Federation

Australia became a nation on 1 January 1901 when six British colonies—New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania—united to form the Commonwealth of Australia. This process is known as federation.

Australia’s federation came about through a process of deliberation, consultation and debate, unlike many other nations that unified as a result of war or conflict. Federation only went ahead with the approval of the people in a referendum (vote of the people).
Reasons for federation

Before 1901 Australia did not exist as a nation. It was a collection of six British colonies which were partly self-governing, but under the law-making power of the British Parliament. The colonies were almost like six separate countries; for example, each had its own government and laws, its own defence force, issued its own stamps and collected tariffs (taxes) on goods that crossed its borders. The colonies had even built railways using different gauges, which complicated the transport of goods across the continent.

By the 1880s the inefficiency of this system, a growing unity among colonists and a belief that a national government was needed to deal with issues such as trade, defence and immigration saw popular support for federation grow. Sir Robert Garran, who was active in the federation movement, later reflected that the colonies were united by a combination of ‘fear, national sentiment and self-interest’.

Free trade

While tariffs provided the colonial governments with much revenue, they restricted trade and movement between the colonies. Tariffs increased the cost of goods and made it hard for manufacturers based outside a colony to compete with local producers.

Trade restrictions also inconvenienced travellers; the train journey between Melbourne and Sydney was delayed at the border in Albury while customs officials searched passengers’ luggage. Free traders were among the most vocal supporters of federation, arguing that it would strengthen the economy by abolishing tariffs and creating a single market.
Defence

Prior to federation, the colonies were ill-equipped to defend themselves. Each colony had its own militia consisting of a small permanent force and volunteers, but they all relied on the British navy to periodically patrol the vast Australian coastline. Increasingly, people feared the Australian colonies could be vulnerable to attack from nations such as Germany, France and Russia who had already colonised parts of the Pacific.

Australia’s position as a sparsely-populated continent close to Asia also gave rise to concerns that countries such as China and Japan, with their larger populations and greater military might, could overrun the colonies. Alfred Deakin, then Chief Secretary of Victoria, warned: ‘The Asiatic wave which has threatened to engulf us is only suspended for a short time, but if the colonies do not federate our comparatively trifling white population will be swept before it like a feather’.

The argument that a united defence force could better protect Australia was strengthened by a report released in 1889 by British Major-General Sir J. Bevan Edwards. It found that the colonies did not have enough soldiers, arms or even ammunition to adequately defend themselves. The report recommended a federal or centralised defence force be established.

Immigration

Today Australia is a multicultural nation; however, in the late 19th century many people wanted to maintain the British heritage of the colonies.

To some extent, this desire was prompted by concerns ‘cheap’ non-white labour would compete with colonists for jobs, leading to lower wages and a reduced standard of living. These anxieties stemmed partly from anti-Chinese sentiment dating back to the gold-fields of the 1850s. They also reflected resentment towards Pacific Islanders who worked for low pay in Queensland’s sugar industry.
Racial conflict was seen as an inevitable consequence of a multicultural society. It was felt a national government would be in a better position than the colonies to restrict and control immigration.

**National pride**

Colonists mostly shared a common language, culture and heritage, and increasingly began to identify as Australian rather than British. New South Wales Premier, Sir Henry Parkes, referred to this as ‘the crimson thread of kinship that runs through us all’. In fact, by the time of federation over three-quarters of the population were Australian-born. Many people moved between the colonies to find work and sporting teams had begun to represent Australia. In 1899 soldiers from the colonies who went to the Boer War in South Africa served together as Australians. The shift was apparent in contemporary songs and poems which celebrated Australia and Australians.

*Beneath our radiant Southern Cross
We’ll toil with hearts and hands;
To make this Commonwealth of ours
Renowned of all the lands*

From *Advance Australia Fair* by Peter Dodds McCormick

Australian troops, with a kangaroo mascot, onboard a ship bound for South Africa, c.1900

Australian troops, South Africa c.1900. During the Boer War, soldiers from the six colonies served together as Australians

Sporting union predated federation. In 1877 an intercolonial cricket team represented Australia in the first test match against England. In this cartoon the umpire tells the Australian cricket team: “You’ve done jolly well by combination in the cricket field, and now you’re going to federate at home. Bravo, boys!”

Australian troops, with a kangaroo mascot, onboard a ship bound for South Africa, c.1900

Australian War Memorial, 129018

Australian troops, South Africa c.1900. During the Boer War, soldiers from the six colonies served together as Australians

Australian War Memorial, P00295.035

A sketch published in *The Argus* newspaper in 1898 urged the colonies to federate

Punch, National Museum of Australia. Photo Dragi Markovic

Sporting union predated federation. In 1877 an intercolonial cricket team represented Australia in the first test match against England. In this cartoon the umpire tells the Australian cricket team: “You’ve done jolly well by combination in the cricket field, and now you’re going to federate at home. Bravo, boys!”
A great national government for all Australians: the Federation Conventions

Convinced the colonies would be stronger if they united, Parkes gave a rousing address at Tenterfield in 1889 calling for ‘a great national government for all Australians’. Parkes’ call provided the momentum that led to Australia becoming a nation. Aware popular support was not enough, Parkes lobbied his fellow premiers to back federation.

On 6 February 1890 delegates from each of the colonial parliaments and the New Zealand Parliament met at the Australasian Federation Conference in Melbourne. The conference agreed ‘the interests and prosperity of the Australian colonies would be served by an early union under the crown’. It called for a national convention (formal meeting) to draft a constitution for the Commonwealth of Australia.

1891 Federation Convention: drafting a constitution

The first National Australasian Convention was held in Sydney in March and April 1891, and was attended by delegates from each of the colonies and the New Zealand Parliament. During the convention, Edmund Barton, who was to become Australia’s first Prime Minister, made famous the catchcry ‘a nation for a continent and a continent for a nation’.

The convention spent five weeks discussing and then composing a draft constitution, which became the basis for the constitution we have today. While Queensland Premier, Sir Samuel Griffith, is largely credited with drafting the constitution approved by the convention, it was based on a version circulated by Tasmanian delegate Andrew Inglis Clark. Clark was inspired by the federal model adopted by the United States (US), which, like Australia, faced the challenge of bringing together self-governing colonies as a nation.
Under the draft constitution the colonies would unite as separate states within the Commonwealth, with power shared between a federal Parliament and state parliaments. This would give Australia a federal system of government. The federal Parliament would have responsibility for areas which affected the whole nation, such as trade, defence, immigration, postal and telegraphic services, marriage and divorce. A High Court would interpret the constitution and resolve disputes between the federal and state governments.

Federal Parliament would comprise the Queen (represented by the Governor-General), the Senate and the House of Representatives. The two houses would have similar law-making powers – laws could only be passed or changed with the approval of both houses.

The power to make and manage federal law was to be divided between the Parliament (who would make the law), the Executive (who would implement the law) and the Judiciary (who would interpret the law).

The House of Representatives was to be elected based on population (with members representing electorates made up of approximately the same amount of people) while the Senate would provide all states with equal representation. States with larger populations would have more electorates and greater representation in the House; the composition of the Senate was designed to ensure that these states did not dominate the Parliament.

The phrase ‘Washminster’ has been used to describe our system of government, as it blends features of the British Parliament and US federal model.

The delegates took the draft constitution back to their colonial parliaments for consideration and approval. Faced with an escalating economic depression, the parliaments lost enthusiasm for federation. Meanwhile, its greatest champion, Parkes, retired from politics and the succeeding New South Wales governments did not share his passion for federal union.
The people’s conventions

While the colonial parliaments put the issue of federation to one side, it had fired the public’s imagination. Groups such as the Australian Federation League in New South Wales and the Australian Natives Association in Victoria continued to push for federation.

In 1893 a people’s conference was held in Corowa, New South Wales, which agreed ‘the best interests, present and future prosperity of the Australian colonies will be promoted by their early federation’. The Corowa Conference agreed to a proposal from Victorian delegate John Quick, that:

- the colonial parliaments pass an act to allow the direct election of delegates to a new federation convention which would decide on a draft constitution
- a referendum be held asking the people to ratify (approve) the draft constitution.

A special premiers’ conference was held in Hobart in 1895 at which most of the colonies agreed to Quick’s proposal. Queensland, fearing federation might mean the loss of its Pacific Islander labour force, decided not to take part. By this stage, New Zealand had also opted out of the federation process.

The following year the Bathurst Federation League, frustrated by the inaction of the colonial parliaments, held a second people’s conference at which over 150 delegates renewed calls for a new federation convention. Finally, in March 1896 elections for convention delegates were held in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia.
**1897–98 Federation Convention**

The second National Australasian Convention met three times during 1897 and 1898 in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne, and used the 1891 draft constitution as a starting point for deliberations. The convention comprised elected and appointed representatives from all the colonies except Queensland.

One of the most significant changes made to the draft constitution related to the Senate. Senators would be directly elected by the people of each state voting as one electorate, rather than, as originally proposed, being selected by the state parliaments. The new draft also established the size of the two houses, so that the House of Representatives would be roughly twice the size of the Senate; in other words, there would be two members of the House for every senator.

Given that the Senate and the House of Representatives would have almost identical law-making powers, the delegates realised a provision was needed to break deadlocks between the two houses. Under this provision, disagreements could be resolved by dissolving both houses of Parliament and calling an election. The newly-elected Parliament could then vote on the issue. If this failed to break the deadlock, it could be put to a vote in a joint sitting of both houses.

The convention also agreed to a clause proposed by the Tasmanian Premier, Sir Edward Braddon, to return to the states three-quarters of the revenue collected by the federal government through customs and excise. ‘Braddon’s Blot’, as it was dubbed by its critics, was designed to appease the economically-smaller states which were worried they would be worse-off under federation.

On 16 March 1898 the convention agreed to the constitution in the form of a draft bill to Constitute the Commonwealth of Australia. After being endorsed by the colonial parliaments, the electors in each of the six colonies were then asked to approve the constitution in a referendum.

**First referendum: 1898**

In June 1898 referendums were held in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. Australia was the first nation to take a proposed constitution to the people for approval (Switzerland had held a referendum to approve changes to its constitution in 1874).

Enthusiastic campaigns were waged urging people to vote either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Anti-federation groups argued federation would weaken the colonial parliaments, and interstate free trade would lead to lower wages and a loss of jobs. New South Wales Premier George Reid publicly criticised the proposed constitution, yet said he would vote for it in the referendum, earning him the nickname ‘Yes-No Reid’.

The referendum was passed in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. However, while a majority of voters in New South Wales voted ‘yes’ to the referendum, it did not attract the 80 000 ‘yes’ votes set by the New South Wales colonial parliament as the minimum needed for it to agree to federation. Queensland and Western Australia, concerned federation would give New South Wales and Victoria an advantage over the less-powerful states, did not hold referendums.

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**Australia was the first nation in history to take a proposed constitution to the people for approval**
‘Secret’ premiers’ conference
In January 1899 the colonial premiers met privately to find a way to bring about federation. Western Australian Premier John Forrest chose not to attend.

In order to win the support of the New South Wales and Queensland colonial parliaments, the premiers made some further changes to the draft constitution. Among these was the decision the Australian national capital would be established within New South Wales but at least 100 miles (160.9 km) from Sydney.

They also agreed the federal Parliament would only be required to return customs and excise revenue to the states for the first ten years of federation, rather than it being a permanent arrangement.

Second referendum: 1899
Between April and July 1899 referendums were again held in Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania, with the result that all four colonies agreed to the proposed constitution. Western Australia still refused to take part.

The following September, Queenslanders endorsed the constitution by the narrowest of margins, with just over 54 per cent voting ‘yes’. Queensland had waited to see whether New South Wales would federate before it held the referendum. The Brisbane Courier welcomed the result and urged all Queenslanders to now unite under ‘The Coming Commonwealth’:

Australia is born: The Australian nation is a fact. Now is accomplished the dream of a continent for a people and a people for a continent. No longer shall there exist those artificial barriers which have divided brother from brother. We are one people – with one destiny.

The Brisbane Courier, 4 September, 1899.

Constitution Act
The constitution had to be agreed to by the British Parliament before federation could proceed. In March 1900 a delegation, which included an observer from Western Australia and a representative from each of the other five colonies, travelled to London to present the constitution to the British Parliament.

The Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act was passed by the British Parliament on 5 July 1900. Queen Victoria signed the Act on 9 July 1900. It was one of the last acts of parliament made during Victoria’s reign.
Western Australia joins the federation

Three weeks after the Australian Constitution became law in Britain, a referendum was finally held in Western Australia at which an overwhelming majority of voters agreed to federate. In fact, the ‘yes’ vote outweighed the ‘no’ vote by a two-to-one margin.

Once it realised the other colonies would go ahead without it, the Western Australian colonial parliament reversed its opposition to federation. Public opinion in Western Australia had also shifted. By 1900 there was widespread support for federation, particularly among the large number of new settlers from the east who had moved to the colony as a result of the gold rush.

Nationhood

The Commonwealth of Australia was declared on 1 January 1901 at a ceremony held in Centennial Park in Sydney. During the ceremony, the first Governor-General, Lord Hopetoun, was sworn in and Australia’s first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, and federal ministers took the oath of office.

Australians welcomed nationhood. Up to 500 000 people lined the route of the federation parade that travelled from the Domain to Centennial Park, and about 100 000 spectators witnessed the ceremony that followed.
Across Australia people celebrated with parades, processions, school pageants, firework displays, sporting events, ‘conversazioni’ (discussion evenings) and special dinners. Decorations and elaborate federation arches festooned the main streets and buildings were lit up at night. In Sydney the celebrations continued for a week.
First Parliament
The first federal elections for the new Parliament, which consisted of 36 senators and 75 members of the House of Representatives, were held on 29 and 30 March 1901. Eighty-seven of the newly-elected parliamentarians, all of whom were men, had served in their colonial parliaments, including fourteen who had been colonial premiers. Several had also participated in the drafting of the Constitution and were active in the push for federation—ten had been at the 1891 Federation Convention and 25 attended the 1897/8 Convention.

The first Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia was opened at noon on 9 May 1901 by the Duke of Cornwall and York (later King George V). The lavish ceremony, which was attended by over 12,000 guests, took place in the Exhibition Building, Melbourne. The Argus reported that:

The ceremony was marked by the splendor and solemn impressiveness which befitted its historic importance. By the hand of Royalty, in the presence of the greatest concourse of people that Australia has seen in one building, and with splendid pomp and ceremonial, the legislative machinery of the Commonwealth was yesterday set in motion.

The Argus, 10 May 1901.

In his address, the Duke told the gathering:

It is His Majesty’s [King Edward VII] earnest prayer that this Union, so happily achieved, may under God’s blessing, prove an instrument for still further promoting the welfare and advancement of his subjects in Australia, and for the strengthening and consolidation of his Empire.

Members of parliament were sworn in by the Governor-General and then proceeded by foot and horse-drawn carriage to Victoria’s Parliament House in nearby Spring Street. The Senate then met at 1.10 pm in the Legislative Council chamber and the House of Representatives assembled at 2.30 pm in the Legislative Assembly chamber for the first session of federal Parliament. The Victorian Parliament House remained the temporary home of federal Parliament until 1927, while a new national capital and Parliament House was built in Canberra. During this period, the Victorian Parliament met in the Exhibition Building.

In Melbourne the opening of Parliament was marked by two weeks of celebrations. The enthusiasm with which Australians greeted federation and the first federal Parliament demonstrated the nation was eager to unite as ‘one people’.

Victoria’s Chinese community joined the Federation celebrations in Melbourne in May 1901, with a procession featuring two Chinese dragons. One of the dragons is shown here at the corner of Spring and Bourke Streets.
## Federation timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>Sir Henry Parkes, Premier of New South Wales, urges the colonies to federate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>The Australasian Federation Conference recommends a national convention be held to draft a constitution for the Commonwealth of Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>The first National Australasian Convention is held in Sydney and drafts a constitution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-1894</td>
<td>Economic depression means the colonial parliaments lose interest in federation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>A people’s conference in Corowa, New South Wales, urges the colonial parliaments to hold a new convention to decide on a draft constitution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>A special premiers’ conference agrees to hold a new federation convention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>A second people’s conference in Bathurst, New South Wales, renews calls for another federation convention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897-98</td>
<td>The second National Australasian Convention meets in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne, and agrees to the constitution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>Referendums are held in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania to approve the constitution. It is endorsed by all but New South Wales.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>In January the premiers hold a secret meeting and agree to several changes to the constitution. Between April and July referendums are held in South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania at which a majority vote ‘yes’ to the bill. In September Queensland voters endorse the constitution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>In March a delegation travels to London to present the constitution to the British Parliament. On 5 July the British Parliament passes the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act. On 9 July Queen Victoria signs the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act. On 31 July Western Australia holds a referendum at which an overwhelming majority of voters approve the Constitution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>On 1 January the Commonwealth of Australia is proclaimed in Centennial Park, Sydney. On 29 and 30 March the first Commonwealth elections are held. On 9 May the Duke of Cornwall and York (later King George V) opens the first Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia in the Exhibition Building in Melbourne.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results of the referendums on the draft bill to constitute the Commonwealth of Australia

1898: While a majority of voters in each colony voted ‘yes’, the referendum in New South Wales did not attract the 80 000 votes set by the New South Wales colonial parliament as the minimum needed for it to agree to federation. Queensland and Western Australia did not hold referendums.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>71 595</td>
<td>66 228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>35 800</td>
<td>17 320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>11 797</td>
<td>2 716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>100 520</td>
<td>22 099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>219 712</strong></td>
<td><strong>108 363</strong></td>
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</table>

1899: Majorities were achieved in all colonies.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>107 420</td>
<td>82 741</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>38 488</td>
<td>30 996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>65 990</td>
<td>17 053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>13 437</td>
<td>791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>152 653</td>
<td>9 805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>377 988</strong></td>
<td><strong>141 386</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1900: Result of the referendum held in Western Australia on 31 July 1900.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>44 800</td>
<td>19 691</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### More information

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  exhibitions.senate.gov.au/pogg/index.htm

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