

# **The Troubles Of Australian Federation**

G. B. Barton



# Table of Contents

The Troubles Of Australian Federation.....1  
G. B. Barton.....2

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THE Commonwealth of Australia has been inaugurated in Sydney with all the pride, pomp, and circumstance that can be brought to bear on the occasion. The Earl of Hopetoun, first of a long line of Governors-General, was welcomed on his official landing on the shores of Port Jackson by hundreds of thousands of people gathered together from all parts of this Continent, and from many other corners of the British dominions. For some time prior to the event the mighty task of devising the most appropriate forms, functions, and ceremonies, without regard to expense, had absorbed the energies of the Government of New South Wales, aided by a Parliamentary and a citizens' committee, with numerous sectional sub-committees, to say nothing of a host of newspaper correspondents brim-full of the silliest possible suggestions for their consideration. With all this brain-power devoted to the simple object of constructing a gorgeous pageant, beautifying the city of Sydney, and providing a round of entertainments during the first week of the year, it would have been strange indeed if the spectacle then presented did not rival a Venetian carnival.

One of the most attractive features in the programme will be contributed by the Imperial Government.

The Duke of York will visit Australia for the special purpose of opening the first session of the Federal Parliament, and a select body of troops, to the number of 1,000, chosen from the finest regiments in the army, and representing every branch of the service, will form His Royal Highness's guard of honour.

These troops formed part of the procession through the streets of Sydney on the day of the Earl's official landing; and they were joined on the march by representative troops from all the federated colonies, from New Zealand, and also from Canada, including those who have served with so much distinction in South Africa. The Royal Navy will also be well represented. In addition to the ships of war forming the Australian fleet, and the auxiliary squadron, there will be first-class cruisers and battleships.

Theatrical displays have an irresistible charm for the multitude, of course, and the multitude will be enthusiastically pleased. But it is not a cheerful reflection for the student of politics that all this concentration of thought, power, and purpose, to say nothing of the money, should be devoted to the single object of amusing a vast crowd of sightseers. If only a tithe of it were employed on the solution of the many political problems which lie in wait for the statesmen of the Federation, there might be something to show for it in the end. The three primary questions—the Federal tariff, the Federal capital, and the Federal finance—are complicated enough to defy all the ingenuity that can be brought to bear on them. As soon as the various amusements have run out and the crowds have scattered to their home the serious business of the Commonwealth will have to be taken in hand. When the writs have been prepared and issued for the first elections, the people will be overwhelmed with a series of political discussions, involving bitter party issues, for which no previous experience will have prepared them. At the present time, for instance, I anticipate that one of the most commonplace topics of Australian politics is the degeneracy of the Parliaments and the general incapacity for sound and prudent administration shown by successive Ministers. After nearly half a century of responsible government, it is a dismal fact that it has proved an unmistakable failure, disappointing all the hopes that were formed of it by its founders, and entailing upon the people an enormous load of public debt, with a corresponding burden of taxation.

There is evidence enough and to spare to show that these statements are not unfounded generalizations. During a general election which has just been concluded in Victoria a Melbourne daily journal of great note as the organ of Victorian democracy published a series of "Papers for the People," in which it reviewed the political situation of the time. It began with an uncompromising exposure of parliamentary degeneracy, which it attributed largely to the corrupting influence exercised by payment of members. This system, by the way, was introduced in Victoria mainly through the strenuous advocacy of the journal referred to as one of the most cherished planks of

## The Troubles Of Australian Federation

the democratic platform. The result is seen in the degraded condition of the average member. He is described as nothing better than a greedy professional politician, seeking every means of increasing his salary by the fees and allowances paid to members of Boards and Royal Commissions, appointed at his instance by subservient Ministers. His greed for office is not less remarkable than his lust for gain. There is such a dead level of mediocrity among the members that one man considers himself quite as capable as another, and everyone asserts his claim to a portfolio with absolute confidence in his own merits. The manner in which they attend to their legislative duties corresponds exactly with the standard of parliamentary morality they have set up. Most of them never take any pains to inform themselves on the subjects before the House. For half the time it is in session there is barely a quorum in attendance, and when the division bell rings they come trooping in from the billiard-room, the refreshment bar, the hotel across the street, the ante-rooms, or other haunts to which they retire in order to escape a debate. The only business to which they pay any serious attention is the town agency of their country constituents, which includes all sorts of commissions and odd jobs, from interviewing a Minister down to the most ordinary transaction.

Out of such materials as these it is impossible to suppose that capable and energetic administrators of public affairs can be found. The Government is of much the same mould and character as the Parliament from which it is evolved.

One of its distinguishing features is its anxiety to shirk its proper responsibility on every matter of importance by appointing a Select Committee, a Board, or a Royal Commission to deal with it. At least thirty instances of this kind have occurred within the last year or two, comprising all kinds of inquiries, from Law Reform, Old Age Pensions, and State Banks, to complaints of personal grievances and petitions for redress. Some of these questions are manifestly such as to require considerable technical knowledge; but that makes no difference, they are handed over as a matter of course to men who do not even pretend to have any knowledge of the kind. The most flagrant case in point is that of the Railway Standing Committee, to which Parliament has entrusted the business of reporting upon all proposals for the construction of new lines, and also of public works generally—say a question of water supply. The members who compose this body know nothing of railway or civil engineering; there are no experts among them, although they are allowed fees at the rate of £1 1s. for each sitting, and £1 11s. 6d. for the chairman. A similar body in New South Wales, by the way, is paid at the rate of £2 2s. for each sitting, and £3 3s. for the chairman; and sittings are adjourned from day to day so often that the fees paid amount to a substantial salary.

This line of criticism was applied to the chief departments of the public service, and with similar results.

Incapable administration and wasteful expenditure were found to be their common characteristics, while the theory of parliamentary responsibility was proved to be a sheer delusion. It is not too much to say that these strictures might have been directed at the state of affairs in New South Wales with equal point and accuracy. In that colony, or State, as we may say now, the same degeneracy has shown itself in its Parliament. Its members can hardly claim to stand on a higher level than their neighbours, and the administration of affairs is open to the same censure. The Parliaments of the other States may have a better record to show; but whether they have or not, the question arises, What is the prospect before us with respect to a Federal Parliament?

Every country, it is said, is governed as well as it deserves to be; and since the same electors who have deliberately returned these corrupt and time-serving politicians to represent them will choose the members of the Federal Parliament, is it to be supposed that they will return men of a higher class to represent them in its two Houses? There is no difference in the franchise, and there are no conditions to be met by candidates other than those existing under the present system. There is nothing to show that candidates at the Federal elections will be materially different, in point of character and capacity, from those who have so often hoodwinked the provincial electors. Laws have been proposed, and will probably be passed, to prohibit dual representation, so that no one will be allowed to hold seats in the Federal and provincial Parliaments at the same time. There are indications, too, that the few able and experienced men in the latter will sever their connection with them in order to confine their attention to Federal politics and posts of honour. That, of course, would mean the perpetuation of provincial degeneracy.

The one thing needed in order to realize the dreams of Federal enthusiasts is a complete revolution in the character of Australian politics and politicians, and without that there seems very little prospect of the new order of things being much better than the old. The appearance of a higher order of candidates than those we have been

## The Troubles Of Australian Federation

so long accustomed to would certainly give confidence in the future of the Federation; but up to the present time there is no reason to suppose that the type of representative so much needed is likely to be seen in practice. There is a special reason for a thorough change in the character of our representatives, and a remodelling of our legislative methods. For nearly ten years past each of these Parliaments has been dominated by a small section of its members, known as the Labour Party, mostly men of the working class, elected for the sole purpose of advocating and enforcing their class interests. This purpose they have succeeded in effecting to their hearts' desire. Forming a third party in the House, and acting independently, they have held the balance of power in their hands, and have given their support to Ministers on the single condition that their policy is embodied in the Ministerial programme. Each Ministry in its turn depends for its very existence on the votes of this section. However powerful or popular a Premier may be in the country, his position is no better than that of Faust with Mephistopheles at his elbow.

This condition of affairs is inexpressibly degrading to Parliament and Government alike, since both are deprived of their independence. While it is undoubtedly right that the working classes should be represented in the Legislature, it is not right that they should be in a position, simply through the weakness of party government, to exercise a controlling influence of this character over the legislation of the country. They insist on "majority rule" as their basic principle; but, tested by it, they form but one-sixth of the total number of electors in New South Wales, and probably not more in the other colonies.

The largest number of representatives they have been able to return is twenty-two in a House of 125 members. Under normal conditions their votes would be of no great account, but when it happens, as it generally does, that the rest of the House is about equally divided, they hold the key of the situation, and make or unmake Ministries at their pleasure.

And yet, despite the obvious dangers arising from the tyranny of a class, the other sections of the community—representing as they do the various producing and commercial interests, and consequently the stability and prosperity of the country—cannot shake off the apathy with which they have regarded the situation from the first. Conscious as they must be of their own political strength if they should choose to exert it, they prefer to remain inactive, and to leave their representation in the hands of the professional politicians who have consistently betrayed them. It needs only a glance at the course of recent legislation to see the necessity for immediate action, in order to avert the disasters with which the country is threatened. At the dictation of the Labour Party the electoral laws have been re-cast, in order to strip property-holders of their plural votes and establish the principle of One Man, One Vote; the colony has been divided into single electorates, in order to facilitate the return of democratic candidates; and now the suffrage is about to be conferred on women, as it has been in South Australia and Western Australia, without anything to show that the great majority of them desire to have it. In the same manner the system of taxation has been altered, in order to shift the burden as much as possible from the poor to the rich. Customs' duties, never felt to be oppressive, have been removed, and their place supplied by land and income taxes, the latter undoubtedly inquisitorial and obnoxious to all whose incomes exceed £200 a year. At the same behest the laws regulating the relations of employer and employed have been revised entirely in the interest of the latter. The climax has now been reached in an Arbitration Bill, which proposes to set up a court with power to enforce its awards against employers, virtually placing them at the mercy of the trade unions, whose liability in case of defeat is said to be mythical. Not the least of these triumphs has been achieved by simple thumb-pressure on Ministers. A minimum rate of seven shillings a day has been fixed as the amount of wages to be paid to labourers on all contracts for the public service, one result of which is that employers in the country districts find it increasingly difficult to obtain labour.

There cannot be any cause for wonder, in the face of such facts as these, that the leaders of this omnipotent party should openly boast of their successes, and proclaim their intention to repeat in the Federal Parliament the tactics which have won such victories in the States. They have already opened their campaign in New South Wales, where they confidently expect to secure five or six seats in the House of Representatives, which will number seventy-six. Supposing that an equal proportion of seats should be obtained in the other States, their combined strength would certainly place them in a position to hold the fate of every Federal Government in their hands. Their programme would include, in addition to more class legislation, several amendments in the Federal Constitution for the purpose of enabling them to make what alteration they pleased in it by the votes of a simple majority on a Referendum. The spirit in which they have entered on the campaign may be seen in the words of

## The Troubles Of Australian Federation

one of their members, in a speech delivered at a recent meeting of the Political Labour League. He declared that "the working classes during the past five years had shown the country that they were masters of the situation. Prime Ministers had been taught that their lease of power would only last with their fidelity in regard to the demands of the workers. They had revolutionized the politics of the country. Some of the enthusiastic advocates of the Federation Bill believed that they were going to abolish the Labour Party, and it was the desire of that party to defeat that object, and break down beyond restoration the old régime which reigned a few years ago."

A striking instance of the power exercised by this section was seen towards the end of last year, when five out of the six Australian Governments were displaced by their votes. Their defeat was attributed to the anti-democratic action of the Premiers during the two Referendum campaigns on the Federation Bill, the second of which took place in the previous June. On both occasions there had been a violent contest between the Democratic and Conservative forces, in which the former suffered a severe defeat, chiefly through the influence of the Premiers. This was especially the case in New South Wales, which formed the battlefield of Australian democracy. The Premier of the time (Mr. Reid)

was the first to go under, and the votes which destroyed his Government were those of the Labour Party, to whom he owed his five years of office and his Jubilee honours. The votes were given on a question which had nothing to do with federation; but it served the purpose of the Democrats just as well—indeed, much better—because it deprived their unexpected hostility of any appearance of revenge.

To understand their action, it is necessary to recollect that all through the sittings of the Convention he acted as the advocate of their principles, notably in connection with the provisions of the Bill for securing "majority rule" in disputes between the two Houses, and also on a Referendum on any proposed amendment of the Constitution. On the former question the Convention agreed, mainly at his instance, to a clause for the prevention of deadlocks. It provided that, in the event of a Bill being rejected by the Senate a second time, after an interval of three months, that body, although elected for six years on the rotation principle, might be dissolved at the same time as the House, elected for three; and, further, that after their re-election a joint sitting should take place if they again disagreed, at which the question should be decided by a three-fifths majority.

This proposal, however, proved to be utterly distasteful to the Democrats, who insisted that a three-fifths majority would mean the defeat of the House on every division, and consequently of majority rule.

To prevent such a disaster, they demanded the substitution of a simple majority, and carried their point in the New South Wales Assembly when the question of amendments in the Bill was under discussion.

At a conference of the Premiers held in Melbourne, in January, 1899, at Mr. Reid's instance, to consider this and other amendments, he endeavoured to get a simple majority in place of a three-fifths one. The other Premiers, however, substituted an absolute majority of both Houses, and the Bill was finally so amended.

So far from pacifying his imperious supporters, this last amendment served only to inflame their discontent. The hubbub grew louder and louder. "Majority rule is in danger," they cried, and as the day fixed for the final Referendum approached, every Democrat in town and country was adjured to vote against the Bill. At their instance a public holiday was proclaimed, and electors' rights were issued to all who applied for them, whether their names were on the rolls or not, in order that "the manhood of the country" might decide the event.

Although it might seem obvious enough that the dead-lock provisions, even with a three-fifths majority, placed the Senate at the mercy of the House, the Democrats contended that the House would be defeated whenever a trial of strength should take place between the two. They worked out the sum in this fashion. Supposing that there should be six colonies in the federation—as there are—the number of members allotted to each would be as follows: A three-fifths majority of 112 being sixty-eight, it follows that the sixty-one members representing the two largest colonies, with a united population of over 2,500,000, would be defeated by the fifty-one members representing the four smaller, with a joint population of, say, 1,200,000. They would be seven votes short on a division. On the other hand, although it is not less clear that, with an absolute majority in place of a three-fifths one, the sixty-one members would have a majority of ten over their fifty-one opponents, they assumed that the representatives of the larger States would always be caught napping by those of the smaller.

The main source of their dissatisfaction lay in the principle of equal State representation in the Senate, undoubtedly one of the radical defects in the Constitution. The stock arguments in its favour as a basis of union made no impression on them. They were not reconciled to it by the fact that the State of Nevada, with 45,000 people, has equal voting power in the Senate of the United States with that of New York, notwithstanding its

## The Troubles Of Australian Federation

6,000,000 inhabitants. Majority rule is their basic principle, and without absolute safeguards for it, they would view with suspicion any constitution, however liberal it might be in other respects. The fact that the island of Tasmania, with a population of 170,000, is to enjoy the same voting strength in the Senate as New South Wales with 1,450,000, amounts, they say, to giving one man in the former eight times the voting power of one in the latter.

The result of the polling at the last Referendum proved a still bitterer pill for them. Notwithstanding their vigorous and well-organized efforts to defeat the Bill, it had a majority of 25,000 in New South Wales, and that majority might have been more than doubled had it not been for the opposition of a strong Conservative section, who objected to the financial clauses of the measure. The Labour Party was utterly routed. The defeat was hard to endure, but it might have been endured with some patience had it not been attributable so largely to the double-dealing of their once-trusted leader. To grasp the prize of the Federal Premiership, he threw all his democratic professions to the winds, and appeared on the platform as the eloquent and earnest champion of a measure which they regard as undermining the first principles of democracy.

The sore humiliation from which they suffered in the defection of their too versatile chief was not the only unpleasant experience they had to put up with. They were equally deceived and disappointed in the working of the Referendum. Looking upon it as an infallible weapon of offence, they saw it easily turned against them, and used with deadly effect against their own ranks. When it came to a trial of strength between them and the rest of the population, they proved to be in a hopeless minority. It was not in human nature that disappointments of this kind should be tamely endured, still less forgotten, by fighting politicians, and it speaks well for their organization and tactical skill that they should have

	House of Representatives.	Senate.
New South Wales	... .. 26	..... 6
Victoria	... .. 23	..... 6
Queensland	... .. 10	..... 6
South Australia	... .. 7	..... 6
West Australia	... .. 5	..... 6
Tasmania	... .. 5	..... 6
76	36	
Total	... .. 112	

been able, in the face of such crushing defeats, to possess their souls in patience until the whirligig of time brought in his revenges. Now it remains to be seen whether the Federal Parliament and Government are destined to pass under their control, and with them the Constitution itself.