

Robert Arthur Broinowski

A witness to federation history

Richard Broinowski*

Two buildings in Melbourne played leading roles in the drama of Australia's immediate post-federation activities. One is the gothic Victorian Parliament House that gazes down Bourke Street from Spring Street. The other is Victoria Barracks that squats, guarded by ceremonial cannons on well-manicured lawns, on St Kilda Road just south of the Yarra. One housed the Commonwealth Parliament for the 27 years of its existence in Melbourne; the other, Australia's fledgling Department of Defence.

An idealistic young man who came down from Sydney just after Federation came to know both buildings well. He was Robert Arthur Broinowski, son of a Polish refugee. Robert worked for Defence in the Victoria Barracks from 1902 to 1907, then as private secretary to three Defence Ministers until 1911. He then transferred to the Senate, where he worked first as a clerk and short-hand writer, later as Clerk of Papers and Usher of the Black Rod. When Parliament moved to Canberra in 1927, he moved with it, and stayed there until his retirement as Clerk of the Senate in 1942.

When Broinowski joined Defence at the beginning of 1902, the new Commonwealth was still engaged in two colonial wars - the Boer War in South Africa and the Boxer Rebellion in China. At 24, his first job was to help equip and despatch eight battalions of Australian Light Horse to South Africa (only four of which saw action).

The Boer War quickly ended, and Broinowski became involved in the more urgent task of helping the Department absorb the disparate military forces of the former colonies into a unified whole, and finding suitable crown land in various State capitals and elsewhere for military barracks. Scattered across the vast Commonwealth territory were 1800 permanent troops, 16 000 partly paid militia, 11 000 volunteers, 29 000 members of rifle clubs and 8000 school cadets. There were also about a dozen naval vessels of various sizes and capabilities previously owned by the former colonial navies which had to be rationalised into one Commonwealth naval force.

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Broinowski was one of a handful of civilians in a department dominated by the military, many of them British, held at that stage by most Australians (and for a considerable time afterwards) to be the fount of all military wisdom. The permanent secretary was a naval man, Captain Robert Henry Muirhead Collins. The head of the army was Major General Sir Edward Thomas Henry Hutton. The head of the navy was the former commander of the Queensland navy, Commander W R Creswell. There was an Inspector General, a Military Board, a Chief of the General Staff, a Chief of Ordnance, and Commanders of various military districts. Like many of their counterparts today, few of these believed that civilians knew anything about the serious business of warfare. But they had to get along with them, and according to the Constitution they, along with their non-military colleagues, were all subject to the control of an elected, civilian, Minister of Defence.

But Ministers of Defence kept changing. The first, Sir James Dickson, made an unsettling example by dying in office on 10 January 1901, nine days after his appointment. Eight more followed him in the first decade of Federation — and neither they nor their cabinet colleagues were agreed on a coherent defence policy for the new Commonwealth.

The debate was roughly split between three factions, and was confused by intermingled, changing coalitions, side issues and political point-scoring. One faction believed there was no threat to Australia, especially if Australia did not enmesh itself in British interests or intrigues, and that little should be done about defence. A second believed that there may be some danger from colonial powers in the region, but that Whitehall had global wisdom and knew the right thing to do. This faction believed that everything should be left to the Royal Navy, which the Commonwealth government should continue to subsidise through its 'Australia Station'. A third believed that there was a palpable and growing threat, not so much from Russians or French, but Asians, particularly the Chinese and Japanese. This faction believed that Whitehall either did not appreciate the danger or was too caught up in a naval arms race with Germany to care, and that Australia needed its own armed forces.

The debate raged back and forth. Fuelled by Japanese expansion into China and its victory against the Russians in 1904–1905, and the withdrawal of five Royal Navy battleships from the British Hong Kong station in 1905, the Threat-from-Asia faction quickly gained ascendancy. Agitation increased for a defence force under Australian control, a position put forcefully to Lord Kitchener when he visited Australia in 1909. It led to the establishment of the Duntroon military college, expansion of ground forces, and the arrival from Britain in 1910 of the first two units of a new Royal Australian Navy, the torpedo boat destroyers *Yarra* and *Parramatta*. These ships were to be under Australian command, unless and until a wider conflict would cause them to be subsumed with heavier Royal Navy units into a larger British command. The wider conflict was the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

Robert Broinowski witnessed these early debates and manouverings from his tiny office in the Victoria Barracks on St Kilda Road. He had his own opinions, which leaned heavily towards an independent Australian defence force commanded by Australians. But by and large he kept these opinions to himself until much later in his life. He was discreet, diligent and, most important, knew how to avoid ruffling the feathers of his military colleagues. These skills did not go unnoticed. In 1907, aided by a recom-

mendation from a friend of his father, Sir Edmund Barton, now a High Court judge, he was appointed private secretary to the Defence Minister, Sir Thomas Ewing, a position he retained with two of Sir Thomas's successors, Joseph Cook and George Pearce.

In his new capacity, Robert carried his ministers' bags, kept them up to date on parliamentary happenings when they were on the road, and wrote some of their speeches. He had a delicate feel for protocol, and often helped his ministers and Defence colleagues with arrangements for visits, including those of the sixteen capital ships of the Great White Fleet of the United States in 1908, and of Lord Kitchener in the summer of 1909-10. He went with Senator George Pearce to Perth in November 1910 to greet Captain Tickell and his ships *Yarra* and *Parramatta* after their long voyage from Britain. His impressions of his ministers, their strengths and foibles, he later recorded, broadcast and wrote about. These are illuminating, but in the main are charitable. He also recorded his early impressions of several of Australia's early prime ministers, most whom he knew. [See following article — Ed.]

Robert Broinowski transferred from Defence to the Senate in 1911. He did so for a variety of reasons, the most important of which were that he had more time to spend with his young family in Melbourne, and follow his private interests in poetry and bush-walking, rather than constantly travelling with demanding ministers. But he was also an intriguer, and felt that the young Parliament offered scope to help shape some things the way he wished them to be.

When he transferred to the Senate in 1911, Robert came in at the end of the first decade of the activities of Federal Parliament. In his later reminiscences, he describes this as a period of initiation rather than consolidation, a restless search for permanent values, where the first parliamentarians were an amorphous congregation of men (there were of course no women) without party discipline. He recalls it as a time of constant intrigue, of clashes, of manoeuvres behind the scenes where unforeseen decisions could be reached by a single feat of outstanding eloquence. Apart from defence and preserving the White Australia policy, the main issue was free trade versus protectionism.

Robert joined the Senate staff during the second Fisher ministry (1910-13). It was a time of intense activity. Apart from wrestling with defence issues such as introducing compulsory military service and establishing the Royal Australian Navy, Fisher and his ministry tasked themselves with starting a trans-continental railway, introducing compulsory voting, maternity allowances, Australian bank notes to replace sterling, and a postage system; taking over the administration of the Northern Territory; and identifying a site for the new federal capital. There was nothing much in the Constitution to guide him — nothing about political parties, a responsible government or Opposition, parliamentary control of the executive, of a Cabinet, or how he was to behave as head of it.

There was also a vacuum about the *procedures* of government — about debates and legislation, interaction between the houses of Parliament, the organisation of the executive, about rules and standing orders. As one of 53 parliamentary officers appointed in five departments to service 36 Senators and 75 Representatives, Robert Broinowski was flying by the seat of his pants. He and his colleagues learnt as they went along, with only the precedents and procedures of the Westminster and former colonial legislatures — now the States — to guide them.

But learn they did, through the ministries of Fisher (1910–13), Joseph Cook (1913–14), Fisher again (1914–15), the three ministries of W M Hughes (1915–23), and the last federal ministry of the Melbourne period, that of Stanley Bruce and Earle Page, from 1923 to 1927.

Robert belonged to a conservative, almost monarchical order of public servants. Promotion through the ranks was glacially slow, depending on seniority and a thorough familiarity with procedure and precedent, much of it newly-minted and carried in the heads of its practitioners. But even comparatively junior officers had access to ministers and back-benchers, who were able to accept or reject their advice without fear of having to justify themselves to outsiders, including an aggressive and intrusive press.

Robert Broinowski's career as a parliamentary servant spanned the formation of the political parties, the catastrophe of the First World War, the Great Depression, and the first half of the Second World War. The period was one of experimentation and rapid change, and towards the end of it, an alarming if temporary diminution in the powers and influence of Parliament as emergency war powers were invoked. Of all the parliaments of the Dominions and the Congress of the United States, the Australian Parliament sat for the fewest number of days and had the least to do with day to day governance. The Executive branch of government reigned supreme.

But Broinowski was a believer, and like many of his colleagues, he waited quietly in the wings until parliamentary powers were restored. He made an impact at the margins, mainly during his time in Canberra, where he initiated the planting of the parliamentary rose gardens, influenced the siting of the new national library and, as secretary of the Joint House Committee, helped the Senate and the House run smoothly.

His reflections on the men he worked with, the times, and his own involvement in the nascent defence forces and Parliament are told in a new book — *A Witness to History* — written by his grandson, Richard Broinowski, to be released by Melbourne University Press in February 2001. ▲