

GETTING IT TOGETHER

From Colonies to Federation

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Introduction



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INVESTIGATIONS OF
AUSTRALIA'S JOURNEY
TO NATIONHOOD
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Getting It Together: From Colonies to Federation has been funded by the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House.

Getting It Together: From Colonies to Federation – Western Australia

ISBN: 978 1 74200 097 8

SCIS order number: 1427627

Full bibliographic details are available from Curriculum Corporation.

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Published by the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House

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September 2009

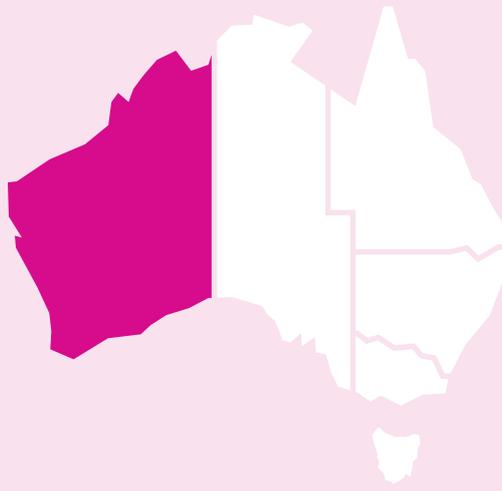
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From Colonies to Federation

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Until the 1820s, Western Australia's only permanent occupants were the Indigenous people who had lived in Australia for many thousands of years. European explorers sometimes came to the west coast of Australia during the 17th and 18th centuries, but they did not form any settlements. In the 1820s, however, British naval captain, James Stirling explored the land around the Swan River and recommended forming a colony there. The British Government agreed.

The colony was established in 1829, with James Stirling in charge. He was first appointed by Britain as Lieutenant-Governor, and then as Governor. The colony's main port was called Fremantle, after another British captain. The capital was named Perth, after a city in Scotland.

Initially, the plan was to have a colony entirely made up of free settlers. However, developing roads, towns, ports and farms was a huge task, and from 1850, convicts were brought in to assist with the work of building the colony. Even then, the population remained small, with approximately 1,000 Europeans. The colony was also extremely isolated because of its location far from the older colonies and their larger populations in the east.

Britain continued to rule Western Australia through a governor until 1890, when it gave the colony the right to have an elected parliament and its own constitution. The first election took place in that year. Only men who owned or rented property were allowed to vote. But, for the first time, the colonists were responsible for choosing who governed them. The leader of the new, elected government was John Forrest, the colony's first Premier.

The issue of Federation faced John Forrest's Government immediately. The Premier of New South Wales, Henry Parkes, believed that all the colonies of Australia should unite, or federate, to form a Commonwealth of Australia. Parkes had called for representatives of all colonies to attend a meeting, known as a convention, to discuss how a federal parliament would work and begin drafting an Australian Constitution. John Forrest took part in this convention, which was held in 1891. Further conventions were held in 1897 and 1898, and Forrest attended these as well.

The idea of the separate Australian colonies coming together to form one nation in the British Empire was vigorously and publicly debated in all six colonies. The thinking behind Federation was that nationhood would make the whole country stronger and have benefits for all colonies. The colonies would all be subject to the same federal laws, and they would all be represented in the Federal Parliament to have a say in running the nation. Also, they would all have increased opportunities for interstate trade and they would all be protected by a federal defence force. Most importantly, the people would be Australians, an independent and free people within the British Empire.

But, would Western Australia really benefit from Federation? Many people, including Forrest himself, were not sure. Uncertainty and disagreement about joining a federal system existed in other colonies, too. However, Western Australia in the 1890s was different from other colonies in a number of ways, and there were special reasons why different groups in the colony had conflicting views.

Western Australia was the last colony to decide whether or not it would accept Federation. The other colonies each held special votes or referendums in 1898 and 1899 – and in all of them the majority of voters said ‘yes’ to the Constitution Bill, accepting the new Australian Constitution. But, Western Australia did not have its referendum until the end of July 1900. By then, Australia’s Constitution had Britain’s parliamentary and royal approval. Arrangements for the new federal system were in place.

Finally, with Federation less than six months away, the people of Western Australia voted that their colony, too, would be part of the new Commonwealth of Australia. On Commonwealth Day, 1 January 1901, all six colonies became States of the new Australian nation. All of the old colonies welcomed Federation with special celebrations and ceremonies.



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 Western Australia’s journey from colony to Federation.

People and Places

Investigate key aspects of life in Western Australia in the years before Federation, especially the 1890s when there were many changes taking place in the colony.

Road to Federation

Investigate key issues influencing Western Australians’ opinions on Federation, why there were different points of view, and the colony’s final vote.

Celebrations and Futures

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