Australia's Centenary of Federation inspires little public enthusiasm

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January 1, 2001 is the centenary of the proclamation of the Commonwealth of Australia—then a federation of six British colonies. Considerable efforts have been made in recent months by federal and state governments, as well as the media, to publicise the event and turn it into a popular celebration of Australia's nationhood. Planning has been underway for several years, funded by the federal government with more than $100 million, in addition to a $1 billion Federation Fund, which has been used to underwrite various infrastructure projects.

A year-long commemoration is in store, starting on New Year's Eve with an obligatory Sydney Harbour fireworks display, followed by a formal ceremony, the ringing of church bells across the country and a "Journey of the Nation" parade through downtown Sydney. The sponsors include the country's largest retailer Coles-Myer, the AMP finance house and mining giant BHP. Media outlets owned by Rupert Murdoch, having won exclusive rights to cover some of the proceedings, are promoting the Centenary heavily.

Yet the anniversary has failed to grip the popular imagination. Media commentators are lamenting the general dearth of interest. Newspaper interviews suggest widespread indifference. In an effort to drum up enthusiasm, Murdoch's tabloid newspapers have resorted to banner headlines such as "Time for a party," inviting their readers to forget the "serious stuff" and make the event a gigantic carnival.

"We have much to celebrate," the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* insists. "Despite the injustice and savagery of white colonisation, the founding of the Australian Commonwealth is something we can all be proud of. Australia is one of the few nations not born of war, bloodshed or revolution; the first and only nation ever to span a single continent, and the only continent ever to come together as a single nation through an act of free association."

The true history of Federation is somewhat less glorious. The "Founding Fathers" were almost exclusively businessmen, lawyers and politicians. Their deliberations were backed by the captains of industry and commerce, propelled by the desire to expand markets, forge a more secure "White Australia" on the edge of Asia, establish colonial mastery over the South Pacific and head off the emergence of a militant working class, which had already begun to organise Australia-wide.

Earlier efforts to unify the six colonies—New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia—had largely foundered on conflicting business interests. The NSW ruling elite espoused free trade, but the Victorian employers insisted upon tariff protection; Queensland sugar interests were intent on retaining the use of virtual slave labour—kidnapped Pacific islanders referred to as "Kanakas"; the Western Australian mine owners feared onerous federal taxes on their earnings.

One event more than any other revived the call for Federation. In 1883, Queensland annexed the island of New Guinea in an effort to forestall the declaration of a German colony, only to be vetoed from London. It was not until Germany seized northern New Guinea in the following year that Britain claimed Papua (southern New Guinea).

This missed opportunity sent a tremor through Australian ruling circles. Sir Henry Parkes, a NSW politician credited with being the Father of Federation, said in 1890: "If Australia could have spoken with one voice, New Guinea could have belonged to Australia." Not only Germany, but also France was vying with Britain for imperialist domination of the region, acquiring South Pacific colonies in New Caledonia and Tahiti. The emerging Australian bourgeoisie had its own wider colonial aspirations. Parkes declared that Australia "ought to be the mistress of the Southern Seas" and "hold the mastery of the hemisphere".

Such ambitions required a unified military capacity. Parkes' most famous speech for Federation, known as the Tenterfield Oration, was directly spurred by an 1889 report on Australia's defence by a visiting British Major-General, Sir James Bevan Edwards. Australia was a "rich and tempting prize" whose military protection was "impossible" without the formation of a continent-wide armed forces, Edwards concluded.

Furthermore, by the early 1890s Australian ruling circles faced the eruption of major industrial strikes across colonial boundaries by sheep shearers and maritime workers, and the onset of a Great Depression, which included serious bank crashes. At various federation and constitutional conventions summoned in 1890, 1891, 1897 and 1898, the delegates deliberately retained the potentially dictatorial "reserve powers" of the British monarchy for use in political emergencies.

Under the 1901 Constitution, which still stands, the Queen and her representative, the Governor-General, can dissolve or prorogue parliament (Section 5), reject legislation passed by parliament (Section 58) and appoint the Ministers of State (Section 64). The Governor-General is the commander-in-chief of the military forces (Section 68). Thus, the vice-regal representative can legally dismiss an elected government, as happened with the sacking of the Whitlam government in 1975.

The centenary is being trumpeted as a celebration of democracy, yet the Constitution makes no mention of the word, nor does it guarantee the right to vote. Instead, it was left to parliament and the states to determine the eligibility of voters, with racial disqualifications of Aboriginal, Asian and Pacific islander people specifically retained. Women had no vote in most states. To this day, the Constitution does

not even require the government to hold a parliamentary majority—Ministers hold office at the Governor-General's "pleasure" (Section 64).

The Founding Fathers did not want to encourage democratic notions, or prematurely break from the apron strings of Britain. The spectre of "revolution" was mentioned a number of times in the course of convention debates. A proposal for a republic and "full democracy" was ruled out of order. An amendment to make the Governor-General's role as military commander-in-chief subject to the advice of his ministers was defeated on the grounds that military intervention would be needed when "responsible government" broke down. As an additional check on popular rule, and to protect the economic interests of the smaller colonies, the Senate was created as a state-based house of review.

Another centenary myth is that Federation and the Constitution were adopted with a popular mandate. "Our nation is the first in history to be voted into existence by its people at the ballot box," the official literature claims. An initial referendum in 1898 failed when two states refused to participate. In a second round of ballots in 1899 and 1900, only 60 percent of eligible voters participated. One historian has estimated that 84 percent of the adult population either did not vote or could not vote. With few exceptions, only white males were eligible. And among them, the poor—those receiving aid from public or charitable institutions—were excluded.

Moreover, the final version of the Constitution was hammered out in London, after four months of negotiations in 1900 involving four Australian representatives and the British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain. Among other things, the British government insisted on the retention of legal appeals to the Privy Council, the British colonial court. Only then was the Constitution passed as a British Act of Parliament. Despite Federation being officially touted as "the birth of a nation," Australian citizens remained British subjects and the Australian political establishment chose to retain the status of a British colony or dominion until World War II.

The formal ceremony declaring the Australian Commonwealth—held at 1pm on January 1, 1901 in Sydney's Centennial Park—reflected Federation's anti-democratic birthmarks. Top-hatted gentlemen gathered under a pavilion to hear the reading of Queen Victoria's Proclamation and witness the taking of an oath by an English earl, Lord Hopetoun, as the country's first Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief. Hopetoun then swore in the first—unelected—government, led by Edmund Barton. Elections were not held until three months later, after which Barton's Liberal Protectionist Party took office, supplied with a parliamentary majority by the newly-formed Labor Party.

Politically, Federation rested on an alliance between sections of business and the leaders of the Labor Party and trade unions to establish a "White Australia". After the industrial and social turmoil of the early 1890s, the labour leaders came together with the employers to cut Australian workers off from their Asian brothers and sisters, impose compulsory wage arbitration and erect high tariff walls around national industry.

One of the first pieces of legislation passed by the new parliament was the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, directed at preventing the entry of non-whites. It was soon followed by the Pacific Islanders Labourers Act, which required the deportation of some 8,700 indentured Pacific workers and their families. In the parliamentary debate, Labor MP and Australian Workers Union leader W.G. Spence summed up the program of the labour bureaucrats: "If we keep the race pure, and build up a national character, we shall become highly progressive people of whom the British government will be prouder the longer we live and the stronger we grow."

The "White Australia" policy also cemented the dispossession of the indigenous population—the Constitution allowed them to be denied citizenship rights, until that provision was overturned by a referendum in 1967.

With this history, the heirs of the Founding Fathers—the contemporary politicians, business chiefs and labour officials—have had considerable difficulty in recent decades in attempting to redefine Australian nationalism and present a different international image. They have sought to fashion a new ideological legitimacy while straining to meet the requirements of global markets, particularly those in Asia, which take a high proportion of Australian raw material exports. These efforts are continuing in the Centenary, with its literature replete with references to "reconciliation" and "multiculturalism".

Yet every social statistic testifies to the continuing oppression of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose life expectancy, health, education, housing, employment prospects and imprisonment rates are among the worst in the world. Despite the formal abolition of "White Australia," immigrants and refugees from poor countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and South America are denied basic democratic rights and thousands are subjected to indefinite detention each year.

At the same time, the working class as a whole has suffered declining living standards over the past two decades—the first such protracted decline since Federation. Job insecurity, household debt, poverty, homelessness, suicide rates, imprisonment and unemployment have soared, and essential social services—welfare benefits, public health and education—have been slashed, while a small privileged elite has accumulated immense and unprecedented wealth. The glaring social polarisation that has resulted has produced deep alienation and dissatisfaction with the political order, reflected in the declining base of support for all the traditional political parties.

At the root of these social processes is the breakup of the sheltered, regulated and highly protected national economy upon which Federation was based. The globalisation of all aspects of economic life has made it impossible for such barriers to be retained. In the new century that commences on January 1, the Australian working class, now drawn from many parts of the globe, will increasingly face the necessity to unify with workers internationally in the struggle to reorganise political and social life along genuinely democratic and egalitarian—that is, socialist—lines.