

GETTING IT TOGETHER

From Colonies to Federation



VICTORIA

Introduction



MUSEUM
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INVESTIGATIONS OF
AUSTRALIA'S JOURNEY
TO NATIONHOOD
FOR THE MIDDLE
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From Colonies to Federation

VICTORIA

Prior to British settlement in Victoria in 1834, it was estimated that the Indigenous population was around 30,000 people. By 1901, with the expansion of British settlement, the spread of disease and removal from their lands, the Indigenous people of Victoria had been reduced to a small and scattered population.

In July 1851, the same week that the colony of Victoria separated from New South Wales, gold was discovered at Clunes, north-west of Melbourne, followed by later discoveries elsewhere. Over the next 10 years, the population grew quickly. Thousands of miners arrived from all over the world. Victoria rapidly became a centre of industry and commerce. Melbourne's sudden growth and its grand architecture built along wide streets earned it a reputation as 'marvellous Melbourne'. The fine buildings included the Royal Exhibition Building, which was completed in 1880 to host the Melbourne International Exhibition. The first Commonwealth Parliament would sit in this building in 1901.

As sources of gold declined, more people drifted into Melbourne to find work or to set up businesses. In the 1890s, the colony suffered a depression. Banks failed, property prices fell and farmers struggled with a severe drought. In 1889, Henry Parkes, the Premier of New South Wales, made a speech in the northern New South Wales town of Tenterfield. He suggested that the time had come for Australians to create a united government for the continent. He believed that this could be done peacefully and without breaking connections with Britain. Parkes called for the leaders of all the colonies to attend a conference to draw up the plans.

Victoria's Australian Natives Association (ANA), established in 1871, supported Parkes' idea. The Association was a group of Australian-born men of British ancestry. They went on to organise and provide funds for the federation leagues that campaigned for the six Australian colonies to unite as the Commonwealth of Australia. When moves towards Federation stalled in the early 1890s, ANA members, such as Bendigo's John Quick, supported an informal people's conference and later a People's Federal Convention, both held in New South Wales, to get things moving again.

Prior to Federation, Victoria imposed intercolonial tariffs on manufactured items and agricultural products that came from other Australian colonies. Victorian farmers and factory owners argued that they needed protection from competition or their businesses would not

survive. But, as farmers became better established, some began to doubt the value of the tariffs since they increased the cost of the goods used for farming. However, they continued to support a tax on stock coming across the Murray River from New South Wales and Queensland.

Since Melbourne was the commercial and manufacturing capital of Australia, Victoria would benefit from gaining free access to the other colonies' markets under Federation. However, manufacturers were worried that a united Australia might not keep the tariffs that protected them from overseas competition. These considerations were used as reasons for and against Victorians getting behind the push for the six colonies to join together as the Commonwealth of Australia.

After many conventions – one of which was held in Melbourne – the issues were sorted out and an Australian Constitution was drafted. Referendums to vote on the draft Australian Constitution were held in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia in 1898. They succeeded, with the exception of New South Wales, where the quota of 80,000 'yes' votes was not reached. A second round of referendums was held in 1899 in the four colonies, and in Queensland. This time the referendums succeeded. Western Australia held its referendum in 1900, after it was clear that the eastern colonies would federate. Australians voted to accept Federation. On Commonwealth Day, 1 January 1901, all six colonies became States of the new Australian nation. They all welcomed Federation with special celebrations and ceremonies.

Melbourne was at the centre of the Federation celebrations on 9 May 1901 for the opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament at the Royal Exhibition Building. The Federal Parliament moved to Victoria's Parliament House where it continued to meet until it moved to Provisional Parliament House, now Old Parliament House, in Canberra in 1927.



Your tasks

For you to investigate

There are three themes for you to investigate. Each has information and activities to help you dig deeper into the story of Victoria's journey from colony to Federation.

People and Places

Investigate aspects of life in Victoria in the years before Federation, especially the 1880s and 1890s when there were many changes taking place in the colony.

Road to Federation

Investigate issues influencing opinions on Federation, why there were different points of view in Victoria, and the colony's final vote.

Celebrations and Futures

Investigate how Victoria celebrated Federation when it began, and how being part of the Australian Commonwealth continues to be celebrated today.