

1901: the first federal election

Marian Simms*

The first federal election could easily be called the forgotten election. Key historians, such as La Nauze, dismissed it as of little interest, for it was not a 'conventional election'¹. Contemporary players, notably Deakin, gave it scant attention in their otherwise prolific writings. Political historians, such as Dean Jaensch, Peter Loveday, Joan Rydon and Allan Martin devoted their considerable historical energies to colonial and state elections and parties.

Interesting fragments, however, are to be found in less fashionable sources, such as the memoirs of George Reid and Robert Garran, a biography of William Morris Hughes and the artist, Tom Roberts' Unpublished Notebooks for his historical painting of the first Parliament.²

By delving into such sources and the contemporary record an interesting picture emerges that reinforces one political adage, namely, that 'all politics is local'. For example, whilst it is true that the overall voter turnout was disappointingly low, on closer inspection the local and state variations are fascinating. This ranged from around 30% in Fremantle (Western Australia) to 97% in Newcastle (New South Wales). In general the turnout was low in the West, probably on account of the late move into the Federation. Sir John Forrest, interviewed by the *Sydney Morning Herald* (2/4/01) after the election, was despairing about the low turnout: 'Such apathy was much to be regretted. The interest in the elections was not equal to that of the Perth Mayoral elections.'

Australian voters went to the polls in 1901 very much as electors from the different states, under different laws, different ballot papers and on different days. NSW, Victoria, Tasmania and the West voted on Friday 29 March and South Australia and Queensland, the following day.

* Reader, Political Science, Faculties, Australian National University, Dr Simms is grateful to the National Council for the Centenary of Federation for supporting the project '1901: The Forgotten Election' from which this article has been drawn. She is particularly grateful to the assistance provided by Ms Sonya Welykyj who has been employed under a grant from the Council.

While each state was to elect six senators, NSW and Victoria had the lion's share (26 and 23 respectively) of the 75 House of Representatives seats, Queensland, nine, South Australia, seven, Western Australia, five and Tasmania, five.

The Commonwealth Constitution specified that each state would go to the Elections using the system of the more 'numerous' house. It also prohibited plural voting, still in existence in several states. South Australian law required voters to mark boxes opposite candidates names; the other states required voters to strike out the names of candidates they did not want. In South Australia and Tasmania the states were undivided and went to the House elections as single electorates. The former had 'first past the post'; the latter, the Hare-Clark system of proportional representation.

In some respects, therefore, the states had quite diverse election legislation, although they had borrowed from one another and from other countries, notably the Mother Country and the United States. Some of the voting provisions are well known, but other information has been previously presented only in a partial fashion.³ The fact of the enfranchisement of women in South Australia (1894 legislation) and Western Australia (1899 legislation) is well known.

The representation of Aboriginal and non-white voting rights has been much more confused and confusing. Gavin Souter has noted, incorrectly, that only Aborigines in South Australia and Tasmania had the right to vote on the same basis as other electors. Alastair Davidson stated that Aborigines in Queensland and the West were entirely excluded.⁴ In fact, all colonies except Queensland and Western Australia treated Aborigines on the same basis as other 'natural born' 'British subjects'.⁵

Western Australia had followed Queensland in its restrictive freehold provision, even though in most other respects its 1901 Election eve legislation was modelled on South Australia's.⁶ The main difference between the two colonies, according to John Forrest, was that South Australia had a 'settled' population, whereas the West was in 'flux'.⁷ In Queensland and Western Australia only Aborigines who met the freehold qualification of property worth 100 pounds were entitled to vote.⁸ This amounted to a tiny number. The freehold test for Afro-Americans had been used in New York in the mid nineteenth century.⁹

One unifying aspect of the election was the fact that there was already a Prime Minister and a Cabinet, who were appointed, not elected. The outlines are well known. Sir William Lyne, the NSW Premier, was originally called upon by the Governor-General, Lord Hopetoun, to form a Ministry and was unable to do so. The Governor-General then called on Edmund Barton, who constituted the first nine-member Commonwealth Cabinet, largely along Protectionist lines. It was the first national example of the incumbency advantage. Holding the first election was the main early challenge.

In fact, according to Barton, the 'diverse electoral laws' were delaying the holding of the elections.¹⁰ Lyne had presented a paper to Cabinet drawing on his state-based researches of electoral differences.¹¹ Each state had different laws governing the issuing of writs, the timing of nominations and the return of writs. The *Sydney Morning Herald* (31/1/01) predicted — correctly — that the election would not be held on the same day throughout the country and that writs would not be issued simultaneously. By law elections in South Australia were to be held on Saturdays and 'by custom' in Queensland (*Sydney Morning Herald* 15/2/01).

George Reid, the Free trader and self-professed Opposition Leader, attempted to make the conduct of the election a political issue. He 'condemned' Barton for not providing electors with 'detailed' information about the 'conduct' of the 'election for the whole continent'.¹² For his part, Barton had admitted his 'confusion' over whether electors were to vote in their state electorate or in the bigger Federal one. Barton had advised voters to vote in the former, only to be corrected by the 'Electoral Department'. Later Barton corrected the earlier position (*Daily Telegraph* 25/3/01).

Robert Garran has maintained that, as the head of the Attorney-General's Department, he and a small band of 'willing, but puzzled' State Electoral Officers were left 'to run the show':

Meanwhile, the first engrossing occupation of Ministers was to scatter to their several constituencies to woo the electors, and I was left on deck with instructions in the name of the Minister.¹³

In NSW and Victoria the enrolment systems generated particular administrative complexities. Both had systems of identity cards, called elector's rights. Introduced in Victoria in the 1860s they were borrowed by NSW in the 1890s. In both cases one key stated reason was to stamp out voting fraud or 'personation'.

In NSW, six weeks before the election, more than 300,000 rights had still not been distributed. The police were in charge of the process and were having trouble locating many previous holders as they had apparently moved away or died. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the government was largely at fault as 'Continued reminder and remonstrance were necessary before the first steps were taken' (20/2/01). Some blame was sheeted home to the general public many of whom were 'careless or apathetic'.

In Victoria, part-time electoral registers managed the distribution process. Those renewing their rights were to collect them from the registrars' offices/homes. Those taking out rights for the first time were required also to apply for voter's certificates through local petty sessions courts, having first notified the local registrar and electoral inspector (*Argus* 18/3/01).

The considerable weight of the 'Postal department' was thrown into the process. Only four weeks before the election, the state departments had been transferred to Federal control. The instructions from the Victorian permanent head to Victorian postmasters were published in the *Argus* (26/3/01):

On election day, March 29, all telegraph offices in the colony will be kept open for business until midnight, or until such hour on the following morning as may be necessary, and no station will close until permission be received from the Melbourne office.

Postmasters are strictly enjoined to give special attention to letters and telegrams passing between the Government, the returning office and the electoral registrars.

Party selection processes were many and varied and, as yet, there were no national parties. It is interesting to note that the current Australian term — preselection — was not yet used. One contemporary vignette is the following description of Frank Tudor's selection:

A meeting of the Political Labour Leagues of the Yarra Yarra electorate was held in the smoke-room of the Collingwood Town hall for the selection of a candidate for the labour interest. Four nominations were received — those of Mr F Tudor, Councillor Colechin, Mr H Beard and Mr H Tregard.

Upon the ballot being taken Mr Tudor was elected by a large majority.

(*Argus* 8/3/01)

The other interests were not as formally organised. The *Argus* (8/3/01) noted that of the 17 freetraders nominated for the Senate in NSW ‘six were approved by the free-trade organisation.’ In mid-February George Reid had cautioned that only one Free Trade candidate had as yet been ‘selected’ and others were making ‘premature’ statements (*Sydney Morning Herald* 12/2/01). The selected person was T Brown (Canoblus, NSW) of the ‘labour and free trade interest’, giving another example of double endorsement. Reid added that while Labour had a free vote on the fiscal question, Brown was committed to vote for free trade (*Sydney Morning Herald* 6/2/01). The *Herald* (20/2/01) subsequently listed him as LF, namely, Labour/Free Trade. The main contemporary source has listed Brown, who was to become the Member for Canoblus, as Labor.¹⁴ It was no accident that Brown was competing against Reid’s enemy, B R Wise. Wise, in an interview in the *Herald* (6/2/01), claimed he was not contesting his electorate on the ‘fiscal issue’:

The real issue is whether the Commonwealth shall be started on its voyage by officers who know its needs, and who are loyal and earnest in their desire to deal in an Australian and not a local spirit with the great and inevitable difficulties which must arise in adjusting the relations between the Commonwealth and the several States.

This example is a useful reminder of two features of the first campaign; namely, that personality factors were very important and that, in NSW, Reid and sections of Labour were close. In West Sydney, for example, Hughes (Labour) was also endorsed by free trade. In Hume, W C Goddard (Freetrader), running against Sir William Lyne (Protectionist), strongly sought the support of workers and the unemployed (*Daily Telegraph* 9/3/01).

In New South Wales both the Feetraders and Protectionists issued tickets which were published in the main newspapers. These lists included men not formally preselected. Consequently, several Labour men appeared on competing tickets: Hughes on the ‘Freetrade Ticket’ (*The Daily Telegraph* 25/3/01) and Chris Watson and James McGowen on the Barton ticket. In its results, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (30/3/01) called Frank Tudor a protectionist, a ‘trades hall man’ and a ‘high-tariffist’. The Labour-side was further complicated by the candidacies of the entirely separate ‘Socialist Six’ in NSW. In Tasmania, the Free Trade League selected ten Senate candidates for the six vacancies and this is a useful reminder that in colonial politics it was not unusual for parties to endorse more candidates than there were vacancies (*The Argus* 25/3/01).

By contemporary standards the official campaign was short, with selection occurring just a few weeks, or, in some cases, a few days before the election. The unofficial campaign was longer — Barton announced his policy on 17 January, well over two months before polling day. Reid’s riposte started shortly afterwards. Barton was

unchallenged in Hunter, leaving him free to run the government and the Protectionist campaign, under the auspices of the Australian Liberal Association. Reid was not as fortunate. Not only was he faced with an 'Independent Protectionist' — whom Reid more or less accused of being a protectionist wolf in sheep's clothing — but Reid felt that Barton had stolen the mantle of Liberalism.¹⁵ Reid's party was the Freetrade and Liberal Association.

Sir George Turner (Treasurer, Balaclava), and John Forrest (Defence Minister, Swan) went to the polls unopposed.¹⁶ The Freetraders had difficulties and delays in finding a candidate to run against Home Affairs Minister Lyne in Hume (*Daily Telegraph* 18/3/01). Charles Kingston (Customs Minister) was competing against other candidates in South Australia's electorate at large but, according to the *Argus* (28/2/01), took time to campaign nationally for the Protectionist cause:

Sir P O Fysh opened his federal campaign tonight. Addressing a large meeting at Albert Hall (Launceston) he said he was full of sympathy for Mr Barton's policy.

Mr Kingston also made a vigorous protectionist speech. Both were attentively listened to, but little enthusiasm was aroused.

Mr Kingston was busy during the afternoon with Customs matters. He leaves for Melbourne to-morrow by the Pateens.

This is one example of how ministers were able to campaign while going about their duties and on an official platform. The Attorney-General, Deakin, whose own campaign was launched on March 6, for instance, addressed an 'enthusiastic' meeting at Stawell, according to the *Age* (25/3/01). He presented the election as a referendum on the government when voters would have the 'opportunity' of 'accepting' or 'rejecting' government policy. J G Drake (Postmaster-General) and Richard O'Connor (without portfolio) were both Senate candidates.¹⁷

The campaigning, once it started, was intense. Candidates gave addresses at a variety of locations, and many kept up heavy schedules of daily meetings, mostly held in the evenings. Locations ranged from Mechanics Institutes, hotels, cafés and town halls to open air meetings. Candidates advertised their meetings and their candidacies in the newspapers. They also used negative advertising and 'third party' endorsements.

As election day drew closer they also advertised for supporters to lend vehicles to the campaign teams to assist with the carriage of voters to polling places.

Women were present at meetings in Western Australia and South Australia. In the West, Lady Forrest, the Premier's wife, was a founding member of the Women's Suffrage League.¹⁸ Mention was made of women's organisations actively campaigning against the Labour candidate T O'Beirne in Fremantle — he was defeated by the Freetrader, E Solomon (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2/4/01).

In Sydney, where suffragists felt that the NSW suffrage legislation had been 'sabotaged' by Attorney-General B R Wise, the suffrage movement was disenchanted.¹⁹ Leading suffragist Rose Scott was also an anti-Federationist. Consequently there is little evidence of women's mobilisation around their exclusion from the first Federal poll in New South Wales. In fact, women were specifically welcomed to the galleries at the town hall for the penultimate Freetrade demonstration (*Sydney Morning Herald* 22/3/01). They also attended Protectionist meetings, sitting in the gallery at W H

Wood's meeting in country Bombala (*Daily Telegraph* 18/2/01) — like other Protectionists, Wood was in fact a revenue Tariffist.

In Sydney on election eve both Protectionists and Freetraders held huge 'Demonstrations'. The Freetrade meeting was held in the Exhibition building, Prince Alfred Park and was chaired by Reid: 'Around the balconies were hung canvasses directing freetraders how to vote.' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 29/3/01.) The Protectionist demonstration was held in Moore Steet — Barton was not present, but was in Maitland (*Sydney Morning Herald* 29/3/01).

For leading newspapers the election came down to 'fiscal faith'. The *Argus*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Courier* were all freetrade supporters — for example, the *Argus* (18/3/01) waxed lyrical about Reid's 'splendid reception' at Toowoomba. It also divided candidates into 'High Tariff and anti-(Boer War) Contingent' versus 'Low Tariff and for the Contingent', thus linking fiscal probity with Imperial loyalty (26/3/01).

Yet for many candidates the real matter was federationists/Ministerialists versus others. This former category allowed freetrade Bartonists — notably BR Wise — to blur fiscalism in the interests of their own team. Personal factors played their part and dislike of Reid should not be excluded as a motive. Reid replied in kind:

Mr Reid at Orange – He made an attack on Mr Wise, whom he described as a nondescript politician, a puppet of Mr Barton, who had lost all his free trade friends. He (Mr Reid) was not hungering after office, but simply fighting for his party and his principles. (*The Argus* 27/3/01)

For his part Reid included James Manifold, Sir William Knox, Thomas Skene and A C Groom, whom he declared to be 'very moderate', as indifferentists on the fiscal question and listed Billy Hughes as a freetrader.²⁰ Manifold was in fact only endorsed by the National Liberal Association three days before the election (*The Argus* 27/3/01). Groom declared himself to be a member of the 'moderate party' and would oppose tariffs above 25 per cent, with the maintenance of the current 'free list' (*Argus* 28/2/01).

The tariff question had racial overtones, even to the extent of questioning the cross-party solidarity on the White Australia Policy. Queensland Protectionists wanted guarantees from Barton that the trade in Kanaka labour would be maintained:

They have convinced me that it will be extremely difficult to carry on the industry without black labour, but they have not convinced me that it is a good thing to allow black labour to remain here indefinitely. (Barton, interviewed in the *Daily Telegraph* 2/3/01)

On polling days there were inevitable problems and confusions.²¹

Voters queuing up at poll closing were not able to cast their votes. There were complaints that the Senate ballot was too long – there were 50 candidates in NSW — and it was hard to complete accurately. The blue pencils became blunt and this made it hard to cross out names, packed closely together. Polls closed at 6pm in NSW and 7 pm in Victoria, creating confusion on the border. The poll was postponed at Menindie due to the non-arrival of necessary documents. In Queensland floods delayed the poll.

Polling took place in a range of locations, including schools, shops, parks (including Hyde Park, Sydney), private homes (for example, Mrs Wood's cottage, opposite Highgett railway station, Balaclava electorate Melbourne), public halls and Mechanics Institutes. Under NSW law, polling was prohibited in hotels. Freetraders wore blue rosettes on election day and Protectionists, red.

The arrangements for the day were very similar to those which were adopted for the ordinary parliamentary contests. At each booth there were a presiding officer and assistants, whilst in the majority of cases scrutineers were present on behalf of various candidates. There was no difficulty in ascertaining where the booths were located, as that information had been very liberally disseminated by means of bills posted in conspicuous places throughout the city and suburbs . . . at most booths gentlemen, acting on behalf of candidates . . . by finding the elector's name and number they . . . accelerated his operations. The booths, as usual were guarded by police constables, and every care was taken to avoid overcrowding. (*Sydney Morning Herald* 30/3/01)

The *Sydney Morning Herald* — as it had during elections for the Conventions — placed a large posting board outside its offices awaiting the returns. Results were telegraphed and telephoned into the Herald from the Returning Officer and posted on the board by a large staff of clerks. Successful candidates remained in their electorates and made speeches of thanks from prominent places — often the hotel balconies so favoured as campaigning spots. Reid gave a midnight interview, published the next morning (*Sydney Morning Herald* 30/3/01). The paper claimed that Barton and 'members of his Committee' took up residence in the Empire hotel — opposite the *Herald* offices — in order to watch the progress report on the board.

The election took place on March 29th (in NSW, Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania), and the *Sydney Morning Herald* records scenes of unparalleled excitement and enthusiasm, both at the polling booths and the period which elapsed between voting and results.

A large crowd gathered outside the newspaper offices to await the figures . . . Naturally the Sydney metropolitan figures were the first through.²²

The results were less clear cut, particularly for the House. Whilst, for example the eventual size of the Labour Caucus was 24, several had contested the election with dual endorsements and King O'Malley was a post-election convert. The contemporary press was comfortable with dealing with dual endorsements. Not all 'Ministerialist' candidates were Protectionists, and the revenue tariffists and genuine independents further complicated the count. In the event the Barton Government was returned even if its core policy was not strongly endorsed.

Endnotes

¹ J A La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin: A Biography*, Melbourne University Press, 1965, p220.

² See Humphrey McQueen, 'Tom Roberts' Notebooks', in M Simms ed. *1901: The First Federal Election*, University of Queensland Press, 2001, forthcoming.

³ See Colin A Hughes and B D Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics, 1890–1964*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1968, pp.423–281. The main

focus is on colonial electoral law in 1890. There is, however, little analysis of enrolment. See Gavin Souter, 'The 1901 Election' in *The People's Say: Elections in Australia*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994, p.4. Scott Bennett, *Aborigines and Political Power*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p.112. Bennett notes the Western Australian freehold provision but ignores the Queensland antecedent. Alastair Davidson, *From Subject to Citizen: Australian Citizenship in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.190. Davidson incorrectly maintains that Aborigines were excluded in both Queensland and the West.

⁴ See Davidson, 1997, p.190 and Bennett, 1989, p.112.

⁵ Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern districts of South Australia had the vast majority of the Aboriginal population at that time, with 20,000, 30,000 and 20,000 respectively. NSW had 3,230 (and 3,661 'half-caste' (sic)), the Southern part of SA, 3,000, and Victoria, 479. Tasmania had none. 'Aborigines Department, Report for the Financial Year ending 30th June, 1899' in *Minutes and Votes and Proceedings of the Parliament of Western Australia*, Vol. 2, Government Printer, Perth, p8.

⁶ See speech by John Forrest, *Western Australia Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. XIV, p.985.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Queensland *Electoral Act 1885* and Western Australia (*Constitution Act Amendment Act 1899*).

⁹ On New York see W C Wentworth's Second Reading Speech on the NSW Electoral Act 1851 in E K Silvester (ed) *NSW Constitution Bill — The Speeches on the Second Reading of the Bill for framing a New Constitution for the Colony*, Thomas Daniel, Sydney, p39.

¹⁰ *The Argus*, 1/02/01. The main problem affecting the Federal elections was the different timing of the issuing of election writs and nominations of candidates, between the states. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31/01/01, p.8.

¹¹ *The Argus*, 1/02/01.

¹² *The Age*, 5/02/01, p.6.

¹³ R R Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1958 p.144.

¹⁴ Hughes and Graham, op. cit.

¹⁵ Election night interview, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30/3/01.

¹⁶ In the case of Turner a Free Trade opponent announced his intentions, but dropped out.

¹⁷ Drake was appointed after the death of fellow Queenslander Dickson in January. Fysh was appointed in April to replace the Tasmanian Premier Lewis who had no wish to serve federally.

¹⁸ F Crowley, *Big John Forrest, 1847–1918: A Founding Father of the Commonwealth of Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 2000, p.261.

¹⁹ J A Allen, *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Feminism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, pp.164 & 169. Wise had disenchanted many, for he failed to win Canobulus.

²⁰ G Reid, *My Reminiscences*, Cassell, London, 1916, p.204.

²¹ This account is drawn from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30/3/01.

²² F. Browne *They called him Billy: A Biography of the Rt Hon W M Hughes*, Peter Huston, Sydney, 1948