Conference were a Parliament, Federation would, ere it rose, be an accomplished fact.’¹⁶

The Conference then adjourned for lunch and it was during this break, claimed D’Esterre Taylor, that he learned Quick intended to introduce a new resolution. He said afterwards that he approached Quick and Peacock as they drafted that resolution and insisted that he should be associated with it since it was based on his ideas. Again according to him, Quick agreed that he could second the resolution, but then deliberately held it back until a prior engagement forced its rightful owner to leave Corowa at 2.35 that afternoon.¹⁷

The only other difficulty arose when the president of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce proposed the immediate abolition of all restrictions on intercolonial trade as a precondition of federation. A number of delegates objected that this proposition introduced a partisan note and that its adoption would be taken as an expression of free trade rather than federal sentiment. Eventually an amended version of the motion was adopted that called on the colonial parliaments to assimilate their tariffs preparatory to the creation of a customs union. This concluded the formal proceedings, which ended with three cheers for federation and three more for ‘Her Majesty Queen Victoria’. In the evening some delegates attended a further public meeting to hear Peacock expound the scheme of federation as drafted by the Sydney Convention. Others made their way home.

¹⁵ *Age*, 2 August 1893, *Argus*, 3 August 1893; *Official Report of the Federation Conference held in the Courthouse Corowa on Monday 31 July and Tuesday 1 August*, James C. Leslie, Corowa, 1893.

¹⁶ *Official Report*, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁷ See note 7 above. Reports of the conference do not record the time Quick introduced his resolution, but its place in the *Official Report* suggests it was mid-afternoon.

Those who took the railway south to Melbourne skirted the town of Shepparton, where a mechanic named Joseph Furphy was working on a long and ‘loosely federated’ novel that eventually ran to more than a thousand pages. Set in the Riverina and northern Victoria, *Such is Life* gestures at the realism and fatalism its author undermines. Describing himself as ‘half bushman and half bookworm’, he blends the demotic with self-conscious displays of pedantry.¹⁸ Taking as his motto ‘temper, democratic, bias, offensively Australian’, he celebrates the richness of possibilities in irony and comedy, twists and turns, digressions and false leads. Nothing is quite what it seems on these grassy plains. So also at Corowa, we have a form of theatre in which the characters assume changing identities and speak in different tongues as they manoeuvre for advantage.

Take first of all those cryptic exchanges between Dr Maloney and the other delegates. Maloney was an interloper, a socialist, a feminist, a companion of Tom Roberts in his early *plein air* days, an Old Scotch Collegian elected to Parliament by the votes of the railway workers of West Melbourne, and a founder of the Social Democratic League. The terms he introduced to proceedings at Corowa, one man one vote, the direct expression of the will of the people and the coming republic, alluded to events in Sydney just four weeks earlier when the Australasian Federation League was formally established. That meeting on the evening of Monday 3 July was orchestrated by Barton. It was held in the Sydney Town Hall and chaired by the Lord Mayor. But a large part of the audience, estimated at between 2,000 and 3,000, consisted of supporters of a new political movement, the Labour Electoral League, which already looked on the terms of the proposed federation with considerable suspicion.

Even before the Lord Mayor took the chair, they foreshadowed an amendment to Barton’s resolution, ‘That it is expedient to advance the cause of Australian federation by an organisation of citizens owning no class distinction or party influence, and using its best energies to assist parliamentary action.’ When they established their right to speak, the president of the South Sydney Labor Electoral League, W.G. Higgs, moved the amendment:

That it is expedient to advance the cause of Australian democracy by an organisation using its best energies to establish Australian Federation on the following basis:

1. That the colonies federating shall form themselves into a democratic republic to be called the United States of Australia.
2. That all laws necessary for the peace, order and good government of the republic shall be made by a Federal Parliament consisting of only one chamber.
3. That the Federal Laws shall provide for
 - (a) One Man One Vote throughout each State
 - (b) the Nationalisation of all Land

¹⁸ Furphy quoted in John Barnes, *The Order of Things: a Life of Joseph Furphy*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1990, p. 221.

(c) the Abolition of all Legislative Councils and the Substitution of the Referendum

(d) the total exclusion of all Asiatics and other aliens whose standard of living and habits of life are not equal to our own, and whose entering into competition with Australian wage-earners is a direct menace to the national welfare.

Higgs was supported by George Black, a Labour member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly and leading figure in both the Australian Socialist and Republican League, and by the young orator of the Australian Socialist League and future premier, William Holman. When the amendment was put to a show of hands, the reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald* estimated it was carried by a margin of two to one. The chairman announced it narrowly lost (he said he noticed a number of people with both arms in the air), hastily pushed through the constitution of the Australasian Federation League and declared the meeting closed. The socialists then took the platform and carried a motion of censure against the Lord Mayor before the police arrived and cleared the chamber.¹⁹

The organisers of Corowa were determined to have no repetition of such nonsense. Maloney was present as a representative of the Melbourne Protection, Liberal and Federation League; another Victorian Labour man, George Prendergast, on behalf of the Progressive Political League; but they had little support from other delegates and were speedily called to order when they attempted to introduce their alternative version of a national settlement. There were republicans and socialists present at the recapitulation of Corowa, the Bathurst People's Convention of 1896, but again they were isolated, and deliberately so since its organising secretary had cautioned the League branches against issuing credentials to Labour bodies 'in order to prevent a swamping democratic vote'.²⁰ Few Labour representatives were elected to the official Federal Convention in 1897.

Their objections to the work of the Federal Fathers—'one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth under the Crown of the United Kingdom', its scope carefully limited, its parliament bicameral, the upper house safeguarding the interests of the smaller states at the expense of the principle of equal representation—were disregarded. Quick himself was wedded to this constitutional monarchical, federal, non-majoritarian outcome with its safeguards against levelling democracy. A former honorary president of the Bendigo Branch of the Amalgamated Engine-drivers' Association, he was one of the group of Liberal Protectionists in the House of Representatives who condemned the growing influence of the Federal Labor Party and welcomed the fusion of anti-Labor forces. A Deputy President of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court from 1922 to 1930, he would condemn the expansion of the Commonwealth.²¹

¹⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 July 1893, and handbill by Higgs pasted into the minutes of the Executive Committee of the Federation League, Edward Dowling Papers, vol. 40, National Library of Australia.

²⁰ Minute book of Edward Dowling Papers, National Library of Australia, cited in R.S. Parker, 'Australian federation: the influence of economic interests and political pressures', in J.J. Eastwood and F.B. Smith (eds), *Historical Studies: Selected Articles, First Series*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1964, p. 163.

²¹ Charles Daley, 'Sir John Quick: a distinguished Australian', *Victorian Historical Magazine*, vol. 15, no. 2, December 1934, pp. 33–52.

Given that initial skirmish in Sydney, the officers of the Australasian Federal League were wary of mass meetings. The next official meeting of the League in Sydney called to elect its officers and adopt its rules, described as the first general meeting, was restricted to just forty people. Corowa was safer territory than Sydney. The townships along the Murray had long chafed against the restrictions on trade between New South Wales and Victoria, and Barton had encouraged the formation of local groups of pro-federalists in the southern province of his colony precisely to bring pressure to bear on the apathetic metropolis. The Riverina was therefore a natural venue for a carefully stage-managed event. Of the 72 delegates who met there, 41 were from the border leagues.²² The remainder were all drawn from the neighbouring colonies of New South Wales and Victoria. Far from being a protonational gathering, Corowa was an attempt to resolve an ancient rivalry between just two of the six Australian colonies, whose symptoms were still apparent in the proceedings there. In his speech at the Oddfellows Hall on the Monday evening, the pugnacious Victorian Sir Graham Berry was unable to resist a dig at his northern neighbours. He recalled that there had been agreement on the need for national union for at least a decade, but ‘from that day to this, New South Wales had failed them’. The disputatious William Lyne, representing the government of New South Wales, could not let that pass. It was ‘a vicious and nasty speech’, he told the press.²³

The object of the Australasian Federal League was to bridge that division. It provided a platform from which those who favoured federation could mobilise public support. It was never a mass movement, for it was dominated from the beginning by a group of enthusiasts drawn from a narrow social base. An analysis of the 126 members of its Sydney executive whose occupations and interests can be identified revealed 53 drawn principally from the professions, 39 merchants, manufacturers or with shipping interests, seventeen involved in land, building and investment companies, and 24 in insurance and banking. Of the 78 Victorian committee members whose occupations can be ascertained, there were 20 lawyers, another 20 from other professions, nine ministers of religion, fifteen in commerce, six from banking and four manufacturers.²⁴ They were exclusively male and failed utterly to connect with ferment of interest in expanding the boundaries of citizenship to take in women. They constituted a particular alliance of businessmen interested in a customs union with members of what would now be called ‘the chattering classes’, seized with a temperate nationalism.

Above all, the Federation League aimed to mobilise the people to make good the failings of the politicians. The main principle, insisted Quick at Corowa, was that the cause should be advocated by the citizen and not merely by politicians. The time was gone by when it should be merely a political question.²⁵ This was a calculated appeal to popular prejudice. The Australian colonists, having nearly four decades of experiment with representative government, were none too pleased with its results. They had widened the franchise, paid their parliamentarians, pressed their interests on the legislature, made the state serve their

²² L.E. Fredman, ‘Quick: the Role of a Founding Father’, M. A. thesis, University of Melbourne, 1956, p. 51.

²³ *Age*, 1, 2 August 1893.

²⁴ A.W. Martin, ‘Economic influences in the “New Federation Movement”’, in Eastwood and Smith (eds), *Historical Studies: Selected Articles*, p. 218; Fredman, ‘Quick’, op. cit., p. 53.

²⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August 1893.

needs, and despised the patterns of flattery and jobbery that characterised public life. In the populist rhetoric that was so powerful, politics was a process of ignoble and divisive self-interest, the politician a professional placeman. Yet what else was Quick but a quondam and future parliamentarian?

The problem which the supporters of federation perceived in 1893, was the entanglement of their cause with the factional rivalries that operated in the colonial parliaments. When the Commonwealth Bill had been brought back from Sydney to the various legislatures, it had become the victim of opportunists who were able to seize on features that seemed to jeopardise local interests in order to garner support. In the key colony of New South Wales the premier, Henry Parkes, was assailed by his rival, George Reid, for giving away too much to the other colonies in the Commonwealth Bill. Parkes' Free Trade ministry gave way to George Dibbs' Protectionist one, yet still it proved impossible to secure passage of the Bill. Barton, who was a member of the Dibbs' ministry, promoted the idea of the Federation League as a device to exert leverage over his unsympathetic colleagues. He was able to secure the participation of a leading Free Trader, William McMillan, to broaden its appeal, though the Corowa assembly still had a strong protectionist tinge—hence its resistance to the proposal of that representative of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce who suggested the immediate abolition of all colonial tariffs.

But there is surely something odd in Barton's insistence that this was to be a citizens' movement. As he put it when speaking in the Sydney Town Hall, there were two aspects to any issue: 'one was the view of the politician, and the other was the view of the citizen'; hence his resolution defined the League as 'an organisation of citizens owning no class distinction or party influence'. For similar reasons the rules he devised for the League restricted the proportion of members of its governing body who might be members of Parliament to two-fifths and made the introduction of political topics other than federation a ground for expulsion.²⁶ Yet he himself had called both the League and its riverine branches into being—as the secretary of the Corowa Conference described his role; he was a 'Galloper' working on behalf of General Barton to 'keep the non-commissioned officers at their work'.²⁷ And while he was not present at Corowa, for he was overseas at the time, he prepared the resolutions that occupied it until Quick's inspired deviation.

My purpose here is not to impugn Barton's motives. With Deakin, Griffiths, Inglis Clark and perhaps a few other of the Federal Fathers, he served the federal cause with singular devotion. Rather, I am struck by the way this conception of politics involves an act of ventriloquism. The politician, having impugned his calling, has to call forth a voice that can restore its legitimacy. He instates the people as a disembodied presence capable of an altruism that he and his colleagues can never achieve. The people are inscribed as citizens, owning no class distinction or party loyalty. They speak at his command and then fall silent as the business of government is subsumed into the Commonwealth that the politicians bring into being.

²⁶ Rules of the League are in the Minutes of the Executive Committee, Dowling Papers; see D.I. Wright, 'The Australasian Federation League in New South Wales, 1893–1899', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 57, pt 1, March 1971, pp. 58–73.

²⁷ Edward Wilson to Barton, 13 June 1893, Dowling Papers, Box 18, quoted by Pringle, 'Workings of the Federation Movement', op. cit., p. 106.

This is a remarkably attenuated conception of citizenship and politics, one whose effects are still with us today as we debate the future form of our Commonwealth. The call for the minimal republic proposes to alter the head of state without in any way changing the relationship between government and governed. The sovereignty that was once exercised by the Crown has passed to elected representatives, appointed officials, courts and tribunals that bestow our freedoms upon us and prescribe their limits. Joseph Furphy would have appreciated the irony, for had he not written, as the Corowa delegates did their work:

See where we stand—with no lack of abuses to correct, by no means now illegal but strictly legal when passed into law; not hampered by rotten tradition, nor fettered by the rusty chains of feudalism, nor blinded by racial antipathy, or religious bigotry; with earth's fairest continent beneath our feet, and heaven's bluest sky above our heads: what nation ever had such opportunity, and when?

In the portion of his manuscript published as *Rigby's Romance*, the principal character tells a Sheriff that 'You can't make men virtuous by Act of Parliament,' but the Sheriff has the last word: 'You can make men anything you please by Act of Parliament, Tom, provided that such Act is sanctioned by a preponderant moiety of the national intelligence'.²⁸ Corowa can hardly be blamed for this outcome but neither should it be celebrated for the democratic qualities it so conspicuously lacked. I offer two cheers for Corowa.

²⁸ The first quotation is an unpublished passage from 'Such is Life'; the latter appeared in Chapter 32 of *Rigby's Romance*; quoted by Barnes, *Order of Things*, op. cit., pp. 236–7.