Essay:
The states we’re in

Author:
AJ Brown

We are the same people sprung from the same race. We bear allegiance to the same throne. Our ideas, our religion – everything, in fact – is common. There is nothing to keep us apart. We are all one people, and why should we be divided by imaginary lines drawn on a map, which in a great many instances are drawn haphazard?

– Sir John Forrest, Premier, Western Australia, 1896

Ever since Europeans began to show interest in Australia, this country has been a product of their imagination. The ability to conjure a picture of how to conduct its political affairs has been pivotal, driven by changing dreams and realities of colonial and national destinies. Australians’ ability to imagine and re-imagine their political future has had a long history of pride and great democratic achievement. It is also a history of challenges, disaffection and ongoing unmet demands.

Political imaginings of Australia have worked in tandem with, and in advance of, social and economic reality. As early as 1797 Sir Joseph Banks told Governor John Hunter he saw ‘the future prospect of empires and dominions’ which could not be disappointed. ‘Who knows,’ wrote the great proponent of colonial development, ‘that England may revive in New South Wales when it has sunk in Europe?’ Banks’ was a vision of transposed civilisation and boundless economic prosperity, a cultural and political life-raft as Britain fought the Napoleonic tide.

The first important vision of governance that British leaders came to impose on their blank map was the great, expanding federal experiment of the United States. Directly motivated by its embarrassing losses in North America, from 1825 the Colonial Office began separating New South Wales into new colonies, planning that this time they would remain bound to the Empire as a loyal ‘dominion’. America’s constitution propagated new states during and after independence and found great favour with British progressives. In 1849 J.A. Roebuck likened America’s federal expansion to ‘a well-made watch [that] went from that moment [in the 1780s] and never ceased to go’. Three years later the future British Liberal prime minister William Gladstone insisted America remained ‘the great source of experimental instruction, so far as colonial institutions are concerned’.

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The imagined political future did not play out as planned, but not yet because, as its original Indigenous owners already knew, the continent’s ecological resources would simply not sustain it. The British vision itself faltered and changed. Trouble in Canada and the American Civil War caused a rethink. Britain came to favour strong central government, supported by regional governments rather than semi-sovereign states. Australian colonists continued to press for self-government, but the constitutional blueprint was left confused and half-baked. By the 1850s, when British policy-makers granted colonial demands for legislative independence, only a few colonies had separated from New South Wales.

Later, some governance experts would seek to impose an ex post facto explanation of this political geography, describing six jurisdictions as either politically or economically natural. In 1969 the constitutional lawyer Geoffrey Sawer described the ‘six metropolitan centres’ at the heart of the colonies as ‘the natural foci of economic development around the habitable perimeter of an arid continent’.

But the reality could not have been further from the truth. The often accidental siting of early settlements itself led to, and then froze, the political structure. The economic sustainability of each was based mainly on the ‘geographic momentum’ of ‘the proclaimed impulse’ – in other words, the decision to make a specific site an official centre, in some cases without knowing of what. Colonial settlement was encouraged, but Sydney fought with other centres to ensure it remained the primary financial hub, especially in terms of export control. Perth did the same to Albany, Melbourne to Portland. Only Queensland bucked the trend. Until the late 1890s when Brisbane also turned, Rockhampton and Townsville were officially destined to become state capitals in their own right.

In addition, despite valiant efforts by the Colonial Office, nothing was done to overlay the separate colonies with a national structure. This was not because Australians did not already imagine themselves as a nation in the Empire. By the 1850s, national constitutions had already been drafted in London, Hobart and Sydney. The problem was not political imagination, but the retreat of colonial legislators to the immediate and practical issue of developing and consolidating their own power. In a pattern that still repeats, Sydney’s political elites adopted the refrain that if the other colonies wanted national unity, they simply should not have separated from the first colony. The modern balladeer Tim Freedman immortalised this distinctive political culture: ‘You’ve got to love this city for its body and not its brain.’

imagining a grand, expanding federal future for Australia was not dead. And in the 1880s and 1890s, when colonial politicians began to finally respond to domestic political pressure for national governance, the American model again provided the key. Those who wonder how Sir Henry Parkes managed to trigger a popular movement in 1889 need look no further than his images of America’s economic and
political growth. Just like the ‘great commonwealth’ across the Pacific, Parkes told his famous audiences an Australian commonwealth could be ‘great and growing’.

Here again was not only a political vision but an economic and social one. Even in the 1880s, the London Times had greeted the interim step of a Federal Council of Australasia as representing ‘legislation for a future nation of fifty millions’. In 1887, one of Australia’s greatest federalists and nationalists, Sir Samuel Griffith, linked political development with economic destiny, seeing a continent ‘which although not now fully occupied, will, ‘ere long I trust be fully occupied by her Majesty’s subjects’ – once again, a blank map filled with farmers, miners, industry and British civilisation.

Once again, both the demographic reality of Australia and this expanding vision called for an alternative structure. The federalists knew it. Post-colonial Australia had many more discrete regions – economic, political, cultural – than official colonies. Australian federation again became associated with support for an American-style destiny, subdividing territory and increasing the number of federal states. The idea was written into the Constitution, where Chapter VI provides for their creation and admission.

This movement carried on, with peaks of agitation for new states in the 1920s, 1950s and 1960s. Utopianism often separates from reality. The concept of Australia Subdivided, written by the founding Country Party leader Earle Page in 1920, was infected with visions of boundless economic growth such as those conveyed two years before in E.J. Brady’s famous book, Australia Unlimited.

Yet even by the 1920s, the reality of Australia as a largely dry, ancient, ecologically fragile landscape conflicted with these popular plans. By the 1950s, the economic outlook was dominated by the growth of the modern welfare state, with big development supported by the alignment of big government, business and unions. While such visions were no more ecologically sustainable than those that preceded them, this industrial outlook left little room for ‘new state’ fragmentation. As the political scientist R.S. Parker declared in 1955, it was ‘very questionable whether the creation of new states … would not exacerbate more of the problems of federalism than it solved’.

Here then, in post-colonial Australia, another different vision was becoming clear. The original logic of each colony (or state) as a largely autonomous economy, independently feeding unlimited streams of resources and products into world markets, had withered and died with the imperial decline. By the 1980s it was under further assault from globalisation, by the 1990s the full reality of the continent’s ecological fragility, and in the twenty-first century the implications of a rapidly changing climate. In 2001 Australians celebrated their Centenary of Federation as a great achievement, but simultaneously knew that – far from any longer a recipe for growth and development – being a federation was now a great ‘problem’ of Australian governance.
Australians’ difficulty with federalism in principle is not, in fact, only a product of the modern era. On one hand it was always viewed as necessary for uniting the six colonies, and hopefully delivering more from Kalgoorlie to Cairns. But federalism was also set to run into difficulty if not able to deliver a properly capable national government. Even in the 1890s, Anglo-Australians wanted to be a nation, but not necessarily preserve the colonial autonomies implied by an American-style constitution. After all, the world’s greatest nation was still Britain, its ‘united kingdom’ forged not from a ‘federation’ but a ‘unification’ of the separate countries of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Even if ‘federal’, a true British nation still surely must have one supreme parliament and sovereign laws applying to all.

While some of Australia’s great federalists knew the legal reality must protect the self-interests of colonial politicians, the message they used to mobilise the public opinion drew directly from this parallel vision of true British ‘unification’. This was not just in the dominant colonies of New South Wales or Victoria, where it might be expected. The rhetoric of unification was used heavily in the outlying states, even though it implied a disappearance of state cultural and legal differences. In Western Australia, Sir John Forrest argued for a union that would overcome such ‘imaginary lines’.

The same words were used in Queensland by Griffith, and became fundamental to the powerful concept of ‘a nation for a continent and a continent for a nation’. This idea is usually attributed to Edmund Barton, but was already ingrained in popular culture, as shown by Griffith as far back as 1891: ‘There must be one Australian sentiment, one Australian people, and that as it is one land surrounded by the sea, without any natural divisions, so it shall be one people with one destiny … looking at the question from a merely geographical point of view … the political unification of Australia is absolutely inevitable.’

So we came to have some more unresolved tensions in how Australians saw and experienced their new system of governance. The last thing many ordinary colonial electors imagined was that their new national parliament would not be able to legislate universally on the most important issues confronting the nation. The result was an attitude to federalism that one of its leading scholars, Brian Galligan, has called ‘schizophrenic’, with deep internal conflicts and inconsistencies.

From the 1920s the High Court began to compensate for the limits of the Constitution by reading more into federal legislative powers than the colonial negotiators had intended, to match the governance needs of the new nation. In parallel, especially when the vision for new states did not begin to be realised, other populist visions of constitutional reform began to emerge. Perhaps federalism should be abandoned altogether, and state governments replaced with more ‘provincial’ or regional governments, all within a properly ‘unified’ – not federal – political structure.
In reality, constitutional diagnosis of these models would often show them to still be federal in nature, a different federalism based on Canada rather than the perceived American model. Hallmarks of these alternatives were widespread. They dominated the Australian Labor Party’s policy platform from 1920 until the 1960s. When the conservative federal government appointed a royal commission on the Constitution in 1927–29, even its business representative, T.R. Ashworth, sided with Labor and the union representative to push for federation to be superseded by this kind of unification.

Calls for the abolition of state governments, and their replacement with reconstituted local and/or regional governments, have resonated ever since. Moving beyond a system based on a half-baked colonial framework has long aligned with popular aspirations. Today business remains keen to support quite dramatic surgery to achieve simpler, more efficient and uniform approaches to national regulation. How to fix the problems of federalism is again a major political topic. But how are we approaching it? Has the quest for pragmatic solutions to the problems of our federal system broken down and lost contact with the larger scope of Australian’s popular and political imagination?

Australians expect a democratic national government to act strongly to ensure the prosperity of the nation and protect its economic interests, but also to use its clout and financial strength to underwrite a community of interest based on social justice and equality of opportunity. They still see themselves as living in local and regional communities, not constrained or overshadowed by the limiting effects of ‘big’ national government. They want the freedom to enjoy local differences, maximise opportunities and respond to sustainability challenges while retaining and developing a sense of ‘community’.

But these questions of how ‘community’ can more effectively be politically recognised, in an increasingly centralised political system, again challenge us to use our larger imagination. Thankfully, the capacity of individual Australians to imagine further evolution in the system of governance remains undiminished. My research suggests that almost two-thirds of adult Queenslanders, and almost three-quarters of adult New South Welshmen and women, would prefer a system of governance in this century different to the federal system today. A stratified survey sample of more than five hundred NSW respondents even found that the group most likely to favour change was state government employees. Two-thirds of these favoured the abolition of their own state government and its replacement with regional governments in a new federal compact. Perhaps public servants are not always purely self-interested, and know when present structures are obstructing their ability to serve their communities in the best possible ways.

State governments are not about to be replaced tomorrow, and for the time being, remain crucially important to the system of government. But our imagination continues
to tell us that two veins of political culture – federal and unitary – can still be mined to deliver the national constitution we have always wanted. Pragmatic as ever, we are already finding a range of interim, transitional solutions towards a better system, including a growing ‘fourth tier’ of regional institutions – health boards, catchment management authorities – which are rarely properly listened to. A notoriously weak system of local government continues to grow slowly in stature and significance, with a renewed debate about its federal constitutional recognition included among the ‘revolutions’ now promised by the Rudd Labor Government.

However, we are only just beginning to reconnect these small steps with our larger national vision. As prime minister, even John Howard recognised that the idea of state governments having ‘benign decentralist tendencies’ was ‘something of a myth’. He detected two levels of political consciousness that mattered – the local and the national – and saw state identity as of little continuing importance. He may have dismissed ideas of radical reform as ‘pure theorising’, but his view since at least 1991 was that ‘if you were starting Australia all over again you would have a national government and twenty regional governments’.

In the end Australians have shown they can be moved by the view that we could do a whole lot better in the fundamental structures of governance. This is clear from the history of federation itself. It would never have happened were it not for what Helen Irving calls the ‘utopian moment’ when colonial electors voted in the late 1890s. This was, in Irving’s words, ‘a time of both optimism and dismay, of disillusionment with old constitutional relations and of confidence in the local ability to forge new ones’.

The political wheel has turned from a fixation on economic conceptions of progress towards binding the nation’s economic future into its social, environmental and political development. Confronted with a shrinking globe, international competition, and ecological fragility in the face of climate change, there is a renewed premium on better ways to govern ourselves. National unity, economic efficiency and policy responsiveness are part of the mix, but so the recognition that it is as communities – national, local and regional – that we lead our lives, innovate, sustain one another, and respond to the exigencies of a changing world. Like federation itself, imagining how formal systems of governance can adapt to better serve and protect this balance will remain part of the Australian psyche until finally it is achieved.