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WHITE CITIZENSHIP: NATIONHOOD AND RACE AT FEDERATION

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This paper explores the centrality of racial concerns at the time of Federation. Whereas citizenship was arguably Federation's greatest gift in a general sea of public apathy and moral and philosophical banality, the gift was very selectively bestowed. Although white men predictably benefitted above white women, the latter too received pronounced political rights which advantaged them largely over their sisters in other Western societies. Overall, Australian citizenship bestowed civil, social and political rights upon its white inhabitants well in advance of comparable societies elsewhere. Yet at the same time, it disadvantaged its remaining Aboriginal inhabitants more emphatically than in other white settler societies; as well as introducing, as Federation's first task, the most thoroughly exclusionary migration legislation in the world in relation to race. The gap engendered between the outstandingly advantaged whites and the heavily deprived and penalised non-whites is a dramatic demonstration of the intensity of institutional racism in Australia at this time. □ *Citizenship, Australian Federation, racial discrimination, Aboriginal rights, women's rights, immigration restriction.*

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I begin this paper with a small confession. Although I am both an Australian historian and co-author of one of the recent spate of books on the Federation period,¹ I must admit that I find the subject of Federation, insofar as it conjures up images of bewhiskered men, meeting in cedar-panelled rooms to parry and thrust about tariffs, customs barriers and fine constitutional tunings, tedious reading. In preparing this paper, I digested John Hirst's new book on the Federation movement, *The Sentimental Nation*. Although the writer does his best to enliven the heavy proceedings by mentioning such things as Alfred Deakin's penchant for spiritualism and seances in guiding the national future; and the fact that the first Governor-General, Lord Hopetoun, could hardly acquaint himself with Australian sentiment because 'his whole time must have been occupied in attending to his bowels'² – the overall effect as we meander through one Convention after another is that of a dull and plodding journey.

Ordinary people at the time also found it hard to produce any head of enthusiastic steam upon the Federation issue. A crowd of between 100,000 and one quarter of a million attended the ceremony proclaiming the new Commonwealth on 1 January 1901 in Centennial Park, Sydney, but they could scarcely raise a cheer. 'There was a meagre cheer, and Australia was born', the *Bulletin* noted; and *Truth* newspaper, under the headline 'Listless Apathy', claimed:

There was not a single spontaneous cheer in the park. The crowd was curious, orderly, apathetic. The school children cheered when ordered. The pressmen cheered to encourage others to do so ...

Most treated the moment as just another picnic in the park, to which was added the distant sight of a nation being born.³ A little earlier that day in the Federation procession, Billy Hughes had organised a ride-by of mounted shearers from the Australian Workers Union, who, he said, symbolised 'the real Australia'. Bystanders were unimpressed and grumbled that the trade union section of the parade was far too long. What the crowd really wanted to see were the Imperial troops – Queen Victoria's Hussars, the Imperial Life Guards, Bengal Lancers and Gurkhas – and these were loudly cheered.⁴ Australia had troops fighting on two Imperial fronts at this point, in South Africa and China, and these military engagements, particularly the South African (or Boer) War, were the events which really captured the public's imagination, rather than the Federation movement itself.

That night at the State Banquet in the Sydney Town Hall, attended by most of the leading men in the Commonwealth (Fig. 1), there was far more emphasis on eating, and especially on getting drunk, than on listening to the speakers. In fact, most of the guests were so drunk that they refused to listen at all. Hirst writes: 'They went on talking to each other and calling the waiters to fill their glasses so that the speakers could not make



FIG. 1. Invitation to the State Banquet held in Sydney's Town Hall on 1 January 1901, an all-male affair in which women were only spectators. The invitee, A.S. Cowley, was a north Queensland sugar-planter and politician. (John Oxley Library, Brisbane)

themselves heard'. The great hubbub continued when Sir Samuel Griffith (one of the architects of the Constitution) rose and attempted to present the toast of the evening to the new Commonwealth. No-one paid attention. The chairman twice pleaded for silence. Edmund Barton (the newly-appointed first Prime Minister) pleaded for silence. To no avail, and so the toast crumbled. Perhaps there might have been more decorum in the Hall if some of the wives of the great men had been interspersed among them around the tables. But the food and drink at this banquet were for men only. The women were bidden to the feast only to watch the unseemly display from the galleries above. They sat, probably with rumbling stomachs, and merely observed.⁵

Apart from cheers for the Imperial military display, the only other time that any marked degree of enthusiasm was offered was several days later at Kurnell on Botany Bay, when some 3,000 white Australians watched a re-enactment of Captain Cook's landing. It was the only nod to history in the entire Federation proceedings. The lively audience responses were triggered by the

presence of a group of Aborigines brought down from Fraser Island by Archibald Meston, Queensland's Southern Aboriginal Protector. The Aborigines advanced towards Cook's landing party and then ran away when muskets were fired at them.⁶ The *Bulletin* wrote that the watching crowd was once again 'more or less tight' (i.e., drunk):

Some of Meston's tame niggers were brought down from Queensland to be the ferocious Aborigines and these gesticulated wildly as Cook landed before fleeing for the predilection of the ... 3,000 people ... shrieking with laughter under big umbrellas.

It was, the *Bulletin* concluded, the 'worst show of Commonwealth week'.⁷ It is noteworthy that, apart from being utilised here largely as figures of ridicule and cowardice, Aboriginal people had no place in the Federation celebrations. They were fast becoming an after-thought, an anachronism, a 'dying race', an embarrassing reminder of less tranquil times.

Indeed, the entire spectacle of Federation was predicated upon an acceptance of the universality of whiteness, and that whiteness was overwhelmingly British. In Sydney's Federation



FIG. 2. A float in Brisbane's Federation procession of 1 January 1901, featuring Britannia flanked by her daughter Australia, a maiden in virginal white. This contribution to the all-white procession was from the Australian Natives' Association, an organisation of native-born white men. (*The Queenslander*, 12 January 1901)

procession, the Italians were the only other ethnic community to enter a float, while the Germans and French offered triumphal arches. In Queensland, the festivities were even more restrictive, invariably excluding Melanesians, Aborigines and Asians (Fig. 2). At Charters Towers, the *Mining Standard* noted that the local procession was led by 'four niggers in fancy dress' riding a decorated four-seater bicycle. These were obviously included again as figures of ridicule, though it is not clear if they were Aborigines or whites in 'nigger minstrel blackface'.⁸ At Rockhampton, the Chinese community marched with music, banners and a dipping and weaving Chinese dragon; but when they reached the Rugby Union Grounds, they alone were refused entry, ostensibly because they had horses pulling their float. So did every other float, however! A spokesman for the Chinese, William Gee, wrote to Rockhampton's *Morning Bulletin*:

The Chinese of Rockhampton ... did their utmost to please the public ... They feel greatly insulted at the manner in which they have been treated and in future ... will not take part in any processions.

My countrymen were so disappointed at your so-called British fair play that they wished to make a bonfire of all their banners and flags ... I am very grieved that such a successful turnout terminated so disrespectfully towards the Chinese.⁹

So, in these snapshots from the Federation celebrations, what can we deduce in relation to the subject of this paper, white citizenship? First, to deal with the matter of boredom and apathy. One interpretation of this could be that we have to look particularly hard for expressions of an independent spirit of Australia in the Federation proceedings. Only one of the founding fathers, Andrew Inglis Clark, was a confirmed republican. He was an admirer of the Italian revolutionary republicans, Mazzini and Garibaldi, but Inglis Clark, although having significant input into the Constitution, was a small, shy, ineffectual man who was a poor public

speaker.¹⁰ The rest of the founding fathers, and indeed the majority of the population, put Britain first. 'We are children dependent on a superior people', Samuel Griffith wrote.¹¹ Representatives of the English governing class, church and military dominated the official proceedings. Toasts were warmly drunk to the British Queen. The British anthem was sung and the British flag flown. In the procession the excited cheers were induced by a sense of the military presence of the British Empire passing by. The institutions were British; the heritage was British; a unifying appeal to Britishness dominated proceedings.¹² The poet William Gay wrote of:

sacred ties of one dear blood
... One people mighty, serving God.

The historian Manning Clark stated: 'No-one seemed able to say who Australians were or what they stood for ...'¹³

Yet, expressions of Australian-ness were also in the air at this time, even though they were not represented in these official sanctums. Here are some words from a book by W.H. Lang entitled *Romance of Empire: Australia*, and written around 1907:

We look much at the heavens in this 'bush' of ours ... And the days are beautiful and warm, with the air like champagne, and the world is wide still, and black care has lost the horseman in his gallop through the bush, frightened by the ringing crack of his whip. And [if we were not here] we would miss lying awake in the soft summer moonlight and, when everything was deathly still, hearing suddenly ... far away across the tree-tops, the sigh of the coming south wind. You hear it growing louder and louder, until from a sigh it has grown to a roar, and the trees wave their arms wildly, and the wind passes over us from the ocean ... Yes, these and a hundred things beside we would miss were we *re-exiled* from this land of our exile, where everything has been *so real*, leaving the old world of five-and-twenty years ago 'a wraith', a film, a memory ...¹⁴

This seems to embody a spirit which one fails to discover in most of the stilted and often pompous words which usher in Federation. Federation rides in on a wave of bad poetry, and when the poems do represent Australian-ness, some strange things begin to happen. First, the Australian past is rigorously falsified. Historical realities are ignored or subverted by literary licence. John Farrell wrote (as if he had never heard of convicts or Aboriginal massacres):

We have no records of a by-gone shame
No red-writ histories of woe to weep.
... God set our land in summer seas asleep
Till His fair morning of her waking came.¹⁵

The theme of denying a conflictual colonial past or a violent frontier history (which, at the time of these writings, was still ongoing in various parts

of Australia) was manifest throughout Federation poetry:

... We have no songs of strife,
Of bloodshed reddening the land

wrote Banjo Paterson in 'How the Land was Won'. Fanny Lyndhurst sang at various Federation meetings around Melbourne:

We're a land that claims
no blood-stained roll of war ...¹⁷

It was as if forceful dispossession of Aborigines had not registered or mattered. Henry Parkes, the Father of Federation, published a book of poems which contained one giving a chilling account of the murder of an Aboriginal boy by settlers on the Hawkesbury in 1794. The boy was tied hand and foot, dragged through a fire, then thrown into a river and shot. Yet in a following poem Parkes could still conclude that the emblem of Australia:

... bears no stain of blood and tears
Its glory is its purity ...¹⁸

When it came to such troublesome matters, therefore, of facing up or 'fessing' up, a kind of cultural schizophrenia descended. The new nation had to be represented as virginal, young and white, no matter what had previously occurred here. For whiteness was equated with purity, strength, morality and all the other virtues. What was written was part of the art of deliberate forgetting – forgetting convict history and conflict history – and silencing the unspeakable. George Essex Evans wrote:

Free-born of Nations, Virgin white,
Not won by blood nor ringed with steel...

and school children composed essays on such subjects as 'Australia: A Land of Peace, Order and Freedom'.¹⁹ There was an implied insistence that no blood had been spilt in arriving at 1901, even though thousands of colonists and tens of thousands of Aborigines had been killed or wounded since 1788 in the Anglo-Aboriginal land wars. The chosen symbol of the new nation was a young, white, virginal Goddess. Sigmund Freud had a word to say about such denialism when he later wrote:

It is universally admitted that in the origin of the traditions and folklore of a people, care must be taken to eliminate from the memory such ... motive[s] as would be painful to the national feeling.²⁰

The dissociation and apathy popularly promoted by Federation may also be related to the point that it is hard to discover in its rhetoric associated expressions of grand human ideals. There was to be no Declaration of Independence, no Bill of Rights. In the Constitution, nothing was incorporated about freedom of speech and association, the rule of law or civil rights.

Edmund Barton privately observed, 'God means to give us this Federation'; and the poet, William Gay saw it as 'a necessary step in the progress of civilised man'.²¹ But these were hardly the kind of expressions calculated to ring down the ages.

When historians sift through the Federation story to find its most resonant moments, they usually arrive at reflections about ideals of citizenship which Federation promoted. Citizenship, as Bob Birrell points out, involves: 'the rights and duties attached to the role one fills as a participating member of a political community'. He shows how, in Western nations, the advance of civil rights had begun in the eighteenth century; of political rights (such as manhood suffrage) in the nineteenth; and of social rights in the twentieth. Social rights accompanying Federation in Australia led to a marked expansion of citizens' well-being as the State intervened to introduce reforms in education, health, workplace relations and social welfare. Both Laborites and Liberals espoused the advancement of 'Citizenship Ideals' and 'National Efficiency' in an attempt to create, in Birrell's words, 'a national community marked by status equality as expressed in "democratic manners"'.²² It was, says Hirst, 'a civic nationalism, concerned with the state and the principles and values it should protect and espouse...'. The changes introduced, especially in the realm of social welfare, work-place relations and health, made the decade of the 1900s one of the great reform eras in Australian history.²³ Of the changes, one might highlight legislation to introduce arbitration and to control hours of work as well as certain workplace conditions: the introduction, through the Harvester Judgment of 1907, of the concept of a fair wage system – the social right to a dignified wage; old age and invalid pensions, provided as a right not as a charity; and maternity bonuses for married white mothers.²⁴ These reforms brought Australia briefly to the global forefront as a social welfare nation. The infant mortality rate, for instance, fell from 107 per 1,000 live births in 1902 to 71.7 per 1,000 in 1912 – a rate nearly half that of Britain at the time. Living standards in Australia approached the best in the world. 'In no other Western nation at the time', writes Birrell, 'was there any parallel to the extent of this reform...'.²⁵

But there were certain crucial strings attached to this matter of Australian citizenship, and here we reach the nub of the problem. Let us return for a moment to those white ladies who attended the Sydney Town Hall banquet but were only

allowed to occupy the gallery seats. They are symbolic of the point that Federation was substantially an all-male affair. There were no columns of domestic servants, 'shop-girls', 'barmaids', wives or mothers marching in the Federation procession as there were of seamen, miners and shearers. No woman did any of the public speaking.²⁶ And while the Harvester Judgment of 1907 supported a 'fair and reasonable' basic wage to sustain 'a normal human being living in a civilised community', it was implicitly understood that that 'normal' human being would be a man and that all working men were to receive 'a family wage', whether they had a family or not. Women workers, on the other hand, were to obtain only around half of what was expected to sustain a normal, civilised human being.²⁷ White women were still effectively second-class citizens, largely confined to the home to clean and reproduce, and subsidiary to the male as his dependant and servicer. That is where the maternity allowance comes in, to boost a flagging birthrate against the threat of Asian invasion.²⁸ Yet, by the same token, the first Federation decade also witnessed the State granting to white Australian women the most advanced political rights for females in the world. Granting the vote to women had begun in South Australia in 1894 and ended in Victoria in 1908. The Commonwealth enfranchised white women for national elections in 1902. Thus Australian female citizens were enfranchised before the great suffragette campaigns in Britain had even hit full stride.²⁹ So we find here, in Federated Australia, white citizens receiving what were probably the most advanced welfare reforms in the world and white Australian females, although less well served with social rights in comparison to white men, receiving the most advanced political rights in contrast with women elsewhere.

The operative adjective here is again 'white', for Australian citizens were chosen upon biological grounds. Those Aborigines who were brought down from Queensland to run away from Captain Cook were supposed to be 'British' subjects, too, just like any other colonists. But they had never been treated as other British subjects were. And now, because they were believed to be in the process of conveniently 'vanishing' from the planet, they were not to be counted as citizens in the Commonwealth census. Aboriginal men had been debarred from voting in Queensland as early as 1885 and this would lead on to Aboriginal disenfranchisement throughout



FIG. 3. Early inmates of Barambah Aboriginal Reserve, Queensland, founded in 1901, some of Australia's second-class citizens. (John Oxley Library, Brisbane, neg. no. 112309)

the future Commonwealth. Indeed, the same Federal Act which enfranchised white women disenfranchised Aborigines.³⁰ But even more pertinently, these Aboriginal people had been stripped of most of the civil and democratic rights accorded to other citizens. They had no property rights and their familial rights, both conjugal and custodial, were not observed. Civil, political and social rights were largely denied them. They had very little protection at law. In many places, it was still open season upon them. Entire societies and more than ninety per cent of their people had perished. Around two-thirds of their languages were all but gone. They could be murdered with minimal legal interference against the white culprits. Their women were the sexual targets of predatory white males; their children were habitually stolen from them; they worked for the whites who had taken their lands in slave-like capacities, barely surviving on handouts. When whites spoke about them, they referred to them as either the lowest human beings on earth or the most humanlike of animals.³¹

What does it mean in relation to citizenship rights to have one's humanity, one's personal and

social protection stripped away so totally? As the British philosopher Jonathan Glover points out in his recent book *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, when people are denied normal human claims and it is suggested that they are not even human – when they are literally 'thought out of the human race' – it leaves them open to all manner of atrocity. Respect for human dignity is neutralised and moral restraints in dealing with fellow humans, which usually protects them against barbaric treatment, can be withdrawn. Dehumanisation produces an abandonment of respect and dignity. Moral restraints and human responsibilities towards such people are eroded by degrees. In the twentieth century, the ultimate consequence of such thinking was the death camp.³²

The Aborigines who ran away from an actor playing Captain Cook in 1901 had largely come from Bogimbah Creek on Fraser Island, which had been established in 1897 to receive those forcibly removed from their tribal homelands all over Queensland. By 1901, Aborigines had been taken there from thirty-five localities throughout the colony; and by 1901, Bogimbah Creek had become a death camp.³³

Whereas white Australian citizens, as British subjects, were receiving advanced privileges in accord with their whiteness, Aboriginal British subjects were being denied human rights on account of their Aboriginality and treated more as hunted animals, chattel labour or State wards. The segregative processes introduced in Queensland in 1897, at the same time as Federation Conventions were ratifying a draft Constitution for the Commonwealth, were later extended to Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia. So, the Australian State was offering its white citizens one of the 'best deals' in the world in terms of citizenship rights, while its remaining indigenes were being handled at least as inhumanely and regarded more negatively than any other indigenous people by a government in a white settler society (Fig. 3). Nowhere else on earth were indigenous people so totally denied land rights by their conquerors; and upon the Western scientific hierarchies of race, Aborigines were invariably placed on the bottom rung, dangling just above the anthropoids. When 'Protector' Archibald Meston developed the scheme for Aboriginal segregation and labour control, which would eventually be implemented across much of Australia, he first looked at American Indian Reservations as a model. But he soon abandoned

that model because he found that Amerindians had too many rights, particularly land rights. As Anna Haebich notes in her recent book, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families, 1800-2000*:

While vast sums of money and energy were committed to building up and moulding a white Australian citizenry, planning for Aborigines was moving in very different directions. They were to be excluded from the package of rights, benefits and responsibilities extended to white Australian families. The Aborigines' situation ... was unique within the Australian population. They were stripped of legal rights accorded to other 'British subjects' and subjected to special legal controls.³⁴

Finally, let us revisit the almost unrelieved whiteness of the Federation celebrations, and especially those unhappy Asians, the Chinese at Rockhampton willing to take part but ultimately being told 'to go home'. Political and public opinion at the time was clear that everything Australia stood for was based on the premise of race. Federation was all about 'the indissolubility of a race', the *Bulletin* stated in 1898. A decade later it would alter its masthead from 'Australia for the Australians' to 'Australia for the White Man' in order to welcome the visit of the American Great White Fleet, arriving as a show of force against Japanese naval pretensions in the Pacific. It would retain that masthead into the 1960s.³⁵ Alfred Deakin, the future Prime Minister, pointed out in 1900 that one of the central thrusts of Federation was 'to make Australia, as far as possible a white man's country'. And H.B. Higgins, in the Parliamentary debates which ushered in the White Australia policy, stated simply, 'if Australia has any national question, this is it'. The theme of racial purity was one of the prime motivating forces of Federation (Fig. 4).³⁶

'White Australia' as a concept had dug deep roots into the colonial psyche. The idea of preserving the country 'as a place where the English race shall be spread from sea to sea unmixed by any lower caste' had been enunciated as early as 1841; while the phrase 'White Australia' had first been coined by the highly xenophobic journalist, William Lane, in the Brisbane *Boomerang* of 1888.³⁷ But it was again in that epochal year 1897, when Aboriginal segregation was being introduced in Queensland and the Constitutional Conventions were meeting in the south, that the Australian Premiers, gathering in London for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, were given a formula for effecting a White Australia policy that London and the Crown could live with. It would be administered to racially unwanted



THE RALLYING CRY--"A WHITE AUSTRALIA."

FIG. 4. Race was a crucial issue in the first federal election of March 1901. All major political parties supported 'a White Australia'. (*The Worker*, 16 March 1901)

migrants in the form of a bogus educational or Dictation Test of fifty words, delivered in such a fashion and in such a language that the non-white applicant would be bound to fail. It was called the Natal Formula. It was a clever, though morally dubious, means of achieving a desired outcome. Somewhat like bowling the last, decisive ball of a cricket match underarm.

So the White Australia policy was built upon this phony Dictation Test; as the policy, in turn, was viewed as the foundation stone of the new nation. It was the first issue to which the Commonwealth Parliament attended and it was, said Alfred Deakin in 1903, 'a reasoned policy ... by which the whole of our social, industrial and political organisation is governed'. The Dictation Test, he re-affirmed in 1905, was applied 'not to allow persons to enter the Commonwealth but to keep them out'.³⁸ Indeed, by virtue of the *Immigration Restriction Act* (1901) which embodied the Test, Australia in the early twentieth century was 'keeping them out' more resolutely than any other white Western nation at

the time. It had been the first country in the world to enforce a blanket restriction against all non-white people, utilising, as one historian puts it, 'a legal curtain of awesome effectiveness'.³⁹

Furthermore, within Australia itself after 1901, the new advanced health and welfare legislation specifically excluded all non-whites. They were also excluded from the choice of naturalisation, from voting and from land holding. Their employment opportunities were severely circumscribed. In Queensland alone there were more than 30 separate Acts passed restricting occupational freedom, and mostly employing the bogus Dictation Test to do so.⁴⁰ As one Western Australian parliamentarian exclaimed in 1903:

Australia ... must be a nation of white men. What were the rights of these coloured people? They had no rights.⁴⁰

What, overall, are we really observing when we review this matter of white citizenship? It is full of contradictory impulses. On balance it would seem to reflect the actions of the early Australian State in pursuing leading world standards for its white citizens. At the same time it ensured policies which both denied indigenous Australians their rights and banned other non-whites from residency or citizenship rights more effectively than any other Western nation at the time. As Mary Kalantzis recently noted, 'They are not separate stories. It is all part of the one story.'⁴¹ It is hard to find another contemporary Western historical precedent for a contrast in political treatment that is so stark. And it should not escape notice that what is displayed here is the *quintessence* of racism: the munificent over-privileging of one group and the bleakest dis-privileging of other groups upon the basis of their ethnicity or race. All this was done to create upon an isolated island continent a 'pure race' society, a distinct biological community extolling its excellence within a single, discrete geographical entity. Australians, with their bloodlines proudly British and their stock genetically nourished by a superior environment, it was believed, were destined to become 'the pick of the most energetic and superior races of mankind'.⁴²

In 1901, an official Commonwealth pamphlet trumpeted:

Ours is not the federation of fear, but the wise, solemn, rational federation of a free people [representing] the development of a higher system of morality than the world ever saw before ...⁴³

But there was probably as much to fear in Federation, as there was to feel so high-mindedly moral about. It all depended upon who you were,

the colour of your skin, your gender and where you found yourself placed in this brave, new, Antipodean world.

ENDNOTES

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