

1850's to 1901

The latter part of the nineteenth century was known as the “golden era” as pastoral interests continued to grow and the mining industry became more and more important to Australia’s growth. Transport was also improving with railways snaking out around the land and more and better roads being built in between growing regional centres. Perth was linked to the eastern cities by telegraph in 1877. Better communication helped break down colonial barriers and rivalries.

Eventually the economic expansion slowed and the 1890’s spiralled into an economic recession leading to a financial crisis. Every area of the economy was severely affected and thirteen banks closed their doors in 1893. Interest rates soared and prices for agricultural produce fell by 50 per cent.

Self-Government

New South Wales was able to establish its own government in 1855 which meant that it could manage its own affairs while still being part of the British Empire. Tasmania, South Australia and Victoria followed suit in 1856. Queensland, being a very new state was able to form government right from its inception in 1859 and Western Australia followed in 1890. London retained control of defence and foreign affairs until Australia came of age and formed the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901.

Urban Growth

Life in Australia was settling down and towns were growing into cities. By the 1880’s most people living in Australia had been born here and a large percentage of them lived in urban areas. Australia’s population in 1901 at the first census after Federation was 3.7 million and almost a million of them lived in Sydney and Melbourne.

By the end of the nineteenth century things were changing. More people were employed in industries such as building, manufacturing and the professions and fewer people were being employed in primary industry and mining. The drift to the cities has continued, unabated, up to the present time.

Birth of a Nation

A spirit of nationalism had been rising in the separate colonies for some years and better transport and communication had brought them into closer contact with each other. A federal government was needed to bring under one umbrella the important matters such as defence. By the end of 1899 the people of five of the six colonies had voted in referendums in favour of Federation.

Thus it was that on 1 January, 1901 the Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed and a nation was born. The first federal parliament, with Edmund Barton as Prime Minister, was opened in Melbourne on 9 May, 1901 by the Duke of Cornwall and York, later King

George V. The parliament continued to sit in Melbourne until new parliament buildings were completed in Canberra in 1927.

At this time, although the nation had a constitution, it did not have a flag. A competition was held and the winning design was a Union Jack on a blue background with a large six-pointed star representing the six Australian states and five stars representing the Southern Cross. The new Australian flag flew over the dome of Melbourne's Exhibition Building for the first time on 3 September, 1901.

The National Capital

Before federation, thought had been given to where a new national capital should be situated. It became clear that none of the state capitals would be accepted. The federal Constitution Bill accepted by all states before federation set out rules about where the national capital should be sited. The site was to be determined by parliament and that site had to be "within territory which shall have been granted to or acquired by the Commonwealth and shall be vested in and belong to the Commonwealth and shall be in the State of New South Wales." The area had to be at least one hundred square miles and not less than one hundred miles from Sydney. It would be called The Australian Capital Territory.

Many sites were put forward and argued about and feelings ran high but the 'stand-out' site was in the Yass-Canberra district which included the 'Canberry' Limestone Plains. The place was sometimes called 'Kamberra' which appeared to be the name of the Aboriginal tribe of that area. By October 1909 agreement was finally reached for this site and the nine-year battle was over. The necessary legislation was passed and received royal assent by the end of the year. A competition for the design of the capital was then instigated and eventually won by an American, Walter Burley Griffin.

The official ceremony to name the National Capital was held on Capital Hill on 12 March, 1913. At noon, Mr King O'Malley, Minister for Home Affairs handed Lady Denman a gold case with the chosen name and she told the excited crowd, "I name the Capital of Australia, Canberra", putting an equal emphasis on all syllables.

It was 1927 before Parliament House was built with a small town growing up around it. Up to that time federal parliament had been meeting in Melbourne but on 9 May, 1927 there were great celebrations as the Duke and Duchess of York opened and established parliament in Canberra.