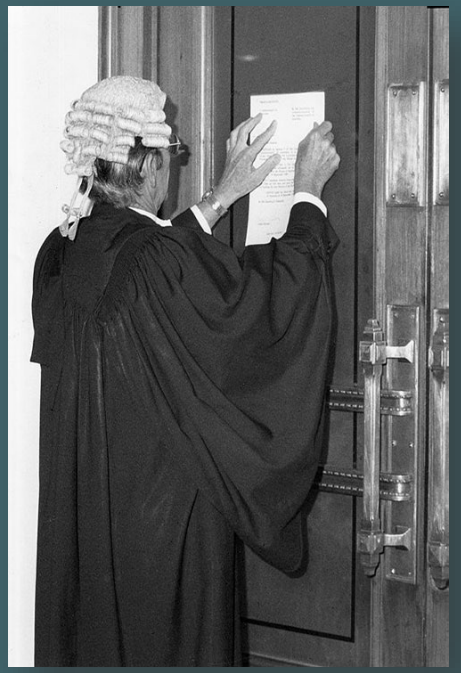

The contract renewed: Ceremony, ritual and the democratic promise

Fleur Hall & Justin Baker, Parliament of Australia

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Auspic, Department of Parliamentary Services

Ceremony and ritual

ceremony: formal acts prescribed by ritual, protocol or convention.

ritual: repeated symbolic behaviour.

The ceremonial opening and closing of a Parliament gives visible form to constitutional principles.

Ritual connects the public to the Parliament.

Democratic legitimacy, continuity, renewal

The Constitution establishes the dual character of Parliament: individual Parliaments are temporary, the institution endures.

Public renewal of the democratic contract is expressed through the electoral cycle, which is a recurring demonstration of legitimacy derived from the people.

The 1901 opening

"…an event the like of which has never been known before and which may never occur again"

ERALD. FRIDAY, MAY 10. 1901.

BIRTH OF A NATION'S PARLIAMENT.

A WONDERFUL PAGEANT.

POPULAR DEMONSTRATIONS.

THE EXHIBITION BUILDING CROWDED.

IMPRESSIVE RELIGIOUS CEREMONIAL.

THE ROYAL SPEECH.

(BY OUR SPECIAL COMMISSIONER.)

MELBOURNE, Thursday.

After witnessing the opening of the Federal Parliament one's feeling is that the occasion, unique as it is, has been done full justice to. The brightness, the simplicity, the beauty, and the dignity of the ceremonial impressed everyone—whoever constructed the programme that took only from noon to nearly 1 o'clock to-day has composed a masterpiece of effect. Its parts were few—prayer and psalm music, a Royal speech and message, reading of official documents, swearing-in of the members, and signing of the test roll, salute of cannon, and peal of trumpets, and acclamations of the people. There was to be a Royal procession, though small—just the Royal carriages, with a military escort—through the streets of Melbourne, and the hope of seeing the Duke and the Duchess attracted tens of thousands into the bleak and wet streets, which were lined with troops. The night had been stormy and wet, and between 9 and 10 a heavy shower, driven by a bitter wind, made people fear an unpropitious day on Thursday; but the sun came out to-day, and not the least cheerful feature of the ceremony in the Exhibition Building was the gleam of sunshine from the high windows. The official invitations set forth the hour of opening the doors as 10 a.m., and though high noon was the hour of the Royal arrival very many guests presented themselves by 10 and soon afterwards. Every detail of the seating of the thousands invited had been studied, so that on entering the building by the designated door the presentation of your card named the seat in the proper section. Except that space in the portions of the building nearest to the Royal dais was divided amongst Senators, Representatives, relations of Federal Ministers, and members of Parliament, and so forth, there was no special reserve-tion of seats in the order in which people entered their sections. So there was chance of seats. Those who came early got the reserved chairs, and the late comers did as they best could.

It seemed but a little while before the naves and galleries were full of spectators. By 11 o'clock, when the orchestra began a programme of music to while away the hour of waiting, the neighbourhood of the dais was a mass of people, and from organ loft to great entrance the long hall, hung with flags and the shields of the States and the Empire, presented a superb appearance. The new decorations of the building had been artistically done, and the arrangement was altogether excellent. As M. Caron led his orchestra the military and consular personages who were privileged with seats on the floor took their places, the members of the Senate crowned them-

COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENT.

ITS PLACE IN HISTORY.

AUTONOMY AND IMPERIALISM.

OPINION OF THE "TIMES."

LONDON, May 9.

The "Times" in its leading article to-day says:—

"The opening of the Federal Parliament of Australia is one of the chief Constitutional incidents in history. Its development will be watched with pride, and with the hope that autonomy and Imperialism in partnership will be compatible and mutually helpful.

AUSTRALIA'S PARLIAMENT.

OPENED BY THE HEIR APPARENT.

MAGNIFICENT GATHERING.

AN IMPRESSIVE CEREMONY.

THE VICE-REGAL SPEECH.

DIRECT MESSAGE FROM THE KING.

PROGRESS THROUGH THE STREETS.

THE MILITARY ARRANGEMENTS.

STATE CONCERT AT EXHIBITION BUILDING.

(FROM OUR SPECIAL REPORTERS.)

MELBOURNE, Thursday.

In the opening of the first Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by the Heir to the British Crown, Melbourne witnessed to-day an event the like

course of people assembled outside the Exhibition Buildings. It was undoubtedly a Royal Progress a every step, and both their Royal Highnesses appeared to be greatly touched at the heartiness of the reception accorded them.

At the conclusion of the ceremony of opening the Federal Parliament their Royal Highnesses and their Excellencies the Governor-General and Countess Hopetoun retired from the dais, and, leaving the building by the southern door, drove back to Government House. Their welcome on passing through the streets on their return journey was just as cordial as before, though the crowds of people had greatly diminished.

AT THE EXHIBITION BUILDING.

It was announced that the Exhibition Building would be opened to admit the invited guests at 10 o'clock. Long before this hour there were in waiting outside the entrance gates a large assemblage of ladies and gentlemen, and a long line of vehicles. Passing through the turnstiles the visitors were directed by the attendants to the doors leading to the parts of the building for which they had tickets. This was a matter of some difficulty. Owing to the alterations that had been made even people well acquainted with the interior of the structure found themselves unable to reach that portion of the immense building for which they had tickets. A little confusion resulted, but with the exercise of patience and perseverance places were found for all. The Governor-General had requested that visitors should be in their places by 11.30 o'clock. Long before that hour every available seat where standing room was available was occupied, and looking from the rear of the dais the floors and galleries of the western, northern, and eastern portions of the building presented an extraordinary appearance.

Special arrangements were made for the ceremony and for the accommodation of spectators. Under the centre of the dome was a dais raised about 30ft. from the floor for the Duke and the Duchess and Lord and Countess Hopetoun, so that all those seated in the main hall and galleries could obtain a good view of the Royal visitors. At the rear of the dais, on a slightly higher level, were seats for the Governors of the States, their wives and suites, forming, as it were, a further extension of this gallery. To the rear were seats for the representatives of the leading English and Australian newspapers, and other journalists were accommodated in the southern gallery, overhead. In front of the dais, but several feet away from it, were chairs on a platform raised about 10ft. from the floor, for members of the Federal Senate and the House of Representatives, the Federal Ministers having the front chairs. The members of the State Parliaments were provided for on either side of the members of the Federal Parliament, and also immediately behind the space occupied by the State Governors. Space provision was made for the Presidents, Speakers, and Ministers of the State Parliaments close to the dais.

WAITING FOR THE CEREMONY.

As the tens of thousands of people waited for the beginning of the ceremony a specially organised orchestra placed on the platform to the right front of the dais played a number of selections. Behind them right away to the organ loft, was a dense crowd of people. Facing the dais were the distinguished guests, and to the south was another enormous crowd. From the floors to the tops of galleries the people showed a mass of black; in front it was relieved by the scarlet and ermine of Judges and red coats and the gold lace of military officers. Here and there ladies were bright purple, giving life and colour to the picture. From a dozen points of vantage [illegible]

The opening today

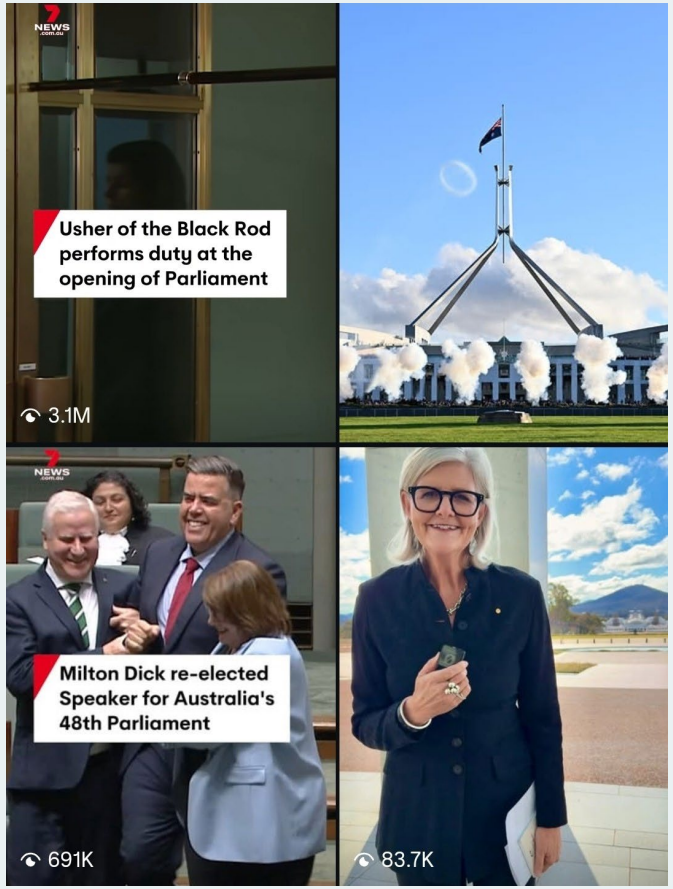
Proposals for change

- Bipartisan recommendations
- Support for traditional / ceremonial elements
- Proposals largely aimed at achieving efficiencies
- Not supported by Governments

Welcome to Country

Prorogation / Dissolution

The public audience



The opening of the Commonwealth Parliament taken from the Press Gallery at the Exhibition Building on 9th May 1901 / Albert Edmond Walcott.
Source: State Library Victoria.

To conclude

- It is through the performance of their ceremonies and rituals that we understand institutions.
- The ceremonial opening and closing of Parliaments give form to constitutional requirements, making tangible the ‘democratic promise’ made by the people at Federation.
- They convey continuity and stability in an increasingly fragmented society.
- The public audience for these ceremonies continues to grow.

Questions?