6.11 Federation

By 1880, the six British colonies were getting closer to merging as one nation. For the next 20 years, the issue of Federation dominated political discussion between the colonies until, on 1 January 1901, the Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed.

Between 1855 and 1860 all colonies except Western Australia had their own governments. However, they governed independently of each other. For instance, laws concerning trade and tariffs, postal services, railway line widths, internal telegraph systems and defence forces differed from colony to colony.

These differences caused many frustrations, especially for those conducting business. Mindful of this, politicians began debating the pros and cons of having a government for the whole country that had some common functions and laws, while allowing certain powers to remain with the colonies.

Why federate?

National defence

By the 1880s, three security issues worried the colonial governments in Australia.

1. The French had been interested in the country from the 1770s, and had a colonial presence in New Caledonia. This was close enough to the Australian east coast for French warships to create problems if relations between Britain and France ever worsened.
2. Germany had established colonial outposts in Northern New Guinea and Samoa, posing a potential threat to colonial sea routes.
3. Russia’s Pacific Fleet was especially a potential threat after the Crimean War. Fortifications had been built to protect many Australian ports and harbours.

Immigration concerns

There was growing suspicion about the large number of non-Europeans coming into the country. The experience of the gold rushes had made many wary of the Chinese. When South Sea Islanders were brought into Queensland (as virtual slave labour), many colonists feared this meant they would lose jobs or have reduced wages. (These forced immigrants worked for much less than colonist workers.) This unrest allowed politicians to argue for a national policy enforcing Australia as a white British outpost.

Common railway gauges

The width of railway lines differed between colonies. This meant people had to change trains and goods had to be transferred from one train to another at the borders. Also, it was argued that a common railway gauge would be vital in any military crisis.

Reliable communications

As the population grew, the demand for reliable, coordinated postal and telegraph services strengthened. Only a national government could guarantee this.

Countdown to Federation

A Federal Council meets

1886

- The Federal Council of Australasia was set up, and a meeting attended by delegates from all six colonies, and from New Zealand and Fiji.
- The main purpose of the meeting was to agree to ask Britain to guarantee it would defend the colonies if they were ever threatened.
HENRY PARKES TALKS TO TENTERFIELD LOCALS

1889
- Sir Henry Parkes (1815–1896), an outspoken and controversial politician, was a prominent supporter of Federation.
- He was premier of New South Wales five times.
- In August 1889, on route to Sydney from Brisbane by train, he stopped in Tenterfield. He spoke to a hall full of locals at a function, challenging them (and all colonists) to think ‘national’.

‘... I do see very clearly that there may come a time and that time not very remote, when the Australian colonies may be brought more into the position of one great and united people. We should have an outline of Empire, such as we could never hope for as isolated colonies, and our place would be admitted in the rank of nations.’

FEDERAL CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

1897–98
- From this convention (attended by representatives from colonies chosen by the people), a draft constitution was taken back to the five colonial governments. The draft plan saw a two-house federal parliament with an upper house of review that would represent states equally and protect rights.
- Delegates re-assembled in Sydney in September (and again in January 1898 in Melbourne) to consider amendments from the colonial parliaments. Free trade between states, and the national management of immigration and defence were key issues.
- On 16 March 1898, the convention agreed on a draft constitution to be put to the voters of all colonies. (Western Australian and Queensland parliaments were still to agree at this point.)

THE REFERENDUM

April 1899 to July 1900
- Votes were cast. After some revotes and a delayed vote in Western Australia, the referendum was completed by July 1900. The majority of voters gave their support for a national government, the Commonwealth of Australia, to be set up in line with the terms laid out in the draft constitution.
- State (formerly colonial) constitutions were recognised in the proposed federal constitution; however, federal laws would overrule any state law where there was a common issue.

Referendum vote on the Commonwealth bill, 1899–1900

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of colony</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Commonwealth referendum</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>20.6.1899</td>
<td>107,420</td>
<td>82,741</td>
<td>190,161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>27.7.1899</td>
<td>152,653</td>
<td>9,805</td>
<td>162,458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>13,437</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>14,228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>29.4.1899</td>
<td>63,990</td>
<td>17,053</td>
<td>81,043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>6.5.1899</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>2.10.1899</td>
<td>38,488</td>
<td>30,996</td>
<td>69,484</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>31.7.1900</td>
<td>44,800</td>
<td>19,691</td>
<td>64,491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>422,788</td>
<td>161,077</td>
<td>583,865</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The referendum result
- A majority of votes were cast for Federation but only 61% of those who had the right to vote took part. So, in fact, less than half the colony’s voters actually voted for Federation. This demonstrates that many Australians were confused or uncertain about its meaning.

A NATIONAL CONSTITUTION DRAFTED

1891
- By the 1890s, it was increasingly apparent to politicians and businessmen that colonists shared a common language and values. A national identity was emerging.
- An Australasian Convention was held, attended by leading politicians from the six colonies and from New Zealand. The purpose was to draft a national constitution.
- The draft for a constitution proposed a federal government and state governments, free trade between the colonies and a national defence force. However, due to the 1890s depression and strikes, the federation issue was put aside.

THE COROWA CONFERENCE

1893
- Economic issues were the focus at this conference of politicians and businessmen.
- The issue discussed most fiercely was the import/export tariffs each colony imposed. People and goods on trains were searched at borders, as a change of train was required, to ensure no smuggling was taking place and that appropriate customs duties were paid.
- Delegate Quick from Victoria proposed that colonial governments ask their voters to elect representatives for a Federal Constitutional Convention.

AUSTRALIA BECOMES A NATION

1900
- A group of delegates (one notable politician from each colony) travelled to London to have the draft constitution passed by the British Parliament. The British State Secretary responsible for colonies wanted to make amendments but the delegates stood firm.
- The Australian Constitution was passed by the British Parliament, with the British monarch, Queen Victoria, giving it royal assent in September 1900. It set out the rules and principles for governing Australia and outlined the powers of the federal parliament and some powers of state parliaments.
FEDERATION

1901

- The Governor-General representing Queen Victoria swore in Sir Edmund Barton and eight chosen ministers on 1 January 1901. (They would act as a caretaker government until the first national elections could be held in March 1901.)
- After this swearing in, the Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed by Sir Edmund Barton in Centennial Park, Sydney.
- All over Australia on 1 January 1901 there were celebrations. Public buildings were decorated and special arches built over city thoroughfares. There were parades, dances and sports meetings. In the evening, the action continued with fireworks displays.
- The Commonwealth of Australia now existed. However, it was still a British Dominion. Australia’s allegiance to the British monarch was indicated by the role of the Governor-General, who represented the monarch.
Since 1901

Australia ceased being a British Dominion in 1941, and the last legal ties were severed with Britain in 1986. But Australia still has the British monarch’s representative, the Governor-General, giving royal assent (approval) to all federal laws.

The Australian Constitution can be changed only by a referendum and then only if the majority of voters and the majority of states vote for the proposed change to the Constitution.

The biggest challenge for Australians in the future is whether our country will become a republic, with a new constitution, flag and bill of rights.

British Dominion a self-governing territory belonging to the British Empire
Crimean War war fought between Britain and its allies and Russia, 1853–56
Federation movement of colonies to form a nation
tariff a duty charged on imports

EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION
1 Why was the idea of national unity becoming more popular among colonists from about the 1880s on? List four primary concerns.
2 Imagine you are a businessperson in 1893 who is becoming angry and frustrated by differences between the colonies. Write a letter home to your family explaining the problems of a particularly stressful week.

CHRONOLOGY, TERMS AND CONCEPTS
3 Use the information in this spread to construct a timeline of the key events leading up to Australia’s Federation.

PERSPECTIVE AND INTERPRETATIONS
4 Use information in this spread to make a ‘for and against’ Federation poster. It must list reasons for each case, and be visually attractive. You may need to carry out extra research. Set yourself a realistic plan to produce it, and monitor your progress.

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES
5 Study Source 1 carefully. Explain the posture or actions of the characters in each state. What do these suggest about state attitudes in 1891 to Federation?
6 Look closely at Source 2:
   a What was the message of this badge?
   b Do you think Federation would really have made all people in Australia feel they were one people with one destiny?
   c Which groups would have had good reasons not to think so?
7 Why are Sources 3 and 4 important sources of evidence about Federation?
8 Why was Western Australia singled out for special consideration in Source 4?
9 Look carefully at Source 5, and answer these questions.
   a List three responsibilities of:
      i the federal government
      ii state governments today.
   b Find an area of responsibility shared across the federal government and state governments, and explain how the responsibilities are divided. Why do you think this is so?
   c Why do you think the federal government is responsible for defence and immigration?
10 Examine the statistics presented in the referendum voting table on page 185:
   a Which colony had the highest percentage of:
      i yes votes
      ii no votes?
         Can you suggest reasons?
   b Explain why these statistics meant that the referendum proposal was approved.