

Loading the Gun— Corowa's Role in the Federation Debate

David Headon

I grew up in 1950s Australia. My postage-stamp of the world was a cosy little bush suburb called Newport, squeezed in between Pittwater and the Pacific, on the northern beaches of Sydney. To use Mark Twain's phrase, it was 'a heavenly place for a boy'. Near the Newport pub of old there was only a small post office, a mixed business that my father ran and, across from us on the hill, a corrugated iron shed about fifty or sixty yards in length. A huge garage, all grease and petrol fumes. It was there, on my way home from school, for well over a year, that I used to pester the garage owner for those Menzies-era treasures. Icons really. Atlantic cards. Do you remember them? You used to put each series into a thirty-two card album. A generation of Australian kids glued every item with utmost care.

One series of cards dealt with Australian history. I well recall that the hardest one to get, it could cost you up to twenty or more cards when you swapped for it, was 'Fort Denison'—Pinchgut, that stone oddity in Sydney Harbour built to repel the Russians in the 1850s. Much easier to obtain was the card that had a portrait of Sir Henry Parkes. The heading on the back I remember exactly: 'Henry Parkes: Father of Federation'. Despite considerable academic reassessment in recent decades, this affectionate description of Parkes has maintained its popularity in the community at large. The 'Father of Federation'. In her poem, 'Old Henry Parkes', Mary Gilmore was conspicuously into the business of myth-making when she wrote about

Old Henry Parkes,
In his big top hat,
His lion-like head,
Eyes like a sword,
Blazing in a thought,
Blazing at affront,

Blazing for a word --
But, in-drawn, still, and cold as the ice,
as vision-held he sat, and saw
Commonwealth and Empire, brotherly and brother,
This State and that State, all linked together.
For Parkes had a vision,
And the vision came true;
And Pitt Street, Macquarie Street,
Never shall forget
That great old man coming down the way,
Coming into Sydney like a king! ¹

¹ 'Old Henry Parkes' in Mary Gilmore, *Selected Verse*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1948, pp. 169–171. I am indebted to Kenneth Wiltshire, *Tenterfield Revisited—Reforming Australia's System of Government for 2001*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld., 1991. Wiltshire begins the booklet (a reprinted lecture) with a quotation from the poem.

Henry Parkes was born in 1815 at Stoneleigh near Coventry in England. He arrived in New South Wales as a twenty-four year-old assisted migrant in 1839. He was a toymaker, as well as being a very ambitious young man, determined and well-read in radical working-class literature. By 1850, Parkes had begun his own newspaper in Sydney, the highly influential *Empire*. He would later become Premier of New South Wales, and by the end of the 1880s, he was widely regarded as the leading advocate of federation. In the years before his death in 1896, many people still viewed him as the senior citizen of the expanding federation movement.

The Parkes story—his elevation to the pantheon of Australian heroes, to eventual Atlantic card fame—appears, for many Australians today, to be relatively straightforward, just like that of the federation movement itself in the 1890s. Parkes: the migrant who revels in his New World home, works hard, makes good, ultimately leads the continent’s oldest colony and paves the way for federation. Similarly, the course of federation seems uncomplicated. It was the movement, to re-assign the words of former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, that Australia had to have.

However, in neither case, Parkes nor federation, is the actual story nearly so simple. Parkes in fact continues to puzzle contemporary historians. As early as the 1850s, that brilliant yet tragic native-born republican Daniel Henry Deniehy, a man destined for elevation in the coming Australian republic, anticipated the Parkes of later years when he wrote to his friend, the Reverend John Dunmore Lang, that in Parkes there was too much not of the ‘English man *in*, but of *Englishmanism* about him’.² Currency lad Deniehy discerned that working-class Englishman Parkes could never escape his background. He would always culturally cringe, tug his forelock to the Crown, even a hemisphere away in a New World land. And how do we reconcile the behaviour of a man who, in later life, as Manning Clark put it, wanted to be ‘a Moses leading the Australian people into the Promised Land of federation’, yet could be accused by the *Bulletin*, Australia’s most popular periodical of the time, of having as his sole motivation the accumulation of Imperial honours?³ Indeed, Alfred Deakin, a key player in the federation story and ultimately the second prime minister of Australia, wrote in a letter that Mr. Parkes ‘had always in his mind’s eye his own portrait as that of a great man, and constantly adjusted himself to it.’ To compound matters, Parkes was a monumentally incompetent money-manager throughout his life. This led some unkind contemporary critics to label him, not the ‘father of Federation’, but the ‘bankrupt from Balmain’.

The Grand Narrative of Federation, too, has its curiosities. There is a significant gap between the myth—what is lodged now in the nation’s unreliable memory—and the reality. One reason for this is that some of the leading federalists of the time, in subsequent books, tended to portray the federation movement, as R. Norris observed in *The Emergent Commonwealth* (1975), ‘as carried forward on the crest of an irresistible wave of national enthusiasm, and the Commonwealth as launched on a high tide of popular approval.’⁴ Subsequent school

² Letter to John Dunmore Lang, 6 June, 1854, MS 869, Mitchell Library.

³ See C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, vol. 5, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1981, pp. 31–2. I am indebted to Prof. Clark for the information which follows in this paragraph.

⁴ R. Norris, *The Emergent Commonwealth: Australian Federation, Expectations & Fulfilment 1889–1910*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1975, p. 31.

textbooks confirmed this triumphal image. Yet for most of the 1890s, federation was far from a certainty to succeed. If the present group of hardened Darwin bookmakers were fielding odds, back then, I suspect federation would have been about 12-1 in 1891, then out to 20-1 in 1892, the worst year of the 1890s depression; back in to 10s, maybe 8s, after Corowa; fractionally shorter after the Bathurst 'People's Convention' in 1896; probably 3-1 after the 1897-8 Convention; and still 6-4, or better, before the first referendum went to the voters of each state.

Federation momentum steadily increased after Corowa, certainly. But an irresistible wave? Not at all. As Professor Kenneth Wiltshire put it in a 1990 lecture:

If the River Murray could talk it would whisper the story of Federation, a story of the artery of a continent which, through a stroke of a pen in the Colonial Office in London, became the border of three of the fundamental colonies and the scene of wrangles and disputes over riparian rights, inter-colonial poaching of business, incompatible duck-shooting seasons, the depredations of the fruit fly, and what was described as the 'lion in the path' of Federation which federalists must either slay or be slain by—the issue of inter-colonial tariffs which made Victoria protectionist and New South Wales free trade. Those vital pieces of our European heritage, the old customs houses on the Murray River, stand today as sentinels reminding us of how visionaries travelling on the path to nationhood can be slowed by invisible barriers of parochialism, economic self-interest and fear of the future.⁵

To understand the important role of the Corowa conference is first to appreciate the half dozen or so years preceding it, during which the likes of Henry Parkes, Alfred Deakin, Edmund Barton, Charles Kingston and John Quick made a concerted effort to get the federation issue on the agendas of the separate colonies. There had, of course, been murmurings for many decades. Both Deniehy and Lang, committed republicans, canvassed the idea in the 1850s (after Earl Grey, Secretary of State to the Colonies, had toyed with it in the late 1840s). Henry Parkes raised it with considerable enthusiasm at an inter-colonial conference in Melbourne in March 1867, during which the concept of a Federal Council was suggested. But it was not until 1887, when Alfred Deakin returned from the Colonial Conference in London, that interest intensified. At that conference, the British Government appointed a Major-General James Bevan Edwards to report on the state of Australian colonial defences. Subsequently, Edwards claimed that federation of the colonies was the only way of preventing foreign invasion.

Parkes, by then in his middle seventies, saw opportunity in Edwards' report. He began a federation push by confirming the support of Victorian premier Duncan Gillies, and then he wooed the other premiers. His celebrated October 1889 speech, delivered at Tenterfield in northern New South Wales and in which he proposed a conference of politicians to appoint a convention of leading men from all the colonies, is one of Australian federation's more important moments. 'The great question', Parkes told his Tenterfield audience, is 'whether

⁵ Wiltshire, *Tenterfield Revisited*, op. cit., p. 2.

the time [has] come for the creation in this Australian continent of an Australian Government ...⁶ He passionately quoted contemporary poet James Brunton Stephens for support:

Not yet her day. How long 'not yet?'
There comes the flush of violet!
And heavenward faces, all aflame
With sanguine imminence of morn,
Wait but the sun-kiss to proclaim
The day of the Dominion born.

Parkes thrived on visionary rhetoric. Yet the colonial rank-and-file in his audience were not yet ready to assist in the birth of the infant Dominion.

Indeed, for many federalists the aftermath of the National Australasian Convention, held at Sydney's Parliament House in March/April 1891 and intended by its organisers to be the catalyst for a federated Australia, was utterly depressing. In his capacity as President of the Convention, Parkes talked of 'One People, One Destiny';⁷ however, he also demanded that his adopted country 'remain side by side with that dear old England that we all love so well.' The *Bulletin* was disgusted with this apparent hypocrisy, but theirs was almost certainly a minority view. Australia continued to be deeply provincial. One problem with the 1891 Sydney Convention was that the Draft Bill to Constitute the Commonwealth of Australia was perceived by some in the media to be the product of scheming politicians, striving for personal advantage. An atmosphere of distrust and confusion in the colonies was intensified by the Barcaldine shearers' strike, the defeat in New South Wales of the Parkes government in October 1891, and the deepening depression and drought of 1892. At one of the 1891 Convention dinners, New South Wales Governor Lord Carrington remarked that 'Federation is in the air.'⁸ Cynics suggested, post-Convention, that it was not in the air so much as in the clouds. Henry Parkes would later refer to this period as one in which the 'sham actors in the Federation comedy' took to the stage. More memorably, Sir John Robertson, whose best political days and more accurate social prophecies lay well behind him, would say that 'Federation is as dead as Julius Caesar.'⁹

Federalists used this remark as a motivational strategy. They argued that just as Caesar's ghost reappeared, powerful and omnipresent, so federation would re-emerge from the setbacks of 1891 and 1892. Edmund Barton, along with a number of adherents including the young and highly energetic constitutional lawyer Robert Garran, determined to renew the federation movement. People power was wanted. Enter, into the federation narrative, the border town of Corowa. Barton paid a missionary visit to Corowa and Albury in December 1892 to address public meetings in both towns. As Corowa's own Edward Wilson would later write:

⁶ Clark, *History of Australia*, op. cit., p. 26. Clark also quotes the lines of James Brunton Stephens.

⁷ J.A. La Nauze, *The Making of the Australian Constitution*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1972, p. 34; Clark, *History of Australia*, op. cit., p. 67.

⁸ See J.C. Neild, 'Obstacles to federation', *Cosmos Magazine*, 29 December 1894, p. 210.

⁹ John Quick and Robert Randolph Garran, *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1901, p. 150.

[Barton] threw out a hint that a League, to be formed among the people on both sides of the Murray on strictly non-political lines, would undoubtedly prove of great assistance to the movement ...¹⁰

In January 1893, Corowa and Albury acted on Barton's promptings and both formed Federation Leagues. By the end of May there were fifteen branches in the towns of the Murray valley. The reasons for this apparently sudden burst of enthusiasm are not hard to find. As John Quick and Robert Garran suggest, in their authoritative *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth* (1901):

The general stagnation of trade set everyone enquiring for himself into the causes which clogged the wheels; and the folly of interprovincial barriers became increasingly apparent. Federation began to appeal to the pocket as well as to the heart.¹¹

The border towns, in particular, were feeling the burden of intercolonial duties. They demanded action. So, in June 1893, the Berrigan Federation League suggested a meeting of delegates with the express intention of more effectively representing the views of the people in all colonies, and of those in their own area specifically. The idea was enthusiastically embraced and Corowa selected as the meeting place, on the basis of its keen Federation League branch, its central location and its accessibility by road or rail.

Albury was far from happy with the decision, especially when one Corowa correspondent prefaced a newspaper report with the assertion that Corowa would '[become] in time the capital and seat of Government of Australia. ...'¹² The editorial pages of the *Albury Border Post and Wodonga Advertiser* practically choked with indignation. On 1 August, the leader writer concluded his column in desperate search for the moral high ground: 'I can fervently promise Corowa that they have no rival in Albury in a scheme for entertaining guzzling politicians ...'¹³ Two weeks after the conference, the *Post* was still suffering the effects of Corowa's propaganda success. No nearby town was safe from the fury of its editor. Unfortunate Berrigan received a particularly ill-humoured appraisal:

There's Berrigan, of course. Perhaps Berrigan has higher aims. It has the stupendous advantage of being unapproachable by rail, and an enemy would be at the further disadvantage of losing its way in trying to find it.¹⁴

¹⁰ James C. Leslie, *Official Report of the Federation Conference, Proceedings and Debates*, Free Press Office, Corowa, 1893, p. 3.

¹¹ Quick and Garran, *Annotated Constitution*, op. cit., p. 3.

¹² *Albury Border Post and Wodonga Advertiser*, 1 August 1893.

¹³ *ibid.*, 1 August 1893.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 15 August 1893.

Sister towns in the Murray region they might have been, but when it came to the prospect of social and economic advantage, solidarity disintegrated completely.

Despite Albury's scarcely concealed petulance, the historic 1893 Conference was Corowa's day, or days, in the sun. The so-called 'popular' phase of the federation movement unofficially began when some seventy-four delegates from Federation Leagues, the Australian Natives Association, and other bodies such as the Cobram Progress Association and the Imperial Federation League, headed to Corowa for the two-day event. John Quick would later write that the 'main principle was that the cause should be advocated by the citizens and not merely the politicians.'¹⁵ Federation would only be achieved, he said, 'by an organization of citizens owning no class distinction or party influence.' Edmund Barton put the issue more bluntly: 'Oh if the thing could be kept clear from dirty fingers.'¹⁶ He was specifically alluding to politicians, for the popular image of politicians of the time was one replete with greed, corruption and connivance. Privately, however, Barton had another agenda entirely. Just four weeks before the Corowa gathering, he convened a meeting of federalists in Sydney with the intention of forming a central Federation League. There was a huge turn out, made the more lively by the presence of the Social Democratic League and numerous labour representatives. A republican motion, said by the conservative *Sydney Morning Herald* to have been carried by a 2-1 majority, was declared lost by the chairman, the Lord Mayor of Sydney. Chaos ensued and police eventually broke up the meeting. Robert Garran many years later would recall that the republicans were routed. Contemporary press reports suggest otherwise.¹⁷

In choosing Corowa, federalists were keen to ensure that there would be no repetition of the anarchic scenes in Sydney. No effort was spared to stop the emergence of levelling, labour resolutions. Corowa had to be very carefully stage-managed. And so it was, beginning with the agreement that the conference should be conducted 'free of party or political influences'. A number of observations can be made on the Official Report of the Conference (published in 1893 by James C. Leslie, of the 'Free Press' Office in Sanger Street, Corowa): first, the motions passed on the evening of 31 July and the morning of 1 August were of the kind intended by the organisers, routinely supporting 'the early federation' of the Australian colonies. Second, border town prejudices surfaced almost immediately as local League delegates sought to make their town the headquarters of a Border district of the League. The idea was eventually abandoned amidst competing interests. Third, when the spectre of the Sydney debacle only a few weeks earlier threatened to appear, courtesy of a speech by New South Wales MLA E.W. O'Sullivan in which he envisaged a 'wider and greater Federation of the English-speaking people' and, in Australia, 'a Republican form of government', it was summarily dealt with and dismissed.¹⁸ Victorian MLA and socialist Dr. Maloney supported O'Sullivan with the claim that Australia was 'marching towards a republic', but he too was ruled out of order. Some of the 'fathers of Federation', it seems, were determined to exclude socialism and republicanism from their Commonwealth. Fourth, it was ironic that a politician, A.J. Peacock, set the tone of the proceedings when he demanded that federation

¹⁵ Norris, *Emergent Commonwealth*, op. cit., p. 50.

¹⁶ *Albury Border Post and Wodonga Advertiser*, 8 August 1893.

¹⁷ For further details, see Stuart Macintyre's contribution to this volume.

¹⁸ Leslie, *Official Report*, op. cit., pp. 20-1.

'be made a people's question'. Left to the politicians, Peacock suggested that federation would be a long, long wait. Fifth, Sydney Australian Natives Association representative Edward Dowling provided some insight into the nature of the struggle ahead when he compared the youth of the United States and Australia, much to the detriment of 'the Australian rising generation' who, he said, 'paid very little attention to the principles of self-government ...'¹⁹ Sixth, the Corowa conference is significant because it was there that John Quick and Robert Garran met and formed a firm friendship that would become one of this country's most illustrious constitutional collaborations. Finally, and without doubt most significantly, late on day two of the conference, when the whole event appeared likely to be consigned to the dustbin of history as simply another federation talk-fest, Herbert Barrett, of the Melbourne Australian Natives Association, little realising the ultimate consequences of his impatience, jumped to his feet and demanded 'something practical'.²⁰ 'Words, words, words – can't we do something?' bellowed Mr. Barrett.²¹

Dr. John Quick, ably supported by Garran and some half-dozen others, used a short recess to produce a new resolution, outlining what would come to be called the 'Corowa Plan':

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.²²

It was, as Garran would recall, 'an inspired break-away' from the standard routine. This resolution was not on the carefully planned agenda of the conference. While the 1891 Bill had made no provision for the future, Quick's Corowa resolution necessitated a program of action leading logically to an end result. As Garran put it:

The Corowa proposal was to make a fresh start, with every step laid down beforehand by Acts of Parliament of each colony. These Acts would provide for the election by the people of a representative convention, the drafting of a Constitution by that convention, and finally its submission to the Parliament of Westminster to be passed into law. Thus, the people, when voting for representatives to a convention, would know that 'the gun was loaded' and that in due course they would be called upon to say yes or no to a Federal Constitution. That would bring the matter right into the field of immediate politics and create such public interest in federation as had never before been known.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 26.

²¹ Robert Randolph Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1958, p. 103.

²² *ibid.*, p. 103.

Neither from memory, nor from the records, have I been able to trace any such previous suggestion by anybody. It was not on the agenda of the Conference, it does not seem to have been mentioned by any member of the Conference or anybody else. 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.²³

Corowa was a catalyst for federation. Contrary to the sour sentiments of the *Albury Border Post*, the Corowa Conference, attended by some of the foremost 'founding fathers', had no heavily imbibing politicians. On the contrary, those present handled their drinking with marked restraint. The 31 July proceedings concluded with a toast to 'Her Majesty the Queen'; 1 August finished with three cheers for Her Majesty *and* three cheers for Federation.

It is, however, worth observing that not one of the leading three federalists of the period appeared at the Conference: Barton was overseas, Deakin legitimately called away for a court trial, while Henry Parkes appears to have been simply peeved at not being asked to lead the proceedings. None of these absences affected the conference result. Parkes eventually came to Corowa two weeks later and delivered a long speech, but his leadership days were effectively over. He was a spent force.

Corowa was undoubtedly a turning point in the fortunes of federation. The impetus provided by the border town gathering even forced the conservative *Sydney Morning Herald* to state, early in 1894, that 'For a "dead" subject, federation continues to exhibit frequent and telling proofs of activity.'²⁴ Critics, of course, continued to disparage the Commonwealth cause. One New South Wales politician, J.C. Neild, labelled the Corowa conference 'that distressingly funny Federation-cum-Protection function, at which Australian unity and long beers were discussed in one of the Murray hamlets.'²⁵ John Quick, however, immediately followed up his Corowa resolution with energy and action. Once he was able to sell the model to the new New South Wales Premier, George Reid, genuine federation momentum had been established. Robert Garran commenced his 1895 pamphlet, *The Urgency of Federation*, with the lines:

Better today than tomorrow; better at sunrise than noon;
Let doing not wait on delaying, nor Now be the servant of Soon.²⁶

At Corowa some of the young, or perhaps younger guns of federation had emerged to add their energy to the cause. It was a crucial development.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁴ *The New Federation Movement*, *The Bendigo Independent*, Bendigo, 1894, p. 14.

²⁵ Neild, *Official Report*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

²⁶ See Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, *op. cit.*, Appendix II, p. 426.

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During the late 1880s, Henry Parkes' aggressive yet self-centred leadership style reflected federation's profile in the community: full of hot air, ignoble aims and theatrical gestures. In the 1890s enthusiasts were needed, committed federalists willing to devote themselves to the cause. When John Quick was knighted for his federation work in February 1901 he accepted with the words: 'I do my duty without any attempt at political fireworks or brilliancy.' He talked of his 'ordinary, plodding' style.²⁷ Many years later a reporter observed of the ageing Quick: 'To-day he sits under the gold unicorn, a triumph of sober, steady, solemn application—the Industrious Apprentice in excelsis.'²⁸ The sun rose for this Industrious Apprentice at Corowa in 1893. He produced a plan for federation that was ultimately acted upon in 1897–8. The resulting Commonwealth would have its faults, but it was a vast improvement on the pre-1901 arrangement of bickering, parochial colonies—and, for that matter, jealous towns. Corowa's role in the process of federation is both a noble and central one.

²⁷ L.E. Fredman (ed.), *Sir John Quick's Notebook*, Reg. C. Pognoski, Newcastle, NSW, 1965, p. 5.

²⁸ *Sun* (Melbourne), 1 October 1924, quoted by Fredman, *op. cit.*, p. 6.