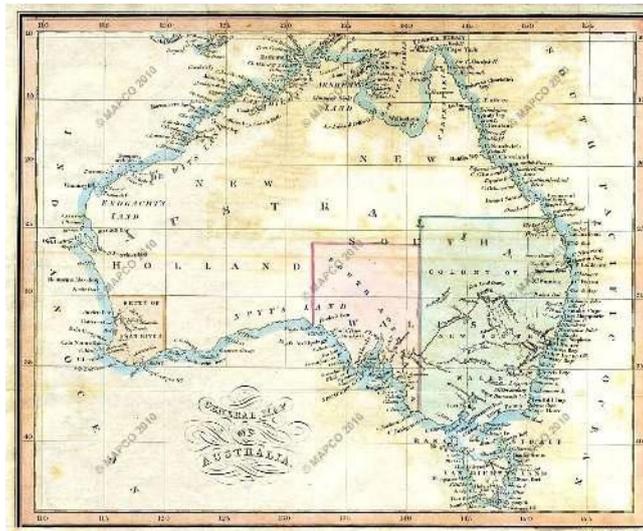




Australian
Nationhood
Foundation

The first hundred years



The first settlers found life to be extremely hard, but because they came from harsh backgrounds, they fortunately had the stamina to be able to tame the land and to build the foundation of the great nation Australia is today.

It was not long before the early pioneers started to explore the interior of this new land. They found that the huge landmass of just under three million square miles (7 million+ sq km) in area was mainly desert or land lacking sufficient water to be properly arable. It was thus that as the British settlements increased, they were all mainly on the coastal areas.

Governor Phillip's First Fleet of 1788 comprised 756 convicts and 550 freemen - including officers, sailors and marines and their families, all crammed into eleven ships. Whilst some died of hardship and many of the freemen returned to England, the white population expanded quickly within twenty years to over ten thousand.

They spread throughout the area, but mainly established agricultural enterprises around the eastern seaboard. Towns and then cities grew up to service these industries and by 1859 the Australian continent had been divided into the six colonies we now know as 'States'.

Because of the enormous distances between what became capitals in the new states, a central administration was obviously not practicable and in 1850, the British parliament passed the 'Australian Colonies Government Act' to enable parliaments in each of the colonies to be established, each answerable direct to London.

At first these colonies were very competitive and sometimes aggressive against each other, but towards the end of the nineteenth century railway and telegraph linked the states and made travel between them much easier and the idea of being 'Australian' began to be celebrated in songs and poems . With each colony taxing goods from other colonies, it made common sense to establish a common customs and taxation system.

Furthermore, the threat of invasion as Germany and Russia expanded their empires (particularly with a German settlement in New Guinea) also brought home the precarious situation Australia was in, being so far from the homeland of Great Britain halfway across the world and with the closest military support in India.

By the 1890s, the six colonial parliaments started to debate uniting into one nation.

Organising a nation

These debates led to *Constitutional Conventions*, the first of which, the Australasian Federation Convention, was held in Melbourne in 1890 and was attended by representatives from all Australasian colonies, including New Zealand.

In 1891, seven representatives from each colony met in Sydney as 'the National Australasian Convention'. This Convention established a sub-committee which was empowered with drafting a new constitution.

The committee comprised: Edmund Barton (from New South Wales), Andrew Inglis Clark (from Tasmania), Samuel Griffith (from Queensland), and Charles Kingston (from South Australia).

These representatives, who are now called our Founding or sometimes our Federating Fathers, drafted a document which, although based on the British Westminster system, also incorporated provisions from the constitutions of the United States, Canada and Switzerland.

In 1893 a decision was made to put the draft constitution to the Australian people at a referendum.

However, this did not occur immediately. In 1897 and 1898 there were two further Conventions and then referendums were held in all colonies, excepting Western Australia which at the time was still objecting to joining a union with the Eastern States, although it later held a referendum and joined into the new Federation. New Zealand, although originally involved in the early Conventions decided to go their separate way.

The referendums in the five states were passed and in May 1900, the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900* was passed by the British Parliament, and was signed by Queen Victoria on 9th July 1900, and so became law.

Today there is criticism that our Constitution was originally established by an Act of the British parliament, but this is because that was the only parliament which had jurisdiction over the Australian colonies and the authority to relinquish control of what became the Australian states which were united into the 'Commonwealth of Australia' with its own independent and sovereign parliament.

The Australian Constitution was therefore not a British creation but was specially drafted by Australian statesmen to suit the requirements of what was to become the brand new country of Australia. It was then voted upon and accepted by the Australian electorate of the time.

It was thus, on the 1st of January 1901, that the Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed in Centennial Park in Sydney and later that year, on the 9th May 1901, the first Commonwealth Parliament was opened in the Exhibition Building in Melbourne at which Edmund Barton, a drafter of the new Constitution, was elected as the first Prime Minister of Australia.

Because Australia was a new nation, it had no capital of its own. Provision had been made in the Constitution that the new capital should be "*in the State of New South Wales, and be distant not less than one hundred miles from Sydney*" and, after much deliberation, the present site of the Australian Capital Territory was chosen and a new city, called Canberra was built.

Twenty six years following Federation on the 9th of May 1927, the new Parliament House was opened by the then Duke and Duchess of York, later King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (the late Queen Mother).

In May 1988, sixty one years later, their daughter, Queen Elizabeth II, opened the new Parliament House in which parliament currently sits.

QUESTIONS:

What did the early settlers find when they explored the interior of Australia?

By 1859, how many colonies had been established in Australia?

What were the main reasons for the colonies to discuss uniting into a federation?

In what year was the first Australian Federation Convention held?

What nationality were the people who drafted the Australian Constitution?

Who voted to accept the new Constitution - the British people or the Australian people?

On what date was the Commonwealth of Australia proclaimed?

What was the name of the new capital of Australia?

© The Australian Nationhood Foundation