

## FEDERATION

Before 1901, Australia was not a nation. At that time, the continent consisted of six British colonies which were partly self-governing, but subject to the law-making power of the British Parliament. Each colony had its own government and laws, including its own railway system, postage stamps and tariffs (taxes). This caused a lot of problems and people began to think about the benefits of uniting as one nation, under a federal system of governance.

### The path to federation

During the 1890s, each colony sent representatives to special meetings, called conventions, to try to agree about how to form a new federation. Eventually the delegates agreed on the rules for a federal system and a draft constitution. The people of the colonies voted in a series of referendums to accept this new Australian Constitution. It was then passed as a British Act of Parliament in 1900, called the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act*, which came into effect on 1 January 1901. The Constitution established a federal Parliament which could make laws on behalf of the new Australian nation (see *Australian Constitution*).

The colonies of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania united and became states of Australia, known as the Commonwealth of Australia. Western Australia was not a party to the initial agreement but also agreed to join the federation before 1 January 1901.

### The territories

In 1901, the two territories did not exist. The Constitution provided for the establishment of a national capital, to be located in New South Wales but at least 100 miles from Sydney. In 1911, the Australian Government created the Australian Capital Territory for this purpose. In the same year, the Northern Territory was also created. Until then, this area had been part of South Australia.

Although part of the Commonwealth, the territories do not have the same legal status as states.

### A new nation and a new Parliament

When the Commonwealth of Australia was declared on 1 January 1901, a ceremony was held in Centennial Park in Sydney. The first Governor-General, Lord Hopetoun, was sworn in and the first Prime Minister, Sir Edmund Barton, and federal ministers took the oath of office. Australians celebrated their nationhood, participating in parades, processions, sporting events and school pageants.

The first federal elections for the new Parliament were held on 29 and 30 March 1901. The first Parliament was held in Melbourne on 9 May 1901. It was officially opened by the Duke of Cornwall and York (later King George V). The opening ceremony was large and elaborate and further celebrations were held.

### Australia's federal system

Under the Australian Constitution, the new states united within the Commonwealth. Power was to be shared between the federal Parliament and state parliaments. The federal Parliament would make laws about national matters, such as defence, immigration, trade and the environment.



Children celebrating federation, Melbourne 1901

The power to make and manage federal law would be divided between the Parliament (who would make the law), the Executive (who would put the law into action) and the Judiciary (who would make judgements about the law).

The federal Parliament would be made up of the Queen (represented by the Governor-General), the Senate and the House of Representatives. Laws could only be passed or changed if agreed to by both houses.

The Australian federal system took some of its features from the British Parliament and some from the United States system of governance.

### LINKS

#### PEO website

Closer Look: *Federation*

[www.peo.gov.au/learning/closer-look/federation-cl.html](http://www.peo.gov.au/learning/closer-look/federation-cl.html)

#### APH website

Senate Brief: *The Origins of the Senate*

[www.aph.gov.au/Senate/briefs/brief09](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/briefs/brief09)