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**The People's Conventions:  
Corowa (1893) and Bathurst (1896)**

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## 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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From the files of the *Corowa Free Press*, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1893

## HYMN OF THE FEDERATION

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The Corowa Conference July 31st, 1893

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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—their'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.