

## Centenary of federation

**Bob Carr\***

*Never on this side of the world was there a New Year's Day with such high expectations.*

*It was the birthday of a whole people.*

Well, ladies and gentlemen, that was how Alfred Deakin, one of the architects of Federation, described the First of January, 1901.

Tonight we come to Centennial Park for this 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of, to use Deakin's words, 'a whole people'.

On this day, 100 years ago, just across there: Federation was proclaimed, the Constitution activated, and the first Federal Ministry sworn in, with Edmund Barton our first Prime Minister.

But before these things could occur, the people themselves, the Australian people, had resolved consciously, deliberately, at the ballot-box, to bring this Federation into being. New nations had been created before. But this was the first to be created by the vote of a people; the first time that had ever happened. The road to Centennial Park was long and hard. So it's fitting we honour the names of the leaders of the movement: Parkes, Reid, Barton, Deakin, Quick, Griffith, Inglis Clark, Kingston, Forrest, to name a few. The movement towards Federation gathered pace, however, only when these leaders took the people with them and made Australian Federation the people's cause.

During 1897 and 1898, Federation was debated and dissected at public meetings and gatherings across Australia in town halls, schools of arts, trades halls, on street corners, from pub balconies, in the great cities, in dusty bush towns, in shearers' barracks and the mining camps. The people of Australia argued about this new constitution. And then there were the referendums to approve the document: and, indeed, to make the people's will doubly sure, they even had a second referendum in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

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\* Premier of New South Wales. Transcript of speech at Centennial Park, Centennial Ceremony, Sydney, Monday, 1 January 2001.

My fellow Australians, this was democracy in action. This was Australian democracy bringing forth the Australian nation. You see, democracy wasn't something we just inherited. The British political legacy is indeed a rich one: the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, parliamentary government. But from the time the eastern colonies became self-governing in the 1850s, we put a distinctively Australian stamp on the way we govern ourselves. It was a *democratic* stamp: one man, one vote; votes for women; the secret ballot; all these achieved here decades before Britain.

By 1901, democracy had deep roots in the soil of Australia. It has survived enormous challenges. In the carnage of the First World War, the people of Australia twice voted to reject their own government's proposal to introduce conscription, to conscript men for the theatres of war. Even in war, the Australian people had the confidence in their own judgment to say 'no' to their own government.

And mid-way through the century there was another referendum — at the half-century mark of our Federation. 1951. The height of the Cold War. And the people of Australia rejected a call from their government to ban a political party because it was deemed to be subversive.

You can only explain the 'No' vote by reference to the deep democratic instincts of the Australian people. The Australian people did not like the idea of sending people to gaol for their beliefs. Australian democracy, therefore, is not a gift, it's not a fluke. It's at the heart of our very being. A hundred years of democracy — that's not an accident. It reflects the genius of a free people.

One hundred years ago, Alfred Deakin spoke of high expectations surrounding the birth of this new nation, surrounding this experiment in building a nation across a continent. There have been blunders and mistakes a-plenty. But, in the main, I suspect, we all agree we've lived up to those expectations strengthened by the democratic spirit, which called our nation into existence. It was that spirit that gave a special quality and lustre to Australia's Olympic achievement.

We begin, therefore, our second century together, renewed in our confidence, renewed in our commitment to give an even deeper, richer meaning to Australian democracy, for every Australian. ▲

