

# Our Federation Journey

## 1901 - 2001

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## Topic Twelve - Regional Victoria and Federation

*The 150 delegates who leave this Conference, returning to their homes in all parts of this colony to report its proceedings, will, I trust, go back each of them filled with zeal and bearing the fiery-cross of Federation. Every branch should be stimulated into action, until ... all your members unite to awaken this colony to its duty.*

**Alfred Deakin at the Annual Conference of the Australian Natives Association in Bendigo, 1898.**

While the political movement for Federation was gaining momentum in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, regional Victoria was undergoing an enormous transformation. Over the period many more people settled in rural and regional areas. Agricultural innovation, better transport, government policy and financial assistance, all resulted in greater productivity from the land, especially from wheat, dairying and irrigation. This meant that Victoria could export more produce around Australia and overseas. Most farmers therefore supported Federation, which would abolish the tariffs that made exporting to other colonies expensive and difficult.

Regional towns that had an intensive farming base or where exporting produce was an important part of the economy continued to grow. New country towns appeared around Victoria as more land was opened up for smaller scale farming.

### **Agricultural innovation**

There were many innovations in agriculture during the years leading up to Federation. The landscape changed drastically, as more people settled and attempted to make a living from farming. Agricultural land generally became more productive during this time, as farmers and agricultural scientists developed methods more suitable to Australian conditions. However, many farmers suffered great hardship before achieving success, and some were forced to give up farming altogether. As there was more produce available for export, the issue of customs duties and the need for Federation became more urgent.

Mechanical strippers, reapers and winnowers made harvesting wheat easier. In 1885, Hugh Victor McKay began marketing the new stripper-harvester, later known as the Sunshine Harvester. It was so popular that by 1901, 500 a year were being manufactured at his factory in Ballarat, and were being exported throughout Australian and overseas.

Victorian wheat production increased from 34 million bushels between 1861 and 1870 to 111 million bushels between 1881 and 1890, not only because of better machinery, but also because more land was being cleared. At the end of the nineteenth century, new varieties of wheat became available, which were better suited to Victorian conditions. In 1902, William Farrer's new variety, Federation wheat, was introduced and increased substantially the amount of wheat produced in Australia. It was the most popular variety of wheat in Australia for many years.



Stripping wheat at Nyallo Farm in the Hopetoun district of Victoria, around 1895.  
Museum Victoria Collection

The extension of the railways, improvement in refrigeration and the new technology of freezing, meant easier transportation of products to markets in Melbourne, the rest of Victoria, and overseas. Customs barriers and protective policies made export to other colonies in Australia expensive, and abolishing customs duties was one of the main motivations for Federation.

### **Environmental degradation**

During this time the environment was suffering from poor clearing and farming practices. Much land was cleared of trees or scrub, particularly in Gippsland, the Mallee and around the Murray River. Water was often used wastefully, despite the droughts of the 1870s and 1890s. Ringbarking, which killed trees, and the use of the mallee roller, which flattened scrub, resulted in erosion, and a greater risk of bush fires, floods and drought. Crops were generally grown intensively without leaving pastures fallow, which meant nutrients in the soil were depleted quickly. Weeds brought into the colony with seed, fodder, animals or deliberately brought with settlers, meant constant struggle for farmers, and changed the landscape permanently. In newly cleared land, rabbits multiplied at an astounding rate and caused great damage to crops and pastures.

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## Environmental preservation

Many of the settlers recognised that the natural environment needed protection, particularly if agriculture and primary industry was to be sustainable. In 1880 the Victorian Water Conservancy Board was established, and in 1881 the Water Conservation Act was passed, which attempted to preserve winter rainfalls for summer use. A series of national parks were reserved in this period: Fern Tree Gully in 1882, Tower Hill in 1892, Wilsons Promontory and Mount Buffalo in 1898. In the first years of the new nation, many more parks were created and by 1909, there were 175 317 acres of national parks in Victoria. People also began to recognise the need to preserve native wildlife rather than the introduced species like sparrows and myna birds, which lost their protection in 1871. The first Conservator of Forests, George Perrin, appointed in 1888, attempted to regulate logging. Native flora and fauna became more widely appreciated as symbols of the new nation, and as representing the unique land and community.

## Aboriginal missions and reserves

While settlers were selecting land for agriculture throughout Victoria, Aboriginal people were increasingly dispossessed of their land. In the 1860s Aboriginal reserves in Healesville, the Western District, Gippsland and along the Murray River were set up and run by the Victorian government or by Christian missionaries. In 1886, however, the Victorian government passed the Aboriginal Protection Act, which banned Aboriginal people of mixed descent, under the age of 34, from the reserves. This policy meant that families were separated from each other and communities divided. It also meant that the reserves were no longer viable as farms, because many of the young and healthy residents were not allowed to live and work on the reserves. After Federation, this policy was widely adopted by the other states. In the early years of the new nation the state government closed many of the reserves altogether. Later, the reserve land was often sold to farmers or kept as crown land and allocated as part of soldier re-settlement schemes after the wars.

## Communications

The arrival of the new technology of the telegraph, made communications between the regions and the capitals easier from the 1850s. In 1854 the Victorian Government opened the first telegraph from Melbourne to Williamstown. An inter-colonial telegraph network was established in 1858, between Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. With the telegraph news or instructions from government could be sent almost instantly to many places in Australia, and overseas. The first long-distance telephone calls became available in the 1890s, when telephone exchanges were established in Melbourne, Ballarat, Geelong and Bendigo. The Railway Construction Acts of 1880 and 1884 extended the railway throughout Victoria. It increased from around 1000 miles to 3000 miles.

This made post services, including the delivery of newspapers, quicker. It also made the transport of produce cheaper. Easier travel throughout Victoria and around Australia fostered a sense of belonging not just to the region in which people lived, but to the colony, and to the new nation. Better communications technology had a direct impact on the movement for Federation.

Post and telegraph services became the responsibility of the new Commonwealth government, and were an increasingly important area of the Federal jurisdiction in the twentieth century.



Beaufort post and telegraph office, around 1885. Museum Victoria Collection

## Celebrations around Victoria

Many communities around Victoria held their own celebrations around the time of the opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament in May 1901. Because a large number of people travelled to Melbourne to see this event, and its associated festivities, most of the celebrations in regional Victoria were planned for just afterwards, on 14 May. On this day the Duchess of Cornwall and York sent a telegraphic message to 7000 schools around Australia and to London, New Zealand and Fiji. When each school received the message, the Union Jack was raised and the students and community sang God Save the King. These flag raising ceremonies were often the centre of a community's Federation celebrations. Afterwards processions, picnics, sports afternoons, dances and banquets were held in towns around Victoria.

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