

What is at stake in Australia's “History Wars”

Part 2: The establishment of the Australian nation-state

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Below we are publishing the second part in a 10-part series written by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. The remaining parts are available at the following links:

[Part 1](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#), [Part 5](#), [Part 6](#), [Part 7](#), [Part 8](#), [Part 9](#) and [Part 10](#).

The history wars—and the conflicting national agendas behind them—are rooted in political issues going back to the formation of the six Australian colonies and their subsequent federation as a nation-state in 1901.

The formation of the modern nation-state can be said to have originated with the French Revolution of 1789, and, immediately preceding it, the establishment of the American republic. But by the time of Australian federation, nationalism had undergone a profound transformation.

In the French Revolution, the nation was defined, above all, politically. It comprised the citizens, in contradistinction to the nobility and the feudal regime. It was an *inclusive* category, based on a political outlook—the rights of man and citizenship—rather than ethnicity or language.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, nationalism was increasingly defined in terms of ethnic origin. No longer so much a political program—associated with opposition to the old regime—it had taken on pseudo-biological traits, becoming, in the process, *exclusive* rather than *inclusive*. Whereas at the time of the revolution, the French nation embraced all who accepted its political ideals and had, therefore, a certain universality, nationality—including in France—had become a matter of ethnic background.

The same process was reflected in the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia. The national ideology of the Australian nation-state was based, not on political ideals but on racial origin. The first action of the new federated parliament was not a declaration of democratic principles or a bill of rights, but the passage of the Immigration Restriction Act. It was this Act that was to form the legislative foundation of the exclusivist, racist “White Australia” policy.

The driving forces behind federation

The impetus for Australian federation came from far-reaching economic and political changes in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Not the least important factor were the growing regional ambitions of the rising Australian bourgeoisie, who, having conquered the continent, were looking outward to opportunities within the wider Pacific region.

In 1883, Queensland Premier Sir Thomas McIlwraith annexed part of New Guinea, a few hundred kilometres to the north, on behalf of the Queensland government. But he was forced to back down by the British government. A year later, Germany took possession of north-east New Guinea, whereupon the British government annexed neighbouring Papua as a British possession. The German move rankled in Australia for the next 35 years. That was why, at the Versailles Peace talks in 1919, Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes was in the forefront of those

demanding that German colonies be handed to the victorious powers.

The rebuff to Queensland's colonial ambitions in the New Guinea affair was regarded as an argument for federation. As one of Australia's “founding fathers,” Sir Henry Parkes, commented in 1890: “I have no doubt whatever in my mind that if there had been a central government in Australia, if Australia could have spoken with one voice, New Guinea would have belonged to Australia.” [1]

While the rising Australian bourgeoisie concluded that its interests might not always coincide with those of Britain, it nevertheless saw no essential conflict between its growing colonial appetite and the British Empire. On the contrary, it hoped the Empire would provide the overarching framework for Australian expansion into the Pacific region—amid concerns that, with the rise of other powers, the British were beginning to feel a certain strain. It was in this period that a pattern was established that has continued to this day: Australia extending support to the dominant imperialist power—first Britain, then the United States—as a kind of insurance policy for its own regional ambitions.

In the 1860s, the colonial settlers sent volunteers to fight alongside British troops and settlers in New Zealand against the indigenous Maori population. In 1885, forces were dispatched to assist the British expeditionary force in the Sudan. Between 1899 and 1902 some 16,000 Australian troops fought alongside the British in the Boer War in South Africa, and in 1900 the colonies deployed a contingent to help put down the Boxer Rebellion. As the historian Stuart Macintyre has pointed out: “All these four overseas wars ... began as local risings against foreign control, and in all four the Australians fought on the imperial side against national independence.” [2]

Internally, the push for federation came from the growing economic integration of the colonies and the advantages to be gained, especially for the manufacturing bourgeoisie, from a unified domestic market. The rail link between the states of New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria was established in 1883, the Victoria-South Australia link in 1887 and the NSW-Queensland link in 1888. Industries in the two main capital cities, Sydney and Melbourne, began to look outside their immediate surroundings for new markets, but inter-colonial tariffs remained an obstacle. The borders between the colonies were, in fact, somewhat artificial. The leading proponents of federation, such as Alfred Deakin, Charles Kingston and Henry Bourne Higgins, articulated the interests of the manufacturing bourgeoisie, who were keenly interested in the establishment of a unified internal market behind a high external tariff wall.

Another crucial factor in the push for federation was the perceived need to create a strong state apparatus to defend the interests of the ruling classes—both externally, but above all, internally—against the threat posed by the growing working class. Significant changes in the social structure

of the six colonies had taken place in the three decades before federation. Small-scale mining and prospecting had been replaced by deep-mining, requiring considerable capital. The small selectors had failed in their attempts to open up the land, which was now firmly in the hands of the big pastoralists and their financial backers. This meant that the majority of the population had no alternative but to work for wages, principally in state capitals and the larger regional towns.

By the 1890s, class divisions were becoming more apparent. The prevailing mythology is that Australia developed as some kind of classless society. In fact, class divisions were defined on the clearest possible basis. Since there was no admixture of birth or social station, they were determined entirely on the basis of money and property. While the government of NSW claimed that class divisions as they existed in Britain were “practically unknown,” a British observer commented: “It would probably be truer to say that in no country are there such strong class distinctions in proportion to the actual amount of difference between ‘the classes’. Betwixt the society worlds of Melbourne or Sydney and ‘the masses’ is fixed a social gulf that nothing but money can hope to bridge.” [3]

A strike movement erupted in the 1890s that assumed the form of an “industrial war.” It was fought out over the demand of the major employer groups for “freedom of contract” in opposition to the development of trade unions. At one point, when police were confronted with a group of strikers, their orders were to “fire low and lay ‘em out” if necessary.

While the employers emerged victorious, the strike movement led to a radicalisation of the working class. This, moreover, transcended colonial boundaries as shearers, waterside workers and seamen engaged in common struggle and began to form inter-colonial organisations. The propertied classes were obliged to respond by undertaking the construction of their own centralised organisations and, above all, a federated state. Cardinal Moran, an unsuccessful candidate for a New South Wales seat at the second constitutional convention, voiced some of their sentiments when he declared: “I regard Federation as the only means of preventing one or other of the colonies from jumping over to extreme socialism.” Pointing to the growth of the Labor Party, a conservative spokesman noted: “This growth can be removed for all time by the proposed federation of the colonies.” [4]

The labour movement and federation

Not surprisingly, given such views and the striking workers’ bitter experiences with the state apparatus, there was considerable opposition from the labour movement to the proposed federation. It was regarded as undemocratic, particularly due to the proposal to establish a Senate with equal representation for each state—a provision seen as inimical to democracy and designed to entrench powerful, wealthy interests.

A pamphlet published in 1891, commenting on the first constitutional convention, drew the connection between the move for federation and the recent strike struggles. The convening of the convention, it claimed, was “remarkable” because of the divergent interests of the colonial representatives: the NSW delegates supported free trade while the Victorian delegates backed protection. The real basis of federation, the pamphlet insisted, was the establishment of a federal army for use against the working class. “The first and principal object of Federation, as declared by the President of the Convention, is the formation of a Federal Army. This is the sub-structure upon which all else is reared. And what is it but a design on the part of the rich, for the oppression of the poor: a mighty engine in the hands of the employers for the coercion of Labour.” [5]

In February 1898, the radical Victorian labour magazine *Tocsin* noted that the federation, as proposed by the convention, was grounded on the “abominable heresy of states rights” which, it emphasised, was aimed at ensuring the ascendancy of a parochial minority and countering the growing movement for democracy.

“Under existing conditions,”

gradually arousing itself to a consciousness of the state of affairs that capitalism has brought about, and there is power in each province of Australia as it now exists, for the democracy to assert itself, to break down the class barriers that an arrogant plutocracy has built—but the Federal Constitution will change all that. There will be a strongly entrenched Senate established in the interests of parochialism, and it will be able to defy even an overwhelming majority of the people. Behind the Senate there will be a Federal Court, that will be as impudent an anachronism as the Supreme Court of the United States.” [6]

Speaking against the proposed federation in April 1898, the British dock workers’ leader Ben Tillet declared that “we shall not be prepared to hand our liberties at this stage of our development to either an irresponsible Governor-General, an irresponsible, but mischievous Supreme Court, or an irresponsible and unrepresentative Senate.” [7]

While the Labor leaders argued that, whatever their misgivings, the Labor Party should make a realistic appraisal of the situation and endorse federation, there was never broad support for the constitution hammered out by the conventions. Turnouts for the referendums that eventually ratified the constitution were lower than for parliamentary elections. Only in the state of Victoria did a majority of eligible citizens vote in favour. In other words, the majority of the population was either opposed or indifferent.

The low participation rate stands as testament to the fact that it was politically impossible for the rising Australian bourgeoisie to advance a platform for the new nation-state capable of winning broad support. They could not use the American Revolution as a model, because its goal was independence from Britain, embodying a repudiation of Empire. The Australian ruling class, however, entertained no such thoughts. It had no desire to obtain independence from the British Empire. Rather, it saw its future development as intimately bound up with the maintenance of the Empire’s global power.

Furthermore, the new ruling elites could make no appeal to the democratic ideals that had animated the American Revolution. This was ruled out because, as the struggles of the 1890s revealed, the nation had already become deeply divided. Any attempt to rally the people around a platform of democracy would immediately call into question the power of the bourgeoisie itself. That was why the constitution became, not a declaration of political ideals and principles, but a contractual arrangement between the British ruling class and its Australian counterparts for the handover of immediate political power. Accordingly, at the centre of the constitution there was no elaboration of democratic forms of government. Instead, there was the delineation of the powers of the new state and its relationship to the British Empire.

Australia became a nation on January 1, 1901, by act of the British parliament. The new Commonwealth was not even strictly sovereign. It had no power to make war or peace, could not make formal treaties, and its head of state was the British monarch, represented by the Governor-General. But these restrictions were not considered onerous in ruling circles. They expressed the views of the Australian ruling class on the British Empire.

To be continued

Notes:

- 1) cited in K. J. Mason, *The Experience of Nationhood*, p. 12
- 2) Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, p. 141
- 3) Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia*, Volume 4, p. 50
- 4) L. F. Crisp, *Parliamentary Government of Australia*, p. 12
- 5) Crisp, op cit, pp. 21-22
- 6) cited in Hugh Anderson ed., *Radical Arguments Against Federation*, p. 12
- 7) Anderson, op cit, p. 67

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