

The Making of 'Australia's Noblest Son'

Explanations of Edmund Barton's pre-eminence as leader of the Federation movement have customarily focussed on two factors: his assiduous devotion in building up grass-roots support in New South Wales in the years preceding the referenda of 1898 and 1899, and his performance as leader of the Federal Convention in 1897-98.

Few would challenge La Nauze's verdict that it is his performance at the Convention 'that ultimately justifies his claim to the respect of posterity',¹ but the earlier claim is more problematical. Reynolds in his biography of Barton puts the case unequivocally. In this version Barton, having resigned from the Dibbs ministry in December 1893 and lost his parliamentary seat at the 1894 election, devoted himself whole-heartedly to taking the cause of Federation to the public at large:

Under the auspices of the Federation League Barton, after he resigned from the Dibbs Ministry, became a missionary for Federation. The frustrations and defeats of his last two years in Parliament left him with a burning, almost religious faith in its cause. During the next three years it is recorded that he addressed nearly 300 meetings in New South Wales alone. He visited other colonies, and he considered that the total number of addresses he gave was over one thousand. No meeting or group was too small for an audience.²

It is an inspiring portrait of a crusade, and since Barton topped the poll for delegates to the 1897-8 Federal

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Convention, it would be easy to deduce that this was the outcome of a colony-wide grass-roots campaign; but there are difficulties. Nearly thirty years ago D. I. Wright, researching among the Dowling Collection in the National Library of Australia, came to the conclusion that the League had not been a particularly effective pressure-group, coming to the fore only when public opinion was already alert to the issue of Federation, and lapsing into comparative inactivity at other times. The years 1895 and 1896 were notably low in achievement until the Bathurst People's Convention of

November 1896, itself stimulated by the imminence of the 1897-98 Convention negotiated by George Reid with his fellow Premiers.³ My own investigations⁴ into the rural press of 1895-96 reveals very little activity of the kind described by Reynolds. Nor was Barton in a position to take the road whipping up zeal for the cause. Out of Parliament, with no official position and no outside source of funding, he was going through a phase of severe personal financial difficulty and had a legal

practice to nurse. He was still addressing meetings when opportunity offered, but some at least were ill attended and nearly all appear to have been held in Sydney and its suburbs. It was significant that at the election of delegates in 1897, rural districts (outside the special case of the Riverina) showed a lower turnout than Sydney and the large provincial towns.⁵

So if Reynolds' crusade is largely fictitious, and the ultimate success of the Federation movement in New South Wales owed little or nothing to Barton's barn-storming between 1894 and 1897, how did the legend arise? The answer

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1 J. A. La Nauze, *The Making of the Australian Constitution*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1972, p.280.

2 J. Reynolds, *Edmund Barton*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1948, pp.97-8.

3 D. I. Wright, 'The Australasian Federation League in the Federal Movement in New South Wales, 1893-1899', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society*, 57, 1, p.61.

4 Research carried out by Helen McCulloch and subsequently by myself.

5 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 March 1897.

would seem very largely to lie with the propaganda campaigns which accompanied the New South Wales Federation referendum in April-June 1898 and the subsequent contests which Barton fought to re-enter the Legislative Assembly, first against Reid in the King division of Sydney in July, and then at the Hastings and Macleay by-election in September 1898.

Barton's credentials as founder of the Federation League were unchallengeable. While the legislation to endorse the 1891 Convention's draft constitution was still before the New South Wales Legislative Assembly Barton had gone down to the Murray Valley border country in December 1892 with the influential local member, his cabinet colleague William Lyne. This visit resulted in the formation of the first Australasian Federation Leagues at Corowa, Albury and several other centres on both sides of the Victorian border. At the end of July 1893 the Corowa conference, at which Dr John Quick's formula of a second popularly elected convention was adopted, came as a direct result of these initiatives.⁶ Earlier in the same month Barton convened a meeting in Sydney with the intention of setting up a central League with a co-ordinating function.

Beset on the one side by the mistrust of Parkes, Wise, and other free-traders and on the other by an almost successful radical takeover of the foundation meeting, the League got off to a slow start. Despite Barton's urging few branches were established in the rural districts outside the original strongholds in the central and eastern Riverina, and suburban meetings were seldom well attended.⁷

The Barton who had to resign from the Dibbs ministry in December 1893 for accepting a retainer against the railway commissioners seems a long way from the figure of national stature in 1898. When, shortly after his resignation, he complained of public apathy towards Federation the *Bulletin* ran a cartoon of Barton dozing in his club chair as a monument to apathy.⁸ He lost his seat at the 1894 elections, and in 1895 was notable mainly as a supporter of Parkes's ill-starred attempt to challenge Reid in his own constituency. Meanwhile Reid as Premier had picked up the Corowa Conference's formula of a popularly



Edmund Barton as Leader of the Australasian Federal Convention, 1897-98 (Mortlock Library of South Australiana).

elected second convention and persuaded the other Premiers to accept it. When elections were held in March 1897 to select New South Wales delegates to the Convention it might have been expected that Reid would top the poll and that Reid would be chosen as leader by the Convention. Instead, it was Barton. Reid gracefully seconded Barton's nomination as leader, and was enabled as a result to play an effective role as watchdog for New

South Wales interests, but the suspicion remained that he was chagrined at falling over ten thousand votes behind Barton at the poll, and that he would have liked the leadership of the Convention.⁹

No explanation of Barton's success seems entirely convincing. In the public eye he was distinguished by a single-minded advocacy of Federation, and, out of office and Parliament, was spared the task of balancing the issue of Federation against other priorities. Between 1891 and 1897 he had also built up a sympathetic network with prominent federationists elsewhere in Australia, especially Deakin in Victoria, Downer and Symon in South Australia, and Griffith in Queensland. But despite a promising start the Federation Leagues had not developed into an irresistible pressure-group, and Barton had not shown himself an adroit tactician in promoting the cause. Perhaps it was simply that while outside Parliament he could be regarded as 'king over the water'. By mid-1896 the *Bulletin* was speculating on his return to politics: 'Ranks at present divided will, it is assumed, close up at his magic call.'¹⁰ When he stood for election as a Convention delegate the press took it for granted that he would be one of the successful candidates. His triumph was achieved without lavish expenditure. The *Sydney Morning Herald* hailed him as 'indisputably the strongest and ablest' of the federationists, while on the Western Australian goldfields the *Murchison Times* wrote: 'it is a distinct tribute to sterling worth and ability that "Toby" Barton should have received nearly ten thousand votes more than any other candidate.'¹¹ His reputation

6 Barton was not present at Corowa, but see *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December 1892; R S Parker, 'Australian federation: the influence of economic interests and political pressures', *Historical Studies*, 4, 13, 1949, pp.22-23.

7 For comments on poor turnouts, New South Wales, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol 80, p.2254, p. 2383; Barton to Dowling 2 October 1894, Dowling MSS, NLA 47/269; *Daily Telegraph*, 13 November 1894.

8 *Bulletin*, 13 January 1894.

9 See comments by 'Ithuriel', *Argus*, 10 January 1920; La Nauze, op. cit., pp.108-9; Sir Josiah Symon, 'The Dawn of Federation', Symon papers, NLA 1736, Box D1.

10 *Bulletin*, 20 June 1896.

11 *Murchison Times*, 9 March 1897.

was real enough, but its origins call for further exploration.

Barton's performance at the Adelaide session of the Convention was widely praised. It was, wrote the *Adelaide Register*, 'distinguished by great ability, in admiration for which one may fairly overlook certain little defects in tact and temper. The sun has spots, but his brilliancy obscures them.'¹² 'His sincerity was never in question,' wrote, his fellow-delegate, J. H. Carruthers, 'and in the Federal Convention he commanded a wholehearted respect from every member of it.'¹³ Manning Clark has suggested that at the same time Reid was losing ground in the eyes of his fellow-delegates:

So while Barton, Deakin, Kingston and Forrest were finding they had something indefinable, something intangible, in common, George Reid went on enjoying his role as ring-master of the federal circus. Meanwhile the combination which would keep what he coveted almost forever out of his reach was coming into being before his eyes.¹⁴

It was not as simple as that. In May 1897 Reid nominated Barton to pilot the draft constitution through the Legislative Council, and there Barton found himself confronted by anti-Federationists whose amendments were so drastic that he eventually walked out of the chamber in despair. His national reputation might be rising, but Barton had yet to demonstrate political effectiveness in New South Wales. During the Sydney and Melbourne sessions of the Convention he further consolidated his standing as an architect of compromise, but at a price which Reid and Lyne, the leaders of the two main political parties in New South Wales, found difficult to accept. They were dismayed at the 'Braddon blot' which transferred three-quarters of the customs and excise revenue to the States. They disliked the system of Senate representation which enabled the smaller States to out-vote the two-thirds of Australia's population living in New South Wales and Victoria, and were unhappy about the Senate's powers. They

wanted the federal capital to be in New South Wales, if not at Sydney. Lyne in consequence became an opponent of the proposed Federal Constitution, while Reid's support was so hedged around with qualifications that he would be forever caricatured as 'Yes-No' Reid. It was at this point, rather than through any interpersonal relations during the sessions of the Convention, that Reid jeopardised his place among the heroes of a federated Australia.

Barton in some respects had the simpler task. When the proposed Federal Constitution was submitted in June 1898 to the voters of New South Wales, he campaigned on the slogan: 'The Bill, the whole Bill, and nothing but the Bill.' He could concentrate on explaining the advantages of Federation to his audiences, and he could be seen as the pre-eminent spokesman for a united Australia. Under, the inspiration of the 'Yes' campaign during April and May 1898 his oratory improved, becoming less elaborate and more convincing in exposition. He coined aphorisms: 'A nation for a continent, and a continent for a nation.'¹⁵ His repartee, while never quite up to Reid's, developed a new dexterity. In the public eye he became the spokesman for Federation. At that year's Commem, the Sydney University graduation ceremony, the anti-Federationist chancellor, Normand MacLaurin, looked on with a frosty eye as the undergraduates sang to the tune of 'There is a Tavern in the Town':

Oh, Georgie Reid sits on a rail, on a rail,
His speeches are a fearful wail, fearful wail
But Toby Barton kno-o-ows the ropes,
And on him we will pin our hopes.
We're the boys for federating, you should
hear us all debating¹⁶

In the wake of the reactions to his 'Yes-No' speech Reid kept a low profile during the referendum campaign. He made only a few major speeches, each time stressing the need for a cautious approach and damping down zeal for Federation at all costs. This fed Barton's

doubts about his sincerity, but it also left Barton unchallenged as the speaker most in demand throughout New South Wales. 'If Mr Barton could come up the river' said a Northern Rivers citizen, 'the voters would poll to a man for union.'¹⁷ But there were far too many requests for Barton to fulfil and although O'Connor and Wise worked hard as substitutes, the first choice was always Barton. In mid-May the Grafton Federal League warned that hundreds of votes could be lost through apathy, 'but those who are able to judge feel assured that if the people here were addressed by such a man as Mr Barton we could materially assist in making up the 80,000' (i.e. the quota needed for a valid 'Yes' vote).¹⁸

CONVENTIONISTS.—No. 1.



BARTON.

Edmund Barton
'Quiz' 18 March 1897
(Mortlock Library of South Australia)

¹² *Register*, 24 April 1897.

¹³ Sir Joseph Carruthers, 'Autobiography', pp.19-20, Mitchell Library, MSS 2914.

¹⁴ C. M. H. Clark, *A History of Australia: The People Make Laws*, vol V, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1981, p.147.

¹⁵ At Annandale: *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 1898.

¹⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 April 1898.

¹⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 May 1898.

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 May 1898.

In his speeches Barton began to claim a special legitimacy from having topped the poll and having acted as leader of the Federal Convention. By citing the federal body as a source of authority Barton was challenging Reid's status as Premier of the senior colony. Cynics might suggest that this marked the start of jockeying for the Prime Ministership of the forthcoming Australian Commonwealth. Barton consistently disclaimed ambition for high office, but he cannot have been unaware of the improvement in his public standing. Increasingly he was prepared to negotiate with the Premiers of the other Colonies as an equal.

This emerged after the referendum results were known. South Australia, Tasmania, and Victoria all returned substantial 'Yes' majorities, but in New South Wales the 'Yes' vote was not enough to reach the 80,000 minimum prescribed by the Colony's Parliament. Reid at once communicated with the other Premiers proposing a conference at which amendments to the draft Constitution might be framed in order to render it more palatable to the voters of New South Wales. Barton at first urged the Premiers to accept no compromise, and Kingston of South Australia and Braddon of Tasmania readily agreed. But the Victorian Premier, George Turner, thought it would do no harm to negotiate, and Barton realised that an uncompromising stance on the draft Bill was unlikely to win over waverers. He declared his support for three of the points which Reid listed for negotiation: the site of the federal capital, the elimination or revision of the 'Braddon blot', and a change in the formula for resolving deadlocks between the Senate and the House of Representatives. Kingston and Braddon protested about this volte-face, but accepted Barton's judgment that these changes were necessary to secure Federation.¹⁹

It was against this background that Barton decided at the general election in July 1898 to challenge Reid in his own constituency, the King division of Sydney. To judge by the

reports of the campaign in the Sydney press the contest focussed on one issue: was Reid or Barton the better qualified to negotiate terms securing from the other Colonies a more equitable form of Federation for New South Wales? Barton hardly bothered to enter into domestic politics. The fiscal issue could be left in abeyance until Federation was achieved. He traduced Reid as the unscrupulous 'Yes-No' wobbler, whose heart was not in the cause and who would demand such impossible terms that the other Premiers would be alienated and Federation fail. Reid presented himself as a business-like negotiator, a friend to Federation, but not at any cost, who could parley with his fellow-Premiers as men who each wanted the best possible deal for his own colony but would accept the outcome of hard bargaining. He portrayed Barton as one who, in his over-eagerness for Federation, would disadvantage New South Wales by yielding too much. Both caricatures had an element of truth in them, exaggerated by much repetition. It was in this election that Barton's propaganda began to picture him as a symbol of Australian nationhood. An admirer presented him with a silver matchbox inscribed: 'To the first Australian', and Reid jibed that 'Barton was such a good Australian that he made a bad New South Welshman'.²⁰ What soon emerged was a clarity that the voters expected the Federation issue to stay alive. A *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter on polling day was surprised listening to many impromptu debates among the crowd, 'to find what a grip of the great national question has been obtained by all standards and conditions of men'.²¹

Reid defeated Barton by 761 votes to 651, but three of his cabinet ministers lost their seats and the ministry's majority, even with Labor support, was reduced to a handful. Barton emerged with an enhanced image in the public eye. For many it was he, and not the doubting Lyne, who was the real leader of the Opposition. Within weeks an obliging

back-bencher resigned the Hastings and Macleay seat to make room for Barton. He was opposed by Sydney Smith, Reid's former Minister for Agriculture, who campaigned on his respectable record as one who understood the needs of farmers better than the urban Barton, too wrapped up in the Federal cause to attend properly to local needs. In reply Barton's campaign managers pulled out all the stops in extolling the statesmanlike qualities of their candidate. It was during this campaign that he was first dubbed 'Australia's noblest son', according to Reynolds, who tells a story of the fence - it must have been a big one - daubed with the slogan in six-foot letters:

'AUSTRALIA'S NOBLEST SON AND
GREATEST ORATOR WILL
ADDRESS THE ELECTORS AT
PORT MACQUARIE'.²²

As at the King division election his propaganda told the tale, remembered with advantage, of earlier crusading for Federation. 'Who went from town to town in every corner of New South Wales and exhorted his hearers to understand the question and read and studied the question to impart information to them?'²³ A special supplement to the *Macleay Argus* presented Barton as 'The Federal Leader'. Here the legend of the Federal movement reached its apex:

After Sir Henry Parkes in his declining years had lighted the torch it was taken up and carried through the country by Mr Barton. He was at the time neither a Minister nor a member of parliament. A private individual, one of the people, he took up the cause and made it popular. Touring the country he taught the electors the meaning and significance of nationhood ...²⁴

To rub in the point that Barton was no professional politician, the article recalled that the 1897 poll for delegates was headed 'not by the Premier, not the man who had made a trade of politics, but the man who had awakened the electors to a knowledge of the feelings latent in their own hearts'.²⁵ It is on the basis of such election rhetoric that the

19 Barton MSS, NLA 51/1/287 to 51/1/303, especially Kingston to Barton 11, 22, and 22 June 1898 (287-97, 299) and Barton to Kingston 21 and 22 June 1898 (292 and 298).

20 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 and 25 July 1898.

21 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 July 1898.

22 Reynolds, op. cit., p.125.

23 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 July 1898.

24 Supplement to *Macleay Argus*, 17 September 1898.

25 *ibid.*

lean years of the Federation League between 1894 and 1896 were transformed, somewhat disingenuously, into a mighty saga of consciousness-raising.

Barton won the by-election, and Lyne stepped aside for him as Opposition leader. While Labor remained staunch to Reid, however, there was no hope of displacing him. In the end it was Reid who met the other Premiers in January 1899 and obtained concessions for New South Wales. The hostility of the Legislative Council still had to be overcome. Barton swung his support behind Reid, and as the *Bulletin* put it: 'the spectacle – rare in Australia, not uncommon in England of the Premier being kept in office by the Leader of the Opposition for the good of the country, was last week witnessed in N.S.Wales.'²⁶ When the referendum was submitted afresh to the voters of New South Wales, Reid and Barton stumped the country in tandem, and the result was the conclusive 'Yes' vote which brought New South Wales into a Federation which would have been unworkable otherwise. In September, without great reluctance, Barton resigned as leader of the Opposition. Lyne resumed his place and at once won over the Labor party, so that the Reid Government fell and Lyne became Premier.

Barton probably believed that his national standing did not depend on

leadership of a New South Wales political party, and might in fact be compromised by it. Perhaps he did not expect that Lyne, a doubter about Federation, would be interested in moving into the Commonwealth Parliament. Having consolidated his national and international reputation as leader of the delegation to London which successfully negotiated the passage of the Commonwealth bill through the British Parliament, Barton late in 1900 confidently expected to be commissioned as first Prime Minister. As the incoming Governor-General, Lord Hopetoun, approached Australia Barton was taking soundings with those whom he wanted in his cabinet. Hopetoun, as is well known, surprised everyone by inviting Lyne as Premier of the senior colony to form the first Commonwealth ministry.²⁷ If he believed he was acting on the precedent of Canada in 1867, he was mistaken; the Premier of Ontario at that time was a nonentity, and the commission had gone to Sir John Macdonald, who as an architect of Canadian confederation combined much of Reid's shrewdness with Barton's inspirational qualities. More likely, Hopetoun was acting on advice from the outgoing Governor of New South Wales, Lord Beauchamp, who recommended that as a compliment Lyne should receive the first invitation; he would decline, and suggest that Barton should be sent for. But Lyne accepted, and it took three days of fraught negotiation before he threw in his hand

and Barton was summoned.

Reid always asserted that Hopetoun had behaved correctly. If he had still been Premier of New South Wales he would have expected the call, and it was right that Lyne as senior Premier should be commissioned. This advice was not disinterested, for if Lyne had gone ahead and formed the first Federal ministry it would have been easier for an Opposition led by Reid to displace him.²⁸ But it would not have been possible for Barton to figure as the predestined appointee to the Prime Ministership without the build-up to his reputation which accompanied the 1897-98 Federal Convention and the subsequent referendum campaigns. To his very real achievements in those years there was added the myth of the lonely crusader for Federation in the earlier 1890s. This myth originated in reality, but was inflated, and in the process gave credibility to an image of Barton as a statesman who was not as other politicians, but had provided leadership outside the normal scufflings of the political system. Barton was always a man of the middle way, and would not have felt uncomfortable with this apolitical image; but it would be over-cynical to suggest that he deliberately manipulated the image to foster his ambitions. As Oliver Cromwell, who should have known, observed: 'No man climbs so high as he who knows not where he is going'.

²⁶ *Bulletin*, 18 March 1899.

²⁷ J. A. La Nauze, *The Hopetoun Blunder*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1957.

²⁸ Sir George Reid, *My Reminiscences*, Cassell, London, 1917, p. 240.