

**1891**

first Constitutional Convention to draft a federal constitution

1893

first 'people's convention' at Corowa

1897

delegates elected to a representative Constitutional Convention

1898-1900

referendums on the Constitution held in all colonies

1901

1 January - inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia

29-30 March - first federal election

9 May - opening of Commonwealth Parliament in Melbourne

1902

Commonwealth Franchise and Commonwealth Electoral Acts

1903

first federal election in accordance with Commonwealth law

For further information about the Australian Electoral Commission's Federation exhibition and fact sheets contact:

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AEC 2001

THE FIRST COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENT 1901

Overview

Once the Australian Constitution had been accepted by voters in the Australian colonies and enacted as law by British Parliament, the process of putting the new system of federal government into practice began.

The Australian colonies were now States of the Commonwealth of Australia, and the office of Governor-General represented the reigning monarch of Britain as Head of the Commonwealth. The first Governor-General of Australia, Lord Hopetoun, proclaimed the Commonwealth of Australia at a special ceremony in Centennial Park, Sydney, 1 January 1901.

It was also the Governor-General's task to commission an interim or caretaker ministry until the Australian people were able to elect their representatives to the newly created Commonwealth Parliament. These interim ministers, with Edmund Barton as Prime Minister, were sworn in as part of the inaugural ceremony at Centennial Park. Over the next months they organised the first federal election and made arrangements for the opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament.

The first federal election

On Friday 29 March and Saturday 30 (in Queensland and South Australia) voters took part in the first election of representatives to the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. Because there was as yet no federal electoral law, the election took place in accordance with the voting legislation in each of the States. This accounted for voting taking place on two different days as well as many differences in voting methods and rights. The *Review of Reviews* commented:

Perhaps there never was a more distracted election. The issue in each State was different ... again, each State followed its own electoral method, and the result was the strangest patchwork of suffrages and of systems... (20 April, 1901, p367).

One of the factors contributing to the confusion was that each State voted as one electorate for the Senate. As well as offering a very long list of candidates, Senate ballot papers required voters to cross out the names of the ones they did **not** want. The Review of Reviews reported that this led to as many as 31,000 informal votes.

Campaign issues in the first federal election had a strong local flavour but one that united candidates and voters nationally was the interest in restricting the immigration and employment of Asian and Pacific Island people. This was expressed as a desire for a 'white Australia'. Otherwise there were broadly three groups of candidates: those promoting Free Trade (Free Traders) those who wanted tariff barriers to support or protect Australian products (Protectionists) and those speaking for the interests and rights of working people (labour movement).

Members of Barton Ministry after first election¹:

Edmund Barton	Prime Minister	New South Wales	Protectionist
Alfred Deakin	Attorney General	Victoria	Protectionist
James Drake	Postmaster General	Queensland	Protectionist
John Forrest	Defence	Western Australia	Protectionist
Phillip Fysh	Without Portfolio	Tasmania	Free Trader
Charles Kingston	Trade and Customs	South Australia	Protectionist
William Lyne	Home Affairs	New South Wales	Protectionist
Richard O'Connor	Vice-Pres. Exec.	New South Wales	Protectionist
George Turner	Treasurer	Victoria	Protectionist

The opening of Parliament

The Duke of Cornwall and York (later King George V) opened the first Commonwealth Parliament in Melbourne on 9 May, 1901. Thousands of people watched the royal procession as it made its way through the streets of the city to the Exhibition Building where the ceremony was witnessed by 12,000 invited guests.

Immediately after the opening the new members of the Parliament made their way to Victoria's Parliament House in Spring Street. The Senate met to elect a president and the House of Representatives to elect a speaker. Detailed parliamentary business was left until 21 May.

The Commonwealth Parliament continued to meet in Melbourne until 9 May, 1927 when its own Parliament House was opened in Canberra. Until this time the Victorian Parliament met in the Exhibition Building.

A week of celebrations and festivities in Melbourne accompanied the opening of Parliament. As with the inaugural celebrations in Sydney, Federation arches were built in the streets of the city, and buildings were illuminated at night. There were firework displays, sporting events, dinners and conversaciones (evenings of programmed entertainment). School children displayed their skills in drill and maypole dancing. After Melbourne, the Duke and Duchess visited the capitals of the other States where similar celebrations took place.

¹ Some Ministers changed their portfolios during the term of the first Parliament