

Parliament in Exile: Aspects of the Victorian Parliament at the Exhibition Building, 1901 to 1927

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For 26 years the Victorian Parliament met in the Exhibition Building in Melbourne whilst the Commonwealth Parliament temporarily occupied Parliament House in Spring Street. Especially during the early years the Victorians protested periodically about the arrangement and for a brief period returned to their own building. Much of the discontent centred on access to and use of the Library.

The Federal Parliament occupied the Victorian State Parliament House at Spring Street from 1901 to 1927. Various political histories of the Commonwealth have examined Federal occupation of this building.¹ This article, however, examines the impact on the Victorian Parliament. These included an attempt by the Victorians not to leave their home, but to have the Commonwealth Parliament occupy the Exhibition Building, and an attempt by the State to occupy the Spring Street building simultaneously with the Commonwealth Parliament.

The Commonwealth's choice

There was no mention of the site of the future Federal capital in the draft Federal Constitution submitted to colonial electors for approval in the 1898 referenda, and this was one of the factors leading to the failure of the referendum in New South Wales. Consequently, a Premiers' Conference of 1899 settled this and some other contentious questions. The revised draft Constitution, in section 125, now provided that the future federal capital would be in territory granted by New South Wales, and that 'The Parliament shall sit at Melbourne until it meet at the seat of Government.' Both New South Welsh and Victorian honour was satisfied. At the repeat referenda of 1899 the Constitution was approved.

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¹ Notably G. Souter, *Acts of Parliament*, Melbourne University Press, 1988, ISBN 0 552 84367 0 (paperback 1989 ISBN 0 522 84408 1).

1900 was increasingly devoted to arrangements for the inauguration of the new Commonwealth. One of the questions to be settled was determination of the initial home of the new Federal Parliament. The predominant view was that the Federal Parliament would occupy the State Parliament building in Spring Street, and the State Parliament move to the Exhibition Building. But many Victorian parliamentarians asked why the Victorian Parliament should not remain in Spring Street and instead the new Commonwealth Parliament occupy the Exhibition Building. In general, however, the magnanimity of the Victorians is said to have surprised even some of the more ardent local federationists.²

On 26 July 1900, William Irvine, Attorney-General in the Victorian McLean Government, initiated debate on the *Commonwealth Arrangements Bill* in the Legislative Assembly. He said that the proposed legislation was ‘very innocent’ although it had ‘caused a certain amount of suspicion in some quarters’. ‘The sole object . . . is to meet certain technical difficulties.’ Specifically, the Bill provided for the Commonwealth to occupy Parliament House in Spring Street, Government House and public buildings. Duncan Gillies, a former Premier, expressed reservations about the Victorian Parliament having to give up its premises and its library.³

There was considerable discussion in the press and a committee comprising the President of the Legislative Council, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly and other Members of the Victorian Parliament was established to consider housing the Federal Parliament. When debate on the *Commonwealth Arrangements Bill* resumed in the Legislative Assembly on 2 October 1900, Mr Irvine moved a significant amendment to allow the Commonwealth to occupy either the Spring Street building or the Exhibition Building in Carlton Gardens. In the following debate in the Legislative Assembly,⁴ and next day in the Legislative Council,⁵ some members referred with approval to a suggestion that both Parliaments should occupy the Spring Street building. The Speaker was later reported as having suggested that the uncompleted northern wing of the Parliament House should be built, thus providing space for the members of both Parliaments.⁶ The legislation passed with provision for the Commonwealth to occupy either of the buildings.⁷ Sir Frederick Sargood MLC thought that because of lack of space at Parliament House it was ‘almost a foregone conclusion that the Commonwealth Parliament would be opened and continue to hold its sittings in the Exhibition Building’. Sir Henry Wrixon MLC expressed regret that both Parliaments could not hold their meetings in Parliament House. He believed sufficient accommodation could be provided for

² R. Wright, *A People’s Counsel: A History of the Parliament of Victoria 1856–1990*, Oxford University Press, 1992, ISBN 019553359 3, 113–14.

³ *Victorian Parliamentary Debates (VPD)*, 26 July 1900, 533–8.

⁴ *VPD*, 2 October 1900, 1767–74.

⁵ *VPD*, 3 October 1900, 1807–9.

⁶ *Argus*, Melbourne, 17 April 1901.

⁷ *Victorian Commonwealth Arrangements Act*, no. 1672 of 1900, section 2(a).

both and ‘they would then have the advantage of the library, and of meeting together for social intercourse’.⁸

Following the formation of the Commonwealth Government, the Premier, Alexander Peacock, wrote to the Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, on 10 April 1901 asking the Commonwealth to choose which building it desired. However, he made it clear which choice the Victorian Government preferred: ‘While leaving your Government perfectly free in its choice of which ever of the two buildings it may deem the more suitable, I desire to remark that such alterations are in progress at the Exhibition Buildings as will, it is considered, most fully meet the requirements and promote the comfort of the Members and the representatives of the Press, should that place be selected.’⁹ On 12 April Barton and the Commonwealth ministry inspected both sites.¹⁰ Alas for the Victorians’ hopes, Barton now replied to Peacock that ‘[a]fter most careful consideration and a personal inspection of both buildings’, the Commonwealth had chosen Spring Street.¹¹ Reportedly, Alfred Deakin was instrumental in this decision, as he was moving from the State to the Commonwealth Parliament and was disinclined to be away from the parliamentary library in which he took such great interest.¹² Indeed the *Argus* reported that ‘[o]ne of the main reasons that induced the Commonwealth Ministry to decide in favour of the permanent Parliamentary buildings rather than the temporary accommodation in the Exhibition building was the presence of the library in the former’.¹³

The two governments agree

Because of the huge nature of the occasion, the only building that could accommodate the grand ceremony for the opening of the Federal Parliament on 9 May 1901 was the main hall of the Exhibition Building. However, following this ceremony, senators and members of the House of Representatives moved down to Spring Street to start work.¹⁴ Many prominent members of the Victorian Parliament, as in all States, resigned to stand for the Commonwealth Parliament. Among them was George Turner, the liberal premier. For six weeks before his resignation, he was both Premier of Victoria and Australia’s first Treasurer. His Chief Secretary, the affable, popular Alexander Peacock, now became Premier.

The Prime Minister stated in July 1901 that he expected an agreement would be necessary for the Commonwealth to occupy the Victorian building for three to five

⁸ VPD 3 October 1900, 1808.

⁹ NAA, A8, 1901/163/1.

¹⁰ *Argus*, Melbourne, 13 April 1901 and *Age*, Melbourne, 13 April 1901.

¹¹ NAA, A8, 1901/163/1.

¹² Statement by Sir Alexander Peacock MLA to the Library Committee of the Victorian Parliament (date not stated) reported in E.L. Frazer, *The Library of the Parliament: A Brief History*, published by the Library Committee of the Parliament of Victoria, 1951, 7.

¹³ *Argus*, Melbourne, 26 July 1901.

¹⁴ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, 9 May 1901, 1–8.

years.¹⁵ The agreement between the Federal and State governments, however, did not specify any time. This agreement was not finalised until 9 December 1901. It provided that the Commonwealth was to be charged with the cost of repairing and maintaining the building and of restoration at the end of the agreement; work however to be carried out by the State. The Commonwealth could not alter the building without the consent of the State, such alterations were to be carried out by the State at the Commonwealth's expense. Members of the State Parliament were to have 'free and uninterrupted access' to the library, State documents, refreshment room, billiard room, rooms set aside for their use, out-offices and the gardens. Both Parliaments would establish Library Committees to manage their respective interests in the library, and they would confer on matters of joint interest. The Commonwealth could not make any alteration to the furniture and structure of the library without State consent. The officers of the library were to remain State employees, with the Commonwealth reimbursing the State for their salaries. The State Parliament was to continue to store its documents in the building and State officers were to have free access thereto. During the first half hour of each sitting of the Commonwealth Parliament, one row of seats in the Speaker's Gallery and the President's Gallery was to be reserved for any visiting members of the Victorian Parliament. Reciprocal rights applied to Commonwealth members visiting the State Parliament at the Exhibition Building.¹⁶

The pain of change

The first meeting of the State Parliament after the inauguration of the Commonwealth was not until 18 June 1901. Newspapers commented that it seemed like the inauguration of a new Parliament. Parliament met in its new premises in the Western Annexe of the Exhibition Building. But, as well, there was a new government, a new Opposition Leader, a large number of new members to replace all those who had transferred to the Commonwealth Parliament, a new President of the Legislative Council, new parliamentary officers to replace those transferred to the Commonwealth, and a new mace in the Legislative Assembly to replace the one lent to the House of Representatives. In addition, all members had to swear allegiance to the Monarch, as usually takes place after a general election, but on this occasion because of the death of Queen Victoria and accession of King Edward VII.

When one entered from Rathdowne Street through the main vestibule of the Western Annexe, the Legislative Council was to the south and the Legislative Assembly on the northern side. The two chambers were apportioned on the same lines as those applying at Spring Street, but with more lavish space.¹⁷ Unlike the two richly decorated chambers at Spring Street, neither chamber was ornate. The

¹⁵ Souter, *op cit*, 56.

¹⁶ *Victorian Parliamentary Papers*, 1902, 2(2); also *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, 1901–1902.

¹⁷ *Age*, Melbourne, 19 June 1901.

Legislative Council was substantially finished with polished wood. The only decoration was a carved wooden screen behind the President's chair in the Legislative Council.¹⁸ Galleries were provided in both houses. Reporters' rooms were along the western wall of the Annexe. To the east, next to the Legislative Council, were two dining rooms and a kitchen. Behind this, the room marked 'Map Room' on the diagram was probably the Reading Room/Library. Behind the Legislative Assembly was the Billiard Room and Ministerial Members' Room. Nearby was the Opposition Members' Room. Elsewhere in the Annexe were Committee Rooms and other offices.¹⁹ The cost of fitting out the new premises was £35,523.²⁰

Members were unfamiliar with their new premises. Many were reported to have 'lost themselves in the maze of corridors, rooms and doors, and there was a perfect babel as members ran into each other and shouted for information about the various rooms. Everywhere members were to be found loudly discussing, not the political situation, but the accommodation provided for them . . . ' according to the *Argus*.²¹ The *Age* noted that '[m]any an unsuspecting visitor got lost in the labyrinthine mazes of multitudinous apartments'.²² The arrangements were not completed: heating was inadequate on a very cold day on which snow fell over much of inland Victoria. The *Herald* unkindly noted that the building now converted for Parliament had for years been used for the purposes of a dog show.²³

Honourable Members were not happy. At the start of the next day's session, Thomas Bent complained that his letters and papers had disappeared from the Spring Street Parliament House. He said that they were 'being treated like a little municipal council'. Sir John McIntyre interjected that it would be 'a very good thing' if the Exhibition Trustees ejected them. The Premier made a soothing speech, referring to State Members' rights under the agreement with the Commonwealth.²⁴ Grumbling had, in fact, been anticipated. In April, the *Leader* (the *Age*'s weekly paper) had said, '[i]f there is any dissatisfaction it will be confined to a few members of the State Legislature who may consider that their personal convenience will be infringed by the necessity of change from accustomed quarters. This grumbling need not be taken seriously.'²⁵

¹⁸ D. Dunstan, *Victorian Icon: the Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne*, The Exhibition Trustees in association with Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 1996, ISBN 1875606297, 337 has an illustration of the Legislative Council.

¹⁹ *Leader*, Melbourne, 29 December 1900, 34, has a diagram. This is captioned 'The Federal Parliament Arrangements', but labels the chambers as 'Assembly' and 'Council', indicating the current uncertainty as to which Parliament would occupy the Exhibition Building Western Annex.

²⁰ P. Gregory, *Speaking Volumes: The Victorian Parliamentary Library 1851–2001*, Victorian Parliamentary Library, 2001, ISBN 0731174054, 63.

²¹ *Argus*, Melbourne, 19 June 1901.

²² *Age*, Melbourne, 19 June 1901.

²³ *Herald*, Melbourne, 18 June 1901.

²⁴ *VPD*, 19 June 1901, 28–30.

²⁵ *Leader*, Melbourne, 20 April 1901.

Members were not, however, mollified. A few days later, on 27 June, the Premier moved what is usually the most routine of motions — the appointment of members of the Library Committee. This erupted into a lengthy series of complaints by members about their new circumstances. Sir John McIntyre said that when ‘a guest came to his house, he was usually offered the best chair, but he usually refused to take it.’ He described the library as ‘an heirloom of the State of Victoria’. Members decried the loss of easy access to their valuable library. They demanded to know how the library would be managed. They suggested various remedies, such as duplicate books. William Maloney suggested a pneumatic tube between the two Houses so that books could be transported quickly. George Prendergast pointed out that members often required a great number of books so ‘if a pipe was provided it would be necessary to have a pipe big enough to convey the member as well as the book’. Thomas Bent said the provisions in the agreement about the billiards room and the refreshment room could have been left out, but ‘the library was of great importance.’ A couple of members even thought that worry over the library may have contributed to the recent death of the librarian. Theodore Fink thought that ‘a bookless house would be something new in the history of Parliament, and they did not want to go down to posterity as an ignorant Parliament’.²⁶

Then, on 17 July, Legislative Councillors took their turn to complain when J.H. Abbott moved an adjournment motion to discuss the situation. He suggested that at the end of their current session, the Federal parliamentarians should vacate Spring Street and come up to the Exhibition Building, allowing the State to move back to the City.²⁷ On the same day, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly received a complaint that the Exhibition Building was now heated too much, but he reassured members that he had arranged for the purchase of thermometers.²⁸

Complaints continued. In the Assembly, on 31 July, S.T. Staughton claimed that Federal members had ‘turned half the lobbies in the [Spring Street] buildings into bedrooms’ and the corridors into ‘private resorts’.²⁹ On 7 August, Mr Prendergast complained of there only being one telephone wire available, but once again Mr Speaker saved the day by saying he had arranged for more.³⁰ George Prendergast again took up the fight on 12 December when he described the library as ‘one of the best Parliamentary Libraries in Australia, and . . . probably the best in the southern hemisphere as a library of reference’. He also described sending to the library to obtain books to use in a debate, only to find that ‘[b]y the time he finally got what he wanted, the member found that the House had gone three or four Bills ahead of the item...’³¹ Even the Attorney-General, Sir Samuel Gillot, agreed with the complaints and bemoaned the lack of legal reference books at the Exhibition

²⁶ *VPD*, 27 June 1901, 227–41.

²⁷ *VPD*, 17 July 1901, 281–5.

²⁸ *VPD*, 17 July 1901, 298.

²⁹ *VPD*, 31 July 1901, 551.

³⁰ *VPD*, 7 August 1901, 639.

³¹ *VPD*, 12 December 1901, 3448.

Building.³² On 19 December Thomas Bent complained of going to the library in Spring Street and finding it closed. Sir John McIntyre again came up with memorable phrases when he said ‘[i]t was only the Library that induced the Federal Government to make an effort to get possession of the Parliament buildings . . . The Library was the great object of the desire of the Federal Government.’ One gentleman, whom he did not wish to name, was desirous of getting the Library all the time.³³ J.W. Taverner suggested that as Federal Parliament had adjourned for Christmas, the Victorians should return to Spring Street.³⁴

These statements by State parliamentarians were noticed by their Federal counterparts. On 20 June 1901, Jim Page, MHR for Maranoa, facetiously asked the Prime Minister if, in view of such expressed dissatisfaction, it would be possible for the Federal Parliament to meet in Sydney ‘where no doubt we will be received in a true federal spirit’. King O’Malley, Tasmanian MHR, suggested Hobart.³⁵

In May 1902 the Premier wrote to the Prime Minister, and the President of the Legislative Council to the President of the Senate, bitterly complaining that State Parliamentary records at Spring Street had been interfered with.³⁶ The President apologised and said the room had been restored to its original condition.³⁷

The Library

So how did the Victorian parliamentarians cope with the loss of their library? A Reading Room was set up at the Exhibition Building. This was not intended to be a separate institution, but rather an outpost of the main library at Spring Street. All major library activities continued at Spring Street and staff alternated between the two locations, with typically only one or two on duty in the Reading Room. Patrick Gregory’s history of the Victorian Parliamentary Library records that ‘[t]he atmosphere in the Reading Room was initially casual. Refreshments were served . . . making it as much a lounge as a library, an impression reinforced by a noticeable lack of books. All of the newspaper and periodical subscriptions were redirected there, the papers from the last two sessions of the Victorian Parliament, some law reports, statutes and [British] Hansard were transferred, and a few works of reference were purchased. But only £450 of the £2,100 spent on the collection by the State between 1901 and 1904 went towards the collection at the Reading Room, the rest being used to purchase new volumes for the Spring Street Library, no doubt much to the enjoyment of federal members . . . Compared with the sumptuous Library rooms at [Spring Street], the Reading Room would not have appeared

³² *VPD*, 12 December 1901, 3450.

³³ *VPD* 19 December 1901, 3748.

³⁴ *VPD*, 19 December 1901, 3747.

³⁵ *CPD*, 20 June 1901, 1366.

³⁶ National Archives of Australia (NAA), A8, 1902/134/2 and 1902/134/18.

³⁷ Souter, *op cit*, 56.

inviting. The absence of windows meant that it lacked both views and natural light. The floor was covered with linoleum rather than plush carpet, and the lack of heating discouraged casual visits by members during the winter months'.³⁸ William Embling MLA described the Reading Room as 'a library with no books' while George Prendergast said it 'was not fit for any honourable member to go into'. Theodore Fink called it a 'very uncomfortable and absurd reading room'.³⁹

In 1901 the Victorian Parliamentary Library Committee decided that all new books purchased by the State should go directly to the Reading Room, but this was not implemented.⁴⁰ In mid-1904, with the realisation that the Federal Parliament was not likely to go away soon, the Committee decided to turn the Reading Room into a proper library. As the Commonwealth was creating its own collection which would eventually be moved, it was clear that Victoria should develop its Parliamentary Library separately. The Reading Room was renamed 'The Library, State Parliament House'. The entire book vote was now spent there. All purchases made since 1901 and stored at Spring Street were transferred. An extra room was fitted out for periodicals. Nevertheless the total library area was still small and dwarfed by the dining rooms. The Assistant Librarian, Patrick Quirk, was now stationed at the Exhibition Building, effectively becoming the Acting Victorian Parliamentary Librarian. Requests for the delivery of items from Spring Street continued, but from 1904 onwards management of the two libraries was completely dissociated.⁴¹

In June 1905, when William Watt was criticised in the Legislative Assembly for quoting out-of-date statistics, he responded by saying that 'the honourable member knows full well how hard it is to get information up from the other Parliament building'.⁴²

The State Parliamentary Librarian, Arthur Wadsworth, also acted as Commonwealth Parliamentary Librarian for the period of the Federal use of the Spring Street building. He, and his staff, remained Victorian officers, but as provided for in the intergovernmental agreement, their salaries were reimbursed by the Commonwealth.⁴³ The same arrangement was even supposed to apply to such staff as the housekeeper. But when a new housekeeper was appointed as early as October 1901, the Commonwealth did not consult the State.⁴⁴

³⁸ Gregory, *op cit*, 68–70.

³⁹ *VPD*, 12 December 1901, 1448–9.

⁴⁰ Gregory, *op cit*, 68.

⁴¹ Gregory, *op cit*, 71.

⁴² *VPD*, 29 June 1905, 88.

⁴³ Souter, *op cit*, 57.

⁴⁴ Souter, *op cit*, 56.

The Mace

Following the inauguration in 1856 of the first Parliament following the grant of responsible government, the Victorian Legislative Assembly used a wooden mace as its symbol of authority. In 1866 this was replaced by an elaborate silver mace inlaid in gold. Fortunately the earlier mace was kept, because in October 1891 the silver and gold mace disappeared. This mystery has never been solved — theories include theft and removal of the mace by parliamentarians to a nearby brothel. The original wooden mace had to be returned to use. A new mace similar to the 1866 mace was subsequently made and brought into use in 1901 coinciding with the new premises at the Exhibition Building. The old wooden mace had been lent to the House of Representatives, in another example of Victoria's generosity. This remained away from home even longer than the loan of Parliament House. It was not returned to Victoria until July 1952, following the House of Representatives receiving a gift of a new mace from the House of Commons to mark the jubilee of the Commonwealth.⁴⁵

Going home, but only temporarily

Towards the end of 1902, State members were apparently still pining for their former home, a feeling intensified by temperatures inside the Exhibition Building of up to 94°F (34°C). In December 1902 the State Parliament was sitting, but the Federal Parliament had been prorogued. The Victorians seized the chance. On 12 December 1902, the Premier, William Irvine, announced that 'in response to what he understood to be the almost unanimous wish on the part of members' he had arranged with the Commonwealth for the State Parliament to return to Spring Street, thus 'relieving all of the inconvenience, almost suffering' felt in the Exhibition Building. Mr Bent said that on a hot day, the Exhibition Buildings were like an inferno. Some Members, led by Dr Maloney, however, opposed any move back. This objection was pushed to a vote, but those supporting the move won 53 to 18.⁴⁶ Accordingly, when the Legislative Assembly met in the next week they were back at Spring Street. The Legislative Council, however, had not been in session when this idea came forth. So, they were put to the inconvenience of having to meet at the Exhibition Building just to move a motion authorising their move to Spring Street. This being unanimously agreed, they reassembled in the Spring Street building.⁴⁷ The *Argus* drew a pen picture of 'two-score well-fed and well-clad gentlemen wending their way to their meeting place. The [Carlton Garden] loiterers opened a

⁴⁵ R. Wright, *A People's Counsel: A History of the Parliament of Victoria 1856–1990*, Oxford University Press, 1992, ISBN 019553359 3, 188; R. Wright, *Who Stole the Mace?* Victorian Parliamentary Library, 2001, ISBN 0723199918, 26–7; Australian Parliament website: www.aph.gov.au/house/work/mace.htm

⁴⁶ *VPD*, 12 December 1902, 1290.

⁴⁷ *VPD*, 16 December 1902, 1323–4.

sleepy eye in wonder and the park orators paused . . . to gaze . . . ,⁴⁸ State Parliament remained at Spring Street until April 1903, for 40 sitting days.⁴⁹

This period back at Spring Street included a significant constitutional event following the death of Victorian Senator Sir Frederick Sargood. On 21 January 1903 the first ever joint sitting of an Australian Parliament took place pursuant to section 15 of the Commonwealth Constitution to elect a replacement Senator. This novel event was held in Queen's Hall between the two legislative chambers. Legislative Councillor Robert Reid was elected as the new Senator, defeating past and future Premier Sir Alexander Peacock.⁵⁰

This experiment of returning temporarily to Spring Street was not repeated. State Members generally either got used to their accommodation at the Exhibition Building, or became resigned to their fate. Gavin Souter, in his history of Federal Parliament, *Acts of Parliament*, says that 'Victorians continued to assert their rights under the occupation agreement, but as they became more accustomed to Carlton Gardens they were seen less frequently at Spring Street.'⁵¹ R A Crouch, Federal Member for Corio, recounted a story of Sir Alexander Peacock, the Premier, using the Spring Street dining room. Peacock was famous for his enormously loud laugh. In reaction to one such laugh, William Hughes put aside his feigned deafness and deliberately dropped two plates. Another Peacock laugh resulted in further dropping of plates by Hughes. The Premier, offended, rarely dined there again.⁵² There were, in fact, some advantages of the Exhibition Building. Members' offices were close to the chambers, visitors and members no longer got lost in the maze of basement corridors and rooms, and the building could be used more flexibly.⁵³

Politics as usual, and as unusual

None of this distracted members from the usual manoeuvrings of politics. Indeed, the first days at the Exhibition Building in 1901 had been dominated by a shabby, contrived move to get at Labor member Edward Findley. Findley was the nominal publisher of a radical journal which had reprinted an insulting article about the King. Findley was expelled for disloyalty, after having been only a few days in the new premises.

The defining characteristic of Victorian politics in the period under review was the weakness of the Labor Party, compared with Labor in the Commonwealth and other States. Victorian political disputes 1901–1927, instead, were mainly between non-

⁴⁸ *Argus*, Melbourne, 17 December 1902, 17.

⁴⁹ Wright 1992, *op cit*, 143.

⁵⁰ *VPD* 21 January 1903, 1579–95.

⁵¹ Souter, *op cit*, 57.

⁵² Quoted in Souter, *op cit*, 57.

⁵³ Wright 1992, *op cit*, 114–15.

Labor groups — liberals versus conservatives, and/or country members asserting their power, often as part of movements to reduce government expenditure.

Premier Peacock, a liberal, responding to the pressure of the populist Kyabram Movement, had attempted to reduce the size of State Parliament and introduce other constitutional reforms. In 1902, the Opposition Leader, William Irvine, leader of the conservatives, successfully moved no confidence, and gained government. Austerity was the criterion in 'Iceberg' Irvine's government. The size of both houses of Parliament was now reduced. Railwaymen and other public servants were not permitted to vote in their geographical electorates, for fear of their influence. In an odd experiment, special functional state-wide electorates were created for them. Irvine also provocatively prohibited the railwaymen from affiliating with the Trades Hall. As a result, in May 1903, the railwaymen went on strike. Victoria was paralysed. Irvine recalled Parliament and for a week the Exhibition Building chambers heard emotional language as draconian legislation to force their return to work was debated. An enduring result was distrust between Labor and liberals.

In early 1904, Irvine resigned because of ill-health. His successor in the conservative government could hardly have been more different. Thomas Bent — hearty, bluff, down-to-earth — he who had been so vocal in 1901 about the inconveniences associated with the move from Spring Street. Separate representation for railwaymen and public servants was, it was agreed, unsuccessful and was abolished.

Women still could not vote for the Victorian Parliament, despite having the vote at Commonwealth and municipal level and in all other States. This was due to the stonewalling intransigence of the Legislative Council, always a staunch bastion of conservative causes. After many rejections, at last in 1908 even the Council had to agree to it. In 1923 women's right to stand for State Parliament was also conceded.

By this time, the labour movement was questioning its strategy of aligning itself with liberal members of parliament to advance its causes. Indeed, liberal and conservative members were themselves moving closer together. In 1907, they merged to form the United Liberal Party, less formally known as the 'fusees' — two years before the merger at Commonwealth level. Yet the old factions remained. In 1908, the liberal wing led by John Murray and Alexander Peacock, tired of Bent's notorious land value manipulations and wily scheming, successfully moved a no confidence motion. The result was confirmed at the ensuing election. Most of the liberals reunited, although some remained in opposition.

Non-labor parliamentarians recognised the danger of competing candidates splitting the vote at elections and leading to Labor victories. Deputy Premier William Watt in 1911 therefore successfully introduced legislation for preferential voting.

Labor could generally make little headway in Victoria, partly due to significant rural bias in electorate numbers, and partially due to their opponents' more

appealing policies and organisation. Watt succeeded Murray as Premier in 1912. In 1913, the Liberals split again, due to conservative and country members' suspicion of his policies. Labor thus gained government for the first time — but for a mere 13 days because the shock brought the Liberals back together again. And for this period, curiously, the Labor Premier, Alexander Elmslie and his ministers, were not even present in Parliament. This is because Victoria still retained the old British custom of requiring incoming ministers to test their mandate by resigning to face by-elections.⁵⁴

In 1914 Watt departed for the Federal scene, and Peacock was back at the helm. Peacock believed that the Government's overriding concern should be to support the war effort. Such measures as price control, controls over rural produce marketing and six o'clock hotel closing were introduced. Some members enlisted for active service; almost all supported recruiting drives. During this decade, even during the war, Parliament laid many of the foundation of the modern State with legislation on such topics as the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board, Country Roads Board and educational expansion. By 1917, the Liberals, following Federal precedent, called themselves the National Party. The country element remained strong, going under the title Economy Party, even while formally part of the Nationals. John Bowser, leader of the Economy Party, ousted Peacock in 1917, before himself being ousted by unflappable Harry Lawson in 1918 from the mainstream Nationalists.

The 1920s were a period of frequent, squalid manoeuvrings and deals between all parties and their sub-groups. Almost every combination of parties appeared. Be warned: it is exhausting just to read the following summary!

The Country Party, now formally a separate party, held the balance of power following the 1920 election, although Lawson and the Nationalists retained office. In 1921, Labor and the Country Party combined to defeat the government. Following an election, some Country Party members supported the Lawson Government and some the Labor opposition. But, as more Country Party members became disenchanted, Lawson had to broker support from Labor! Nevertheless, his government was notable for establishing the State Electricity Commission under the Chairmanship of Sir John Monash, and dealing with the devastating Police strike of 1923.

In 1924, Lawson, tired of the manoeuvrings, resigned as Premier on the understanding that he would be elected Speaker. But his enemies in the radical wing of the Country Party and Labor now exacted revenge on him by installing John Bowser as Speaker. Peacock came back as Premier for the third occasion, but only for a short time.

⁵⁴ V. Isaacs, *The Case of the Missing Premier — A Strange Parliamentary Practice* to appear in *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 18(1) Autumn 2003.

With Parliament again divided three ways after the 1924 election, Labor and Country combined to move and win a parliamentary no confidence motion. Flamboyant, picturesque George Prendergast (the member who twenty years before who had been so concerned about loss of the Library at Spring Street) now formed Victoria's first effective, but short-lived, Labor government. Labor relied on support from the Country Party to form government, but the support was half-hearted and withdrawn after only four months in yet another successful no confidence motion. Now John Allan from the conservative wing of the Country Party formed a government in coalition with the Nationalists. Allan, Australia's first Country Party Premier, was very traditional, stubborn and unimaginative. Before the next election, both the Nationalist and Country parties split. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the 1927 election – the first with compulsory voting — was a triumph for Labor, which gained office under Ned Hogan. That government eventually fell apart under the pressure of the depression, but that is not a story for this article.⁵⁵

More complaints

Occasional complaints about the Exhibition Building continued during this period. On 9 March 1909, in the Budget debate, George Prendergast returned to his concern about access to the Parliamentary Library, arguing that all of the State Parliament's records and papers should be at the Exhibition Building, as well as the headquarters of the Library.⁵⁶ On 7 December 1916, Prendergast was supported by other members when he complained about the difficulties of obtaining access to the Library after hours.⁵⁷ Complaints about ventilation and lighting were also made every so often, for example by Prendergast on 10 December 1914⁵⁸ and by E.J. Cotter, John Lemmon, and even the Premier, Harry Lawson, on 17 November 1921.⁵⁹ On 10 August 1915 Legislative Councillor R.B. Rees complained of the free services provided to the Commonwealth by Victoria and asked why the State 'could not charge the Federal Government rent for our Parliament House'.⁶⁰

A controversy flared in 1925. On 24 July, James Deany, MLA for Warrnambool, took up a position on the steps of the Spring Street Parliament House to watch the march past of sailors from a visiting United States Navy Fleet. A policeman ordered that he and other State members leave. As he later indignantly told the Legislative Assembly 'Of course, I resisted . . . and said I intended to stay there, that I was a State member with certain rights and privileges and was entitled to be there.' At that

⁵⁵ Summaries of Victorian politics in this period are in R. Wright, *A People's Counsel: A History of the Parliament of Victoria 1856-1990*, Oxford University Press, 1992, ISBN 0195533593, passim; and D. Garden, *Victoria: A History*, Thomas Nelson Australia, 1984, ISBN 0170058735, particularly 269–81 and 355–61.

⁵⁶ VPD 9 December 1909, 2966.

⁵⁷ VPD 7 December 1916, 3135.

⁵⁸ VPD 10 December 1914, 164–5.

⁵⁹ VPD 17 November 1921, 1174–5.

⁶⁰ VPD 10 August 1915, 1712.

point Senator Givens, President of the Senate intervened. Deany continued, 'I defied the President. I told him that he was degrading his position, and that, as a matter of fact, I had more right there than President Givens . . . I take it as a gross insult.' G C Webber from the Labor Opposition said that he had also had been ordered from the steps and out of Queen's Hall and Mr J McDonald, Honorary Minister, said there was ample justification for Deany's complaint.⁶¹ Senator Givens responded in the *Argus* newspaper asserting the right of Federal Parliament. He said that 'Federal Parliament was the tenant and had the right to the House'. Givens continued, 'every courtesy and consideration has been shown to State members' but 'if the churlish and grudging attitude of Mr Deany is an indication of the general feeling of the present Victorian Parliament . . . then that sense of obligation and appreciation will be very much lessened . . .'.⁶² This enraged Mr Deany and other MLAs even further. Deany pointed out that the Federal Parliament was there under an agreement which preserved the rights of State members. He said 'that Senator Givens is an unmitigated liar' and 'he was ignorant of the whole conditions regarding the occupancy of Parliament House'.⁶³ Givens then called Deany 'very foolish'.⁶⁴ Deany responded in the *Argus* that he heard 'foolish arguments put forward during my public career, but none comparable to his latest one'. He concluded that 'I have no desire to embarrass Senator Givens further, so will leave the issue in the hands of the House Committee which will give him every opportunity of extricating himself from the undignified entanglement he now finds himself in'.⁶⁵ Finally, the President of the Legislative Council and the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly jointly met the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives. The two Federal presiding officers then 'expressed their deep sense of generosity of the Government and Parliament of Victoria' and, '[w]hile expressing regret at the incident, they gave complete assurances that there would be no recurrence of anything of the kind . . .'.⁶⁶

Meanwhile

While State Parliament occupied the Western Annexe, activities continued as usual in other parts of the large Exhibition Building complex.

To take a few examples: Concerts were popular, including Nellie Melba in 1907, and others making use of the large pipe organ in the main hall. Art exhibitions took place. The Salvation Army made frequent use of the Exhibition Building for rallies and other functions, for example, Christmas Dinner in 1908. The Australian Natives Association hired the Building for their annual fete. A re-enactment of the siege of

⁶¹ *VPD* 11 August 1925, 342–44.

⁶² *Argus*, Melbourne, 12 August 1925, 19 and 13 August 1925, 5.

⁶³ *VPD* 13 August 1925, 430–2.

⁶⁴ *Argus*, Melbourne, 15 August 1925, 27.

⁶⁵ *Argus*, Melbourne, 18 August 1925, 13.

⁶⁶ *VPD* 15 September 1925, 1111.

Port Arthur (of the Russian-Japanese War) with a modelled cyclorama and fireworks show was popular in 1904–05. A grand dinner for sailors of the visiting US Navy ‘Great White Fleet’ hosted by Prime Minister Deakin was held in 1908 — unfortunately the sailors didn’t turn up. Motor Shows commenced in 1912.

Some uses were semi-permanent. The main part of the Building was converted into a hospital for most of 1919 to help cope with the great influenza epidemic. The Australian War Memorial occupied the Building from 1921 until 1925.

The Melbourne Aquarium was open throughout this period in the eastern part of the Building. Bicycle races took place on the sports oval, including a six-day race in 1912.⁶⁷

A happy ending

The Federal occupancy of Melbourne’s Parliament went on for much longer than anyone anticipated in 1901. Construction of the new Federal capital was delayed by other priorities of the new government, by lengthy arguments about where it should be located (within Federal Parliament, as well as between the Commonwealth and New South Welsh governments) and then by world war. By the 1920s, construction of Canberra commenced.

At last, on 13 January 1926, the Governor-General, opening a new session of Federal Parliament in Melbourne, said ‘arrangements have been made according to which the transfer of the seat of government will be effected in the early part of 1927’.⁶⁸ On 26 May 1926 the Prime Minister, Stanley Bruce, in a parliamentary statement, advised an exact date for Federal Parliament to commence sitting in Canberra — 9 May 1927, the twenty-sixth anniversary of Federal Parliament’s opening.⁶⁹ Victorian Federal parliamentarians no doubt cursed the future inconvenience for them, and Victorian State parliamentarians probably rejoiced at the prospect of regaining their own building.

A trial shipment of books from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library collection was sent to Canberra in November 1925 and the rest of the collection, 108,000 volumes, between October 1926 and April 1927. As Gregory puts it, ‘The Victorians were keen to ensure that none of their books went north — accidentally or otherwise — and arranged for a complete stocktake . . .’⁷⁰ It was found that 1,460 volumes were missing, of which only 200 were considered worthy of replacement. The Commonwealth agreed to provide ‘good editions’. After removing their books, the Commonwealth cleaned the library and agreed to pay for repainting and rebinding damaged volumes. Over eight working days in May–June

⁶⁷ Dunstan, *op cit*, passim.

⁶⁸ CPD 13 January 1926, 8.

⁶⁹ CPD 26 May 1926, 2303–5.

⁷⁰ Gregory, *op cit*, 88.

1927, five labourers, one carpenter and one large covered motor lorry transferred 21,000 volumes from the Exhibition Building to Spring Street. Five thousand volumes of Parliamentary Papers and newspapers were left behind because of lack of space, as a suite of rooms had been converted by the Commonwealth to kitchens. 'After a month of frantic work, the Library was ready for the opening of the new [State] parliamentary session on 6 July'. None of the library staff now at Spring Street had worked there before.⁷¹ There remained some years work to amalgamate the catalogues of the two collections.⁷²

The opening of Federal Parliament House in its own city (rather, bush settlement) of Canberra on 9 May 1927, however, was merely a ceremonial occasion. The first substantive session of Parliament House in Canberra did not commence until 28 September 1927. In the meantime, the Commonwealth quit the Spring Street Parliament House from 30 June 1927. The Commonwealth paid £13,510 to Victoria for repairs to the building.⁷³

On 6 July 1927, the Victorian Parliament returned to Spring Street. Nine members of the Legislative Assembly survived the whole period of exile: Alfred Billson, John Bowser, Alfred Downard, E.C. Wade, Harry Lawson, David Oman, Sir Alexander Peacock, George Prendergast and Richard Toutcher. Four (Peacock, Bowser, Lawson and Prendergast) had been premiers during this period. Only two Legislative Councillors survived the whole of the diaspora: Joseph Sternberg and Thomas Payne. While the State Parliament had been away, the Spring Street building had been altered: three chandeliers removed from the Legislative Council/Senate chamber, a gymnasium installed in the basement (rarely used), sewerage connected and an early form of air-conditioning provided.⁷⁴

On 15 April 1926, Sir William McPherson MLA wrote to the Federal Government to suggest that before vacating Spring Street it should complete the building by constructing the dome. He said it should be known as the 'Deakin Dome' as a 'graceful compliment to pay to the memory of that revered gentlemen'. McPherson estimated the cost at about £40,000, for example, 'less than £2,000 per annum' of occupation. Upon receipt of the suggestion Mr Bruce referred the question to Cabinet, which decided a Parliamentary Committee should consider a suitable memorial of Federal occupancy.⁷⁵

Accordingly, fittingly almost as its last business before leaving Spring Street, the Commonwealth Parliament considered the *Victorian Parliament House Memorial Bill*. The Bill was introduced by the Prime Minister, supported on behalf of the

⁷¹ Gregory, *op cit*, 88–90.

⁷² Gregory, *op cit*, 92.

⁷³ Letter from Prime Minister Bruce to Premier Hogan, 7 March 1928, NAA A282/1, A144.

⁷⁴ Wright 1992, *op cit*, 143.

⁷⁵ NAA, A461, F4/1/10.

Opposition by James Scullin, and passed without a division.⁷⁶ This legislation provided that ‘Whereas the Parliament of the Commonwealth desires to express its appreciation of the action of the State of Victoria’ a sum of £50,000 was appropriated to be ‘applied towards the provision of a permanent memorial associated with the Parliament House of the State of Victoria in commemoration of the occupation by the Commonwealth Parliament’.⁷⁷ The Federal Parliamentary Committee which had considered the matter envisaged a ‘symbolic sculpture’.⁷⁸ Senator Givens opined ‘that it is not desirable that the addition of a kitchen to these premises should be regarded as a fitting memorial of our occupation of it’.⁷⁹ The State Government considered using the money as meeting half the cost of constructing the unbuilt north wing, but had difficulty finding the other £50,000. On 26 October 1927 the Premier, Ned Hogan, accompanied by his Minister for Public Works, called on Stanley Bruce. The Prime Minister later minuted that he ‘could not quite follow what was in their mind at first, but I gathered later that they were somewhat apprehensive that the Commonwealth might be inclined to question their not proceeding to spend the £50,000 that we had made available’.⁸⁰ In the event, the Victorians spent the money on the mooted refreshment room. This was opened in 1929 and is the last substantive addition or alteration to State Parliament House. This addition to the refreshment room released space to the library, enabling the volumes which had remained in storage at the Exhibition Building in 1927 to be now brought to Spring Street.⁸¹

In the meantime, the Western Annexe of the Exhibition Building was given to the Country Roads Board, and later also the Motor Registration Branch and the Transport Regulation Board. Clerks occupied the area in cramped and uncomfortable accommodation until the 1960s.⁸²

Retrospect

What was the effect of the Victorian Parliament having spent 26 years in exile? The physical effect is obvious – duplication of premises and facilities, plus the oddity of two Parliaments in one city. But it seems there were no wider implications for Victorian politics. Other than spending time complaining about the Exhibition Building, and that mainly in the first couple of years, politics went on as normal. Indeed, the new premises had been designed as a replica of the old. It was plainer and slightly more spacious, but this was mere detail. Even location was only about a kilometre from the old premises. There is no surviving evidence that the changed location altered how State politics worked.

⁷⁶ CPD, 24 March 1927, 1032–4 and 1077–8

⁷⁷ Commonwealth *Victorian Parliament House Memorial Act*, no. 24 of 1927.

⁷⁸ NAA A461/7, F4/1/10.

⁷⁹ CPD 24 March 1927, 1032.

⁸⁰ NAA A461/7, F4/1/10.

⁸¹ Gregory, *op cit*, 97.

⁸² Dunstan, *op cit*, 337–8.

Postscript: On the move again

The wanderings of the Victorian Parliament are possibly not over - it may now move throughout the State. The Bracks Government decided to commemorate the centenary of Federation with special sittings of State Parliament. On 16 August 2001 the Legislative Council met in the Ballarat Town Hall and the Legislative Assembly at the Bendigo Town Hall. Other than special speeches to note the occasion, ordinary business was transacted. The Minister for Industrial Relations, Monica Gould MLC, said that if the sittings were a success, the Government would examine the logistics of having a parliamentary sitting in rural or regional Victoria once every year.⁸³ The Legislative Council met in Benalla on 30 October 2002.

Perhaps this is the start of a trend. The Queensland Parliament met at Townsville from 3 to 5 September 2002, as part of a plan by Premier Peter Beattie to make Parliament 'more accessible to Queenslanders'.⁸⁴ It is now planned that there be a regional sitting of Queensland Parliament once each term.⁸⁵ Tasmania and the Northern Territory are also reported to be considering regional sittings⁸⁶ and the NSW Opposition Leader has also suggested the idea for our oldest State Parliament.



⁸³ *VPD*, 16 August 2001, 19.

⁸⁴ Media Statement by the Hon. Peter Beattie MLA, Premier of Queensland, 18 June 2002.

⁸⁵ Hon. P. Beattie MLA, Premier, Queensland Parliamentary Debates, 5 September 2002, 3397.

⁸⁶ *Courier-Mail*, Brisbane, 6 September 2002, 6.