

GEORGE RICHARD DIBBS
1834 ~ 1904

PREMIER OF NEW SOUTH WALES
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Related Federation Studies by the same author:

1. *George Houstoun Reid:
Federation Father; Federal
Failure? (1979)*
2. *The Later Australian Federation
Movement 1883-1901: Outline
and Bibliography (1979)*

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I. 1879

'Without the creation of any complicated scheme of graduated depositories of political authority [i.e. Federation] or altering the familiar proportions of our system of government, an Australian nation might start into existence with all the attributes of national greatness, and with the homogeneity of interests which is best calculated to promote the strength and glory of a free Commonwealth....Is it necessary, now, to have an independent executive and an independent legislature at Melbourne, and at Sydney, and at Adelaide? Would these three separate Governments for two millions of people serve the higher purposes of order and progress, of public prosperity and public safety, more effectively than one powerful Government would serve them? If the three Colonies could consent to join in forming one political State, what would be the position and prospects of the new power? An united Australia of such colossal proportions would be a power from the day of its birth....It may be laid down as an axiom of good government that the multiplication of parliaments, with duplicate constitutions, for a people of the same origin and language, inhabiting the same territory and following in the same pursuits, is in itself a positive evil....We have three separate Civil Services where one Civil Service would, with the agencies of electric telegraph and the railway, do the work just as well, even with no better resource of official capacity and experience than at present.

'All the questions that would arise of first magnitude would receive a more undisturbed and unbiased consideration, and plans for national improvements would be less liable to be warped or impaired by the pressure of local claims. There would be a noble field for statesmanship....Sufficient immunity from the petty details of administration would attach to the principal offices of State to afford opportunity for the exercise of constructive capacity, which is hardly possible under the daily harassment of the politico-municipal labours of a Colonial minister in the present state of things.'

HENRY PARKES

The Melbourne Review
No.16, October 1879
(Extracts from pp.327-332)

II. 1979

'The nature of economic developments in Australia, and in the world of which we are part,...has ensured that [Federation] now does not meet the critical criteria of relevance and capacity. Not only is the "States' Rights" concept not positively relevant to our present economic realities, but, worse, the continuation of an increasingly irrelevant structure creates very real impediments to the sensible conduct of our affairs. Our present structure of government is not well calculated to best achieve a resolution of conflict; in fact, that very structure of government is itself a significant source of traditional and unproductive conflict within our community....We are delinquents to ourselves and our children if we do not move to meet this crisis with a more appropriate structure of government. If our society is to have any chance of dealing with the problem of growing unemployment, high inflation, depressed levels of economic activity, dramatic changes in technology and the pressure of developing countries for greater access to our markets - the elements of crisis - then we must have one government with the unquestioned powers to match the dimension of those elements.'

R.J. HAWKE

The Resolution of Conflict
1979 Boyer Lectures
(Extracts from pp.16 & 18)

PREFATORY NOTE

In a short monograph published several months ago, *George Houstoun Reid: Federation Father. Federal Failure?* (Canberra, 1979), I suggested that the two most successful Premiers of New South Wales in the 1890s, George Dibbs and George Reid, were two most significant champions of national union. They were also two of the most significant critics of the Federalist 'Ultras'. But their purpose was *not* obstruction of the extreme Anti-Federalist kind. They both wanted national union of a high order *and* they wanted the keenest constructive assessment of every feature of the proposals being made with a view to the utmost practicable improvement of each - even if that took a little longer - before it was accepted and allowed to set hard, so to speak, in the constitutional edifice of the future.

It is the prime purpose of the present monograph to examine the nation-making record, ideas and influence of George Richard Dibbs, Premier of New South Wales 1885, 1889 and 1891-94.

Though he held to many of his basic principles faithfully throughout his career, Dibbs was a more mercurial and sometimes more impulsive politician than Reid. But he was certainly not any less consistent between 1884 and 1899 on the subject of a constitutional pattern for uniting Australia under a national

government than was, say, Henry Parkes between 1879 and 1895. Those were days of continuous striving by some groups or others of Australians towards an at once satisfactory and acceptable formula for Australian unity and nationhood. They happened also to be days of bewilderingly shifting politics in New South Wales, from which solid party lines were slow in crystallizing. In the context of the somewhat kaleidoscopic factional politics of the 1880s and 1890s, so little comprehended now, some changing thinking on the part of individuals, and a wide variety of formulae for national unity, were hardly surprising. But it is essential to examine the actual positions of *each* significant participant in the nation-making drama against his general socio-political background and record and not simply to accept the prejudiced and over-simplified categorisations (not to mention falsification of alleged motivations) insisted upon by some of the eventually victorious Federalist 'Ultras'.

Those who engage upon an analysis of aspects of the Federation story nowadays have to cut through the early accretion of myth. They have to guard against the subsequent slanted selection or relegation of facts, the ultimate reinforcement and 'freezing' of the victors' prejudices thanks to their collective dominance of the literature of the subject in the first half of the twentieth century. The modern scholar would be advised to 'Namierize', i.e. to 'find out who the guys were' (as Lewis Namier once put it

pithily) in the life of their Colonies, as well as what they said and wrote and did in the immediate field of national-government-making. That is what I sought very briefly to do for one of the most important of them in my *George Reid* piece: that is what I have now attempted for his very different predecessor in the Premiership of New South Wales, George Richard Dibbs.

Because Dibbs and his record, and his admirable State Papers - that on the British Treasury Paper on the Australian financial and banking crisis of 1893, and that on Unification (i.e. his letter to Victorian Premier Patterson in 1894) - are so little known today, I have felt obliged to give parts of this short monograph a more 'documentary' content than seemed necessary in the case of the *Reid* volume. This, however, carries with it the benefit of conveying something of the flavours of the oratory, official correspondence and newspaper editorials of another day, long past.

It is possibly prudent to make the point that the author has never lived in, nor owed allegiance to, the State of New South Wales. Born in Melbourne, brought up there and in Adelaide, semi-retired after some forty years' happy residence in Canberra, he is an unreconstructed Southerner. Any seeming prejudice in the following pages should be attributed, then, not to undue attachment to the apron-strings of the 'Ma-State' but to a somewhat more than vague hankering after an end to the costly, wasteful and often

deplorable existences of States, 'States' Rights' and the many-ways inadequate Constitution of 1900 (even with its minor amendments to date), and to a keen desire to see a rationalisation and enrichment of local government.

My thanks to my research assistant and collaborator, Barbara Atkinson, and to the very helpful officers of the National University Library and the National Library (Canberra) and the Mitchell Library (Sydney) for their indispensable patience and help with our work.

L.F. CRISP

Canberra
March 1, 1980

I.

George Richard Dibbs was born at Flagstaff Hill, near the Observatory in Sydney, a third child and third son, on October 12, 1834. Until his death seventy years later, Dibbs never tired of reminding people that he was a native Australian, a 'Sydney-sider' born and bred.

His father, Scottish ship's captain, John Dibbs, had departed the East India Company's service in 1820 to set up on his own account in Sydney. In 1828, at the age of 38, John Dibbs married a splendid nineteen-year-old wife and fathered three sons by late 1834, in which year he seems to have vanished from the scene. Mrs Dibbs was no quitter and saw her boys received a sound education. George had his at St. Philip's Church of England School and thereafter at John Dunmore Lang's Australian College.

With this background, Dibbs knew his Jacobean Bible and his Anglican Prayer Book well. Their wonderful language later salted and enriched his speeches. He also turned that knowledge to account in drawing audiences to him, as when, mounting the platform of a large Protectionist rally in Sydney on July 19, 1887, to announce his conversion from free-trade to protectionism and to be received into the protectionist fiscal faith, he opened his declaration (to delighted applause) with the text: 'Joy shall be in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no

repentence'. (He did, perhaps, some violence to the truth about the processes of his conversion when he invoked the picture of the blinding Pauline conversion on the road to Damascus!).

Dibbs grew up and remained a faithful and active Anglican, though his fellow communicants and fellow Synodsmen mostly deplored and disowned his consistent and practical parliamentary championing of a national system of free, compulsory and secular education, which sprang from his conviction that the State had 'an absolute duty to educate every child in it'.

Nor did his support for extension of legal provisions for divorce reassure the 'unco'guid' of Queen Victoria's sanctimonious days. Ironically, his loyal and zealous support for his brother's action for divorce landed Dibbs with a £2,000 libel verdict (plus £1,600 costs) in favour of counsel (who was, allegedly, more than counsel) to his brother's erring wife. Incensed by what he regarded as a grossly unjust verdict and penalty, Dibbs chose to serve twelve months in gaol rather than pay. This was in 1880-81, when, as luck had it, he was out of Parliament and found modestly comfortable, if confined, leisure for his work-bench hobbies and extensive reading and sympathetic visits from family and friends not altogether insupportable. Henry Parkes, who at the time made the work-bench available to him, in later moments of public, mean-spirited bad temper, threw up this gaol-term at Dibbs. But it would appear from

contemporary comment that in Sydney political and social circles Dibbs gained a good deal of sympathy for taking such a stand on principle against what he regarded as a bad and harsh judgment. At all events, he was re-elected to Parliament and appointed a Cabinet Minister within not much more than a year of his release.

George Dibbs was six feet four inches tall - at the peak of his parliamentary and ministerial career¹ he weighed some eighteen stone - a man of splendid presence. He fathered fifteen children on his wife Anne Marie (née Robey), eleven surviving him. With energy to spare, he was from 1854 active in, and finally the Honorary Colonel of, the New South Wales volunteer military forces.

Dibbs became a practical man of business, and at times a pretty tough operator therein. He gained much of his commercial experience with his brother John (J.C.) as partner, some with his father-in-law, some in ventures on his own account. The range of his training and experience included importing and exporting, shipping, merchandising at various times in wine, coal and general cargoes, sugar-refining and distilling. Business took him as far afield as Asia and Britain. It took him also to Valparaiso and Santiago in Chile, to reach which destination (with his wife and early children) he had to persuade the ship's master and crew to 'run the

1. For an outline of his public career see Table I.

blockade' of the Spanish fleet under cover of night. Like so many early Colonial merchants, he and his brother John experienced the swings and lurches of the nineteenth century Colonial trade cycle, and they suffered bankruptcy on account of a bank failure. To their credit they traded themselves completely out of debt, paying all creditors in full, after eight or nine years, in 1875. Meanwhile, in 1872, Dibbs was appointed to the Marine Services Board and had a good deal to say - intra-murally and in public - on the shortcomings of, and the need to develop, water-side services for New South Wales maritime commerce. In the late 1870s Dibbs was chairman of the Australian Steam Navigation Company, whose extension of its use of Chinese crew-members to the Australian coastal run involved him in industrial strife in Sydney.

Dibbs's brother Thomas (T.A.) was also a commercial man - from 1846 a lifelong banker with the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney - its general manager from 1882 until 1915 (when he was 82) and thereafter an honorary director.

Even by the time he first entered Parliament at 40 years of age, Dibbs's experience and family environment together had given him a better insight into the actual practice of commerce and banking against a wide and varied background than most of his fellow-Members had. Well-regarded by a considerable circle of Sydney businessmen, he was first elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1874. In parliamentary politics he was at first a Free-trader and, ordinarily

and in general, on the side of 'law and order' and the employing interest. In the waterside and maritime and mining disputes of the period this held true - though he usually worked to effect some moderating compromise, such as he sought in 1892 when he came back from Britain to find the Broken Hill miners' strike on his hands. His stands on law and order, not least in strikes, and his support of assisted-immigration schemes, did not endear him to the trade unions.

Dibbs's Parliamentary career was no easy one. Not only was there the five-year break between 1877 and 1882, which included a year in gaol (as already mentioned). His first term as Minister - Colonial Treasurer under Stuart from 1883 to 1885, a Free-trader amongst Free-traders - brought him face to face with both the tribulations of drought and depression, and, above all, the inheritances which flowed from the profligate spending of some of his recent predecessors. This immediately had him chasing revenue almost wherever and however it was to be found. It would be idle to pretend that this earliest Treasury experience, and policy-mistakes he made incidentally to it, did not decisively turn his mind in the direction of personal fiscal conversion. The thought of more tariff revenue immediately and of the eventual fruits of higher consumption of locally-produced commodities must have been tempting indeed to a rather pragmatic Treasurer of New South Wales in the middle 1880s.

TABLE I : SIR GEORGE DIBBS IN N.S.W. PUBLIC OFFICE

Member of the Legislative Assembly	Ministerial and Leadership Offices
Dec.1874-Oct.1877 WEST SYDNEY	-
Dec.1882-Oct.1885 ST. LEONARDS	5.1.83-6.10.85 : Colonial Treasurer under Stuart. 1883 : NSW Delegate to Inter-Colonial Conv. 7.10.85-21.12.85 : Premier and Colonial Treasurer.
Oct.1885-Jun.1894 THE MURRUMBIDGEE	26.2.86-19.1.87 : Colonial Secretary under Jennings. Sep.1887-Jan.1889: Leader of the Opposition. 17.1.89-7.3.89 : Premier and Colonial Secretary. 1889-1891 : Leader of the Opposition for most of the period. 1891 : NSW Delegate to National Federal Convention. 23.10.91-2.8.94 : Premier and Chief Secretary. [To Britain 30.4.92-13.9.92]
Jul.1894-Jul.1895 TAMWORTH	Aug.1894-Jul.1895: Leader of the Opposition.

Sir George Dibbs was a Member for nearly 15½ out of 21 years from 1874 to 1895. His Premierships covered 3 years and 2 months, mostly his 1891-94 term. He was Colonial or Chief Secretary for 3 years and 10 months and Colonial Treasurer for 2 years and 11 months. (Some of this service was concurrent). In fact he spent some 7 years in Ministerial office and 5 years as Leader of the Opposition. In March 1893 Dibbs had to vacate his seat whilst he satisfied his creditors. He was re-elected a week later (March 30). His Premiership continued over this week out of Parliament.

In mid-1887 Dibbs made his profession of Protectionist faith. Within three months he was officially Leader of the [Protectionist] Opposition. He was obliged to work tirelessly to give the Protectionists in Parliament and out of doors the unity and force essential for success. The outside Protectionist organisations did not want too powerful a Parliamentary Leader, nor one too independent of their control. Dibbs was determined to show them who was to be master. In those days of faction-politics a Leader had regularly to be manoeuvring and fighting for predominance even on his own side of the House. He had to cope with a situation where even those who rallied solidly around the Protectionist banner were still very much divided and opposed to each other on other socio-economic policies. Thus Dibbs, though conservative-leaning on so many issues, was repeatedly attacked as a radical spender in the early 1890s by E.W. O'Sullivan and his close associates (of what may conveniently be referred to as the 'retrenchment and reform' faction of the Protectionists). Yet at that time an amount of public works and public service patronage was a customary instrument of leadership in New South Wales politics. Indeed, O'Sullivan's 'retrenchment and reform' slogans long brought smiles to the shrewder faces in those sections of the Monaro which he represented, where they knew just how assiduous and successful a 'roads and bridges' man O'Sullivan himself was in the good use he made of his membership of the Parliamentary

Public Works Committee. Nor did satisfying Dibbs's necessary allies of the new Labour Party after 1891 come cheaply on the public purse.

Throughout the 1891-94 Parliament, the years of his third and longest Premiership, at the head of the first New South Wales Government whose members had been *elected* under a Protectionist banner, Dibbs's ideas and policies had other aspects which helped him to command sufficient support from the new Labour Party to last out the three-year term. It was only with Labour votes in the Assembly that his minority Ministry was able to enact as much of his programme as he did - as much, that is, as the largely reactionary Legislative Council would allow.

Dibbs was in fact very much his own man, as employers, his parliamentary party colleagues and Labour all well knew. And, until perhaps his last Parliament (1894-95), there was enough in him of a sort of 'Tory Democracy' - including not a little near-radical progressive reformism - for him to find sufficient bases of electoral support in the mixed bag of metropolitan and country electorates to which he personally had recourse between 1874 and 1895. It was sufficient to afford him ample room for plausible manoeuvre in the faction-politics of the Sydney Parliament of his day. His relations with Henry Parkes were very much of an 'on again, off again' sort, as were those of not a few other colleagues of the ageing Titan. Temperamentally, Dibbs was not made for the emerging system of party

discipline and ideological 'party-platformism'. But, with his practical background as a man of business and commerce, his mixed bag of policies, his pragmatic approach, and his forceful way with problems at hand, he was sufficiently armed in the early 1890s to cope with an infant Labour Party or the threatened crash of the Colonial banking system.

In 1893 Dibbs gave concrete shape in his Electoral Act to his 'one man, one vote' and other democratic electoral principles (though he held to his opposition to payment of Members). As recently as December 1979, D.A. Aitkin recalled his electoral measure:

'In 1893 the New South Wales Parliament brought into being a fine new electoral law which must have been just about the most progressive in the world at the time. It provided 125 single-member seats; no distinction was made between country and city; plural voting was prohibited....Deviations were allowed from the common quota, but wide deviations had to be explained to Parliament. With the single exception of the restriction of the franchise to men, the Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Act 1893 was more democratic than most of those presently in force in Australia; and it was sufficiently well thought of to be the model for the Commonwealth Electoral Act of 1902.'²

2. *National Times* (Sydney). Week ending 8 December 1979.

TABLE II : N.S.W. ELECTIONS 1891-95*

1891 141 Seats			1894 125 Seats			1895 125 Seats		
'Party'	% of votes	Seats	'Party'	% of votes	Seats	'Party'	% of votes	Seats
FREE TRADE	38.77	47	F.T.) Indep F.T.)	39.87	46) 12) 58	F.T.) Indep F.T.)	47.04	61) 1) 62
PROTECTIONIST	38.65	51	PROT.) Indep PROT)	33.91	36) 4) 40	PROT.) Indep PROT)	35.96	40) 1) 41
LABOUR	18.03	35	LAB.) Indep LAB.)	25.23	14) 13) 27	LAB.) Indep LAB.)	15.97	18) 4) 22
INDEPENDENT	4.51	8	INDEP.	0.98	0	INDEP.	1.03	0

* At the 1887 general elections (for an Assembly of 124) Parkes and his allies won 83 seats to the Opposition's 41. In 1889 (of an Assembly of 137) Dibbs and his allies won 66 seats, coming within five seats of Parkes and allies who held 71 seats.

When, a decade earlier, Dibbs had joined Stuart's Free-trade Cabinet as Colonial Treasurer,³ he thought of himself as, *inter alios*, a land-reformer intent on eliminating the regrettable abuses practised under Robertson's 1861 Act, on reforming the land laws of the Colony generally, and in particular on stopping the prodigal and almost heedless disposal of public lands as an easy revenue-raiser. In some measure, the 1884 Act of the Stuart Government effected Dibbs's most urgent objectives. It was, initially at least, a popular success with small settlers and with shearers and other less affluent aspirants for settlement.

Throughout his Ministerial career, Dibbs, like many other Colonial politicians, was inclined to be a sanguine and fearless borrower for public works - expenditure popular at once with local interests and with unions whose members depended on jobs in such undertakings.

In 1882 Dibbs had introduced a Bill for establishment of an industrial conciliation council (based on employer-employee representation); but he was unable to carry it through the Parliament of those days. As Premier in 1892 he passed his Trades Disputes Conciliation and Arbitration Act. But it lacked provision for compulsion; and, to his great disappointment, employers' organisations boycotted its

3. This was in January 1883. George Reid was a Ministerial colleague and another 'Ministerial beginner'.

machinery in the miners' and shearers' strikes of the early 1890s. In 1892 also, he founded the Labour Bureau - in the absence of joint employer-union arrangements, it was to bring employers and unemployed job-seekers together - an early step in State action in this field.

Not only locally but at inter-Colonial levels Dibbs was widely held in warm regard (as the extract from the Hackett editorial affirms⁴) and in not a little respect for his commercial and financial capabilities. When, as New South Wales Premier, he went to London in 1892 to soothe London critics of Australasian financial policies and to prepare the ground for further British investment in Australian loans and enterprises, he went endorsed and entrusted to speak also for the Governments of Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. His mission was accounted successful and well-worthwhile.

From mid-1891, in some Australian Colonies, land and finance companies had begun to come tumbling down - notably in Melbourne, but also in Sydney. From early 1892 there followed difficulties amongst the banks (especially in Melbourne) and subsequently the failure, enforced reconstruction or pre-emptive taking-over of some. By 1893 even the most respected banks faced trouble. The weakened wheat and wool prices, losses on city and suburban property as the boom in housing and construction ebbed and burst, the

4. See below, p. 20.

intensifying paralysis of business generally - aggravated by the drying up, withdrawal or at least upward pricing of British funds - were felt at every turn. The *sauve-qui-peut* spirit spread and led to panic through the whole finance industry. The major banks eventually were no exceptions to both the panic and the victimisation. Premier J.B. Patterson spoke frankly enough for himself and his Government and most of Melbourne in the depths of the Victorian crisis when he declared, 'We are all floundering'.

Liquidations, compositions, suspensions, reconstructions - the words became almost everyday currency in the market-place; more so in Melbourne, to be sure. Of the governmental role in New South Wales in 1893 it will here be sufficient to cite two opinions: first, that of an 'insider', the State Statistician of the day, T.A. Coghlan; secondly, that of a distinguished economist, economic historian and sometime Economic Adviser to the Bank of New South Wales, Professor E.O.G. Shann, looking back across four decades. On the banking crisis Coghlan wrote:

'In Victoria, the Patterson Ministry had recently taken office and met the storm by proclaiming five bank holidays, an action of imbecility, as no bank that expected to survive could have taken advantage of the moratorium, and, as for the others, nothing could then have helped them. [All the Victorian banks save one went into reconstruction.] New South Wales was fortunate in having at the head of affairs G.R. Dibbs, who, after making strong efforts to save the sound banks in spite of themselves, took decisive steps; and, bad as were the effects

'of the crisis on industry and credit, it is admitted that, had it not been for the courageous and discerning action of Dibbs at every phase of the crisis, the effects would have been still more deplorable....[The Dibbs Government's] management of business during the bank crisis was bold, well-conceived, and successful, and, moreover, deserving of much praise....In Victoria the financial policy never rose above the most drudging economy....It preoccupied Governments to such an extent that other aspects of politics [and policies] almost disappeared from view....The administration of the Turner Government [which succeeded the Patterson Ministry in Victoria] was of the narrow order usually associated with municipal government and, apart from finance,...was weak and timorous.'⁵

Forty years after the event, Shann summed up the Dibbs achievements thus:

'In Sydney, Sir George Dibbs played a worthier part [than Patterson in Melbourne] as head of the Government. He realised by May 3 that the banks were unable to act in unison, and pushed an emergency plan through Parliament in three measures. The first made bank-notes a first charge on their issuer's assets, the second permitted the Governor-in-Council to make such notes legal tender at any bank's request, and the third, a little later, permitted the Treasury to issue its own notes and to lend these to the banks to the extent of half the current accounts locked up by any

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5. Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, Oxford, 1918, Vol.III, p.1268 and Vol.IV, pp.1944-5 & 1949. Serle records in his *Dictionary of Australian Biography*, Vol.I, p.241, of Dibbs that 'he later received a substantial public testimonial for his services at this time'.

'bank suspension. Either through their traditional dislike of government intervention, or through the palsy of despair, the banks at first refused to apply for the aid offered. On May 15, one strong Sydney bank [ironically, that managed by Dibbs's brother Thomas, who was reportedly estranged from him in 1892-93] suspended payment, although possessed of a million in cash and owing only £600,000 to British depositors. The Premier thereupon exacted the needed applications from the other leading banks and, willy-nilly, made their notes legal tender. This cleared the air in Melbourne as well as in Sydney, for Sydney's large gold stocks, no longer wanted there, could be used to assuage panic elsewhere.'

6

Of the contrasting poor performance by Patterson and other Victorian leaders and their efforts at recovery, Shann is scathing:

'The rest of Australia did not regain faith in Melbourne as its financial centre with the readiness that Melbourne expected.... Melbourne's loss of strength during the 'Nineties may in part be traced to dull political leading. Throughout the long crisis from 1889 to 1893, Victoria sought a statesman but found none....Between 1895 and 1900 the Colony lost 75,000 of its people by emigration, chiefly to the goldfields of Western Australia. [Coghlan says 114,000 persons, the majority males in the prime of life, went to Western Australia, Queensland, and New Zealand - and, we may add, to the busy new cities of South Africa.] The growth of its people numbered less than one-fourth

6. *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, Vol.VII, Part I: 'Australia', 1933, p.371.

'of the natural increase.'⁷

The leading money men of Melbourne were neither unaware nor unappreciative of the much more effective and generally beneficial role played by the New South Wales Premier in the days of crisis, as this obituary note on Dibbs abundantly makes clear:

'...In 1893 he rendered eminent services to Australia, not merely to New South Wales, by the vigour with which he acted during the banking crisis. He proclaimed notes as legal tender for a given period, and he assented to advances being made by the Treasury against current accounts locked up in reconstructed banks. The first measure prevented further panic and the second alleviated the effects of temporary suspensions. When the legal tender period expired, there was no occasion to renew it, while the advances made ran off quickly. Both the emergency measures were highly successful. Sir George had the sagacity to perceive their usefulness, and the pluck promptly to adopt them.'⁸

There was one significant footnote to Dibbs's 1893 crisis leadership which should be remarked. In Britain a Treasury Paper was issued under the title *The Australian Crisis of 1893*. Its author was a 25-year-old Treasury clerk, Arthur George Villiers Peel, grandson of the great Prime Minister Sir Robert

7. *Ibid.*, Vol.VII, Part I at pp.378-9; Coghlan at Vol.IV, p.1948; for Colonial populations in this period see Table III below at p.22, and a telling article 'The Population of Victoria' in the *Melbourne Australasian Insurance and Banking Record*, Vol.23, 1899, pp.152-3.

8. *Australasian Insurance and Banking Record*, Vol.28, 1904, p.627. (A Melbourne monthly).

Peel. Dibbs was very much offended by what he regarded as its many-faceted inadequacy and its many errors or false impressions or misleading comments in detail. He sent a thirteen-foolscap-page paper in shrewd reply through the New South Wales Agent-General to the British Treasury and had it tabled and ordered by the Legislative Assembly to be printed in the first volume of New South Wales *Votes and Proceedings* for 1894.⁹ It is a forceful and effective reply and must have given young Peel a good deal to think about. That Dibbs issued this fascinating paper and his historic letter to Victorian Premier Patterson [see later in this monograph] within a few months of each other at the hectic height of his third Premiership says much indeed for the forcefulness of his command of his responsibilities.

For all his outstanding success in the financial and banking crisis of 1893, and in other of his efforts as Premier, Dibbs approached the election due in 1894 with his political position weakening. He had long attracted the more or less savage opposition of the freetrade *Daily Telegraph*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Evening News*, and they had done their best to blacken and diminish his record with the people. Reid's Free-trade Opposition was proving effective in its public and parliamentary probing of any vulnerable spots in the Government's performance. The foolish-

9. NSW Legislative Assembly: *Votes & Proceedings*, Vol.I, 1894, pp.1021-33.

ness and indiscretion (to say the least) of his Cabinet colleagues Barton and O'Connor in laying themselves and the Government open to effective parliamentary attack (and themselves to the necessity of resigning from the Ministry) dealt a heavy blow at the end of 1893. The Labour Party, on the voting support of a substantial part of which he depended for command of the House, had extracted a fair amount of 'Danegeld' for that support and was now beginning to feel it had not a great deal more to hope for from him. Its support grew more and more grudging and half-hearted. Indeed, Labour in and out of doors had growing reservations about not a little of Dibbs's legislation and administration. Moreover, Reid was offering an end to Dibbs's duties on various items of popular consumption, and, instead, direct taxes on income and land on bases attractive to workers, small shopkeepers and small farmers - people who frequently had little appreciation of what Dibbs had done in the banking crisis. Some of Dibbs's programme which, if implemented, would have counted to credit electorally with some of these groups, had in fact been rejected or mauled by the Upper House.

All in all then, Dibbs's defeats in the 1894 and 1895 elections were hardly surprising or astonishing. Indeed, after his party's 1894 defeat at the polls, Dibbs was left leading in the Parliament not much more than a sort of 'country party' wanting continuation of protection against inter-colonial 'imports' of competing primary produce and a quick end

to Premier Reid's direct taxation on property in its several forms.

At the premature general election of 1895, Dibbs, like Parkes, went down to personal defeat in his electorate and never returned to Parliament. With characteristic generosity and a sense of fittingness, Premier George Reid subsequently had his Administration advise the Governor of New South Wales to appoint the fallen Protectionist Leader to take his place, as Managing Trustee, on the Board of Trustees of the Savings Bank of New South Wales.

An historian has characterised Dibbs as 'a plain, blunt man of simple manners, quick-tempered yet kindly, staunch in his friendships, able, but lacking in tact, a courageous figure in the political life of his time'. Another said of him: 'His temperament, active not cool, courageous but not disciplined, was litigious'. A contemporary newspaper saw in him 'an impetuous temperament and imperious manner, British stubbornness, a rich manhood and a robust if undisciplined intellect'. Upon his death, the *Sydney Bulletin*, which had sometimes damned and sometimes hailed him, wrote on August 11, 1904: 'He was too frank, downright and earnest to take middle courses that keep seats but make no reputations....Transparently honest in his private business, he tried to be honest also at the Treasury, and succeeded better than any other New South Wales Treasurer....[He was outstanding for] his frankness, his sincerity and his earnestness, no less than for his picturesqueness.'

He was a born competitor and combatant, said to have been an impatient Minister under other men as Premier. Essentially a pragmatist, in the heat of battle he was sometimes forgetful or negligent of precisely what he had said previously - he was not the only occasionally inconsistent man, at least in speech, in New South Wales politics.

His sometime colleague and later rival, George Reid, in 1917, in *My Reminiscences*, summed him up this way: 'Mr Dibbs was a man whom everyone liked, in spite of his roughness of speech and crude methods. His great ability would have made him far more useful than he was if he had blended with his force of character a remembrance of the fact that his head was not strong enough to upset stone walls'.

At the height of the Federation episode, which is the focus of this monograph, the editor of the *West Australian* (Winthrop Hackett) wrote of Dibbs: 'The Premier of New South Wales is probably one of the most popular men in Australasia. He can have hardly an enemy. His urbanity and pleasant genialities have been and are largely instrumental in securing for him the position which he now holds and has held from October 1891'. This all adds up to Dibbs's being, whilst no great diplomat, in many other ways well-equipped and well-armed for the very robust platform-politics of late nineteenth-century Sydney and for the final brittle stages of 'faction-evolving-into-party' politics of the Colonial Parliament of New South Wales.

II.

Between 1863 and 1891 there were some twelve more or less major Inter-Colonial Conferences, with a variety of particular titles and policy-foci. Their record was such as to make men of experience and vision increasingly sceptical of '*ad hocery*' in the management of continental affairs. In 1886, there emerged a Federal Council with grudging and very limited legislative powers but no associated executive authority. It was born lame inasmuch as not all Colonies were - or ever became - members. It stood for thirteen years for something well short of major general commitment to, and investment of sufficient and effective powers in, national governmental institutions. To achieve the latter required *either* some measure of federation *or* unification.

In the generation before Australian union in 1901, many of those who were involved in the governmental leadership of the several Colonies changed at least once their general stance regarding the best basis for national government. Some changed their minds from deepening experience of Australia-wide problems. Some did so from study of broadly comparable experiences and institutional remedies in other lands. Some, it is to be suspected, shifted ground in part at least under the pressures of the faction-politics of their day.

One instance of successive changes is none other than that of the so-called 'Father of Federa-

TABLE III : AUSTRALASIAN POPULATION IN THE 'FEDERATION' PERIOD & RECENTLY

COLONY (STATE)	1881 (Census)		1891 (Census)		1897 (Coghlan)		1901 (Census)		1976 (Census)	
	<i>Numbers</i>	%	<i>Numbers</i>	%	<i>Numbers</i>	%	<i>Numbers</i>	%	<i>Numbers</i>	%
NSW	749,825	33.3	1,127,137	35.4	1,323,460	36.0	1,354,846	36.0	4,914,300	35.3
VIC	861,566	38.3	1,140,088	35.9	1,176,248	32.0	1,201,070	32.0	3,746,000	27.0
QLD	213,525	9.6	393,718	12.5	484,700	13.0	498,129	13.0	2,111,700	15.0
SA	276,414	12.3	315,533	10.0	363,044	9.9	358,346	9.8	1,261,600	9.0
WA	29,708	1.3	49,782	1.6	161,924	4.4	184,124	4.7	1,169,800	8.4
TAS	115,705	5.2	146,667	4.6	171,719	4.7	172,475	4.5	407,400	2.9
AUSTRALIA	2,250,194		3,177,823		3,681,095		3,778,801		13,915,500	
NEW ZEALAND	489,933 (Coghlan)		626,658 (Coghlan)		729,056 (Coghlan)		770,000		3,130,083	
AUSTRAL- ASIA	2,740,127		3,804,481		4,410,150		4,543,801		17,045,583	
NZ %	18%		16.4%		16.5%		16.9%		18.4%	

tion', Henry Parkes. To the October 1879 issue of the *Melbourne Review* (1876-1885) Parkes contributed a characteristically rhetorical and verbose article, 'An Australian Nation'. In it he advocated unification - of the three Colonies of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Queensland he imperiously wrote off as *sui generis*, a distinct great nation of the future. Tasmania and the Crown Colony of Western Australia were not, in the whole nine pages, dignified with a mention.¹⁰

This 1879 would-be 'Father of South-Eastern Australian Unification' presided sixteen months later, as Premier of New South Wales, over an Australasian Inter-Colonial Convention (January 13-27, 1881) which considered a number of problems like Chinese immigration and a common tariff approach. It then went on to look at a measure of federation. Parkes himself submitted a Federal Council Bill and a personally-signed *Memorandum: In Respect to the Federal Council Bill Now Submitted*. The latter - leagues removed from his proposal of 1879 - stated, *inter alia*:

'....The following positions are assumed as hardly open to debate:

1. That the time is not come for the construction of a Federal Constitution with a Federal Parliament.
2. That the time is come when a number of

10. *The Melbourne Review*, No.16, October 1879. See extracts reproduced at the head of this monograph, pp.i-ii.

matters of much concern to all Colonies might be dealt with more effectively by some Federal authority than by the Colonies separately.

3. That an organisation which would lead men to think in the direction of Federation, and accustom the public mind to Federal ideas, would be the best preparation for the foundation of Federal Government.

The Bill has been prepared to carry out the idea of a mixed body, partly legislative and partly administrative, as the forerunner of a more matured system of Federal Government. Care has been taken throughout to give effective power to the proposed Federal Council within prescribed limits, without impairing the authority of the Colonies represented in that body. No attempt has been made to constitute the proposed Council on any historical model, but the object has been to meet the circumstances of the present Australian situation, and to pave the way to a complete Federal organisation hereafter.'

The former 'Father of Unification' could not secure a majority of delegations for his minimal Federal Council scheme - New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania were opposed by Victoria, Queensland and New Zealand, and the Crown Colony of Western Australia abstained.¹¹

Two years later another such Convention met in Sydney (28 November - 8 December 1883). Fiji as well as New Zealand joined the Australian Colonies.

11. For the Convention Report see *NSW Votes and Proceedings*, 1881, I, pp.327-419.

Now it was Stuart and Dibbs rather than Parkes who were speaking for New South Wales. S.W. Griffith (Queensland) carried a motion based consciously on the Parkes *Memorandum* of 1881 and Dibbs another which, as adopted, read:

'That the Governments represented at the Convention pledge themselves to invite the Legislatures of their respective Colonies to pass addresses to Her Majesty praying that she may be pleased to cause a measure to be submitted to the Imperial Parliament for the purpose of constituting a Federal Council upon the basis of the draft Bill adopted by this Convention.'¹²

When the New South Wales Parliament came to consider these motions in 1884, Parkes, the would-be 'Father of the Federal Council' of 1881, now joined notorious Anti-Federalists like Sir John Robertson and L.F. Heydon in opposing New South Wales participation. Heydon damned the proposal thus: 'We have this gift offered us - thrust upon us - by an aggressive neighbour [Victoria] who wishes to mend her condition at our expense. We have some affection for our Colony, and for the England which has treated us so well. What has Victoria ever done for us - except to insult and despoil us - that we should for her sake injure New South Wales, the land of our birth, and England who has given us everything we have?'¹³

12. For the Convention Report see *NSW Votes and Proceedings*, 1883-84, IX, pp.1-190.

13. *NSW Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.XV, 30 October 1884, p.6221.

Very strange company in which to find the Father of Unification (1879) and of Federation (1889-91)!

The Premier, Stuart, suffered a stroke two days before this debate and it fell to Dibbs to move for the Federal Council in terms of the Convention resolutions. He delivered a very considerable speech indeed. He assured the House that the current proposals 'will not jeopardise the fiscal policy or detract from the powers of Parliament in this Colony in any shape'. He expressed a view about the future embracing of national union to which he was to hold consistently and firmly throughout the rest of his parliamentary life: 'I hope that whenever we arrive at that stage in our history...this Parliament will not take upon itself to deal with the question of Federation without in the first instance passing resolutions approving of such a course and then submitting the whole question to the decision of the people....The matter should be submitted to the country'. He stressed his own preference for a dominant central authority for Australia: 'It is only a question of time as to when and how federation will take place. For my own part, I hope the principle will be carried to a *much* greater length than is done in the propositions I submit'.¹⁴ Though later Dibbs came out clearly for Unification, he regarded Canadian-type Federation, with both main and residuary

14. *Ibid.* at pp.6170, 6175-6 and 6172 for the three foregoing Dibbs excerpts.

powers in the hands of the National Parliament, as a compromise - a second best. It is essential to construe his use of these terms carefully.

Dibbs dealt very effectively with Parkes's opposition and interjections, from the strong ground that he and his colleagues at the 1883 Convention had consciously borrowed heavily from the very words as well as the ideas of Parkes's *Memorandum* and Bill of the 1881 Convention. 'If the Hon. Member will look at his own [1881 draft] Bill and at this Federal Council Bill', he threw back at Parkes at one point, 'he will find an amazing likeness between the two'.¹⁵ After another interjection and point of order from Parkes, Dibbs came back again: '...Federation is one of the matters with which the Hon. Member thinks that he alone, as a heaven-born statesman, is capable of dealing....This Bill is like a good many other measures which have been passed this Session - the Hon. Member has intended to do a great many such things, but never did them. He has flaunted them before the public, and lived upon the reputation they brought him; but when it came to the crucial test of what was in him, he had nothing to submit to the Parliament'.¹⁶ Dibbs presented the Federal Council proposal as 'but the foreshadowing of a greater Federation when the minds of the people become better educated, when the desire for union becomes unanimous

15. NSW *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.XV, 30 October 1884, p.6176.

16. *Ibid.*, p.6178.

from one end of the Colony to the other, when we shall emerge from the position of petty States and small countries and become one great federated nation....We must educate the minds of the people'.¹⁷

Dibbs had the better of the parliamentary joust - but Parkes, Robertson and their factions registered a 22 to 21 veto; and, in all its fourteen years' existence, the Federal Council's door was never darkened nor its objectives advanced by representatives of New South Wales. Between 1881 and 1884, moving from Premier to Opposition, Parkes had reversed his position, and, as far as New South Wales was concerned, had slaughtered his own child.

In 1889 Parkes, despite some opposition in his Cabinet, again took up the Federation running. Observers saw his motives at that time as extending from a genuine sense of the inexorably advancing need for union of the Colonies and a jealous desire to gain recognition as the 'Father of his Country' to a practical politician's need to deflect from himself impatience at failure to resolve some local problems and consequent pressures in the factional politics of the day. Dibbs was now Leader of the [Protectionist] Opposition and more convinced than ever that, as he had said in the speech of 1884 from which quotations have just been made, 'until the Colonies can agree on a Federal tariff, there can be no complete Federation between the Colonies generally, or between any two of

17. *Ibid.*, p.6182.

them'.¹⁸ Parkes remained a Free-trader.

More than that, as Parkes in 1889-90 revealed his procedural ideas for the advance to Federation - by Parliamentary and Convention action alone - Dibbs insisted on his 1884 theme: the necessary direct role of the people, of the electorate. On 29 April 1890, in the Address-in-Reply debate, Dibbs threw it directly at Parkes again:

'...We cannot interfere with the existing Constitution, under which we meet as a legislature, without the absolute mandate of the people. I hold that, before anything can be done with regard to Federation - even the preliminary step of appointing a Convention with power to draw up a scheme - the voice of the people should in the first instance be obtained - and this is the constitutional law as laid down clearly and distinctly [a few years ago] by no less an authority than the present Premier.'¹⁹

Parkes clearly resented the way in which Dibbs had cast doubts on the sincerity of his 1889-90 Federation cry, which the Opposition Leader represented on occasion as resort to a kind of chauvinism in adversity, a diversion of public attention from his failures in the affairs of his own Colony.

Speaking to the Parkes Federation Resolution in the Legislative Assembly in May 1890, Dibbs pilloried Parkes for trying to exclude him, the Leader of the Opposition, from the New South Wales

18. *Ibid.*, p.6182.

19. NSW *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.XLIV, 29 April 1890, pp.36-7.

delegation to the forthcoming Australasian Federation Convention [1891] on the pretext that he [Dibbs] had disqualified himself by saying, the previous month in Orange, 'if we are going into Federation, it should be on the distinct understanding that that is a step of separation from the old country and towards the establishment of a nation of our own'.

Dibbs defended his right to his own views, and to represent his side of politics and express those views at the Convention. He went on, teasing free-trader Parkes:

'The difference between the Premier and myself is that he believes in a Federation which I believe will be incomplete and will never work....I am in favour of one united Australia, with one tariff law throughout. ...We [New South Wales] are just on the eve of putting ourselves on all fours with Victoria with regard to our fiscal policy... that great event which, when accomplished, will be the foundation-stone of federation. Our platform is a uniform tariff throughout Australia, and then federation would be almost an accomplished fact....I say that the proposal of the Premier is a partial scheme. The Federation which should be accomplished should be a Federation of everything in common. We would then remove our boundaries, and the questions of railways, lands, education, matrimonial disputes and every form of law would be common to the whole country.'

20

Here was advance notice of the Tamworth

20. NSW *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.XLIV, 14 May 1890, pp.405, 408, 410, 413.

speech and the letter to Patterson of 1894 calling for unification.

The Parliament rebuffed Parkes by electing Dibbs to the New South Wales delegation.

At the 1891 Convention and on its Judiciary Committee, Dibbs did not make a major contribution. Towards its end, indeed, he claimed: 'I have occupied less time than has any member of the Convention. I have been a very patient listener'. Deakin later wrote of Dibbs as 'the Ishmaelite of the Convention'. (That seems hardly to have been the view of the electors of New South Wales - six months later, shortly after the Protectionist advance in the general elections of 1891, he replaced Parkes as Premier).

At the beginning of the 1891 Convention, consistently with his view about popular participation in constitutional change, Dibbs opposed McMillan's move to limit greatly public access to its proceedings. Then, he urged, 'there will be no feeling that this is a secret conclave to take away the liberties of the people....We want to build up a nation, and, in order to do so, we must take the people into our confidence'.²¹ At a later point he advanced another of his long-time democratic principles:

'I am in favour of the principle of one man, one vote....If we are to establish Federation at all, uniformity in regard to these election matters ought to be one of the principles of that Federation....Why should

21. 1891 Convention Debates, 3 March. P.12.

we not now, in starting the larger scheme, affirm a principle of democracy in its purest form?'²²

In his speech of March 10 to the Convention he echoed again his earlier and later unificationist note:

'We have had from very able speakers, namely, Sir Samuel Griffith, Mr Deakin and Mr Barton, a clever discussion of one phase of the federation question, that is, State rights. ...But it appears to me that we are just a little in advance in dealing with the question of State rights before we agree amongst ourselves as to what is to be the real basis upon which federation shall take place.'²³

Yet in the same speech he lapsed into gross inconsistency, surely, in the following passage, with some of what he had said before - and urged later:

'It ought to be our duty, in any proposals which we make for legislation by the various Colonies, to endeavour to create a strong, powerful Senate, which will have the confidence of the people out of doors. We can do that only by giving a guarantee and an assurance to the smaller Colonies that we shall not leave them in such a position that they will almost be annexed to the larger Colonies, or simply wiped out of existence. We are not going to become provinces. I do not think we are going to give up the individual rights and liberties we possess.. ..to become mere provinces under a federal form of government. We may take the more

22. *Ibid.*, 2 April 1891, p.624.

23. *Ibid.*, 10 March 1891, p.175.

dignified form of "States"....There must be no surrender of territorial rights in any shape or form.'²⁴

Some other things he had to say seem to have been inconsistent. Thus he insisted that:

'I must say, as one possessing a slight tinge of republican notions, that...we are laying the foundation, and step by step are following in the lines, of a great nation, and in due time we shall become what America has become, a separate, free and independent state. That is what we are gradually doing.'

²⁵

At a yet later stage he supported retention of the right of final appeal to the Crown (i.e. to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council) rather than to a local Appeal Court.²⁶

Again, there seems little in common between his 'one man, one vote' to 'affirm a principle of democracy in its purest form' (already cited above) and his profession four days later:

'I hold that the Senate, to be of any power at all, must be framed on the direct lines of the American Senate and have co-equal powers with the House of Representatives. ...But now we have this maudlin proposition put forward for the Senate to make suggestions to the House of Representatives.'

²⁷

24. *Ibid.*, 10 March 1891, pp.176, 183-4. [See also his speech of 10 April 1891 at pp.752-5.]

25. *Ibid.*, 10 March 1891, pp.185, 187.

26. *Ibid.*, 6 April 1891, p.786.

27. *Ibid.*, p.753.

In the same speech, Dibbs proposed the Norwegian resolution of inter-House deadlocks - by majority vote of a Joint Sitting, without prior recourse to a referendum.²⁸ His words about the American Senate also ring strangely beside his 'too American' verdict about the 1891 Bill in following years.

More consistently with his longer term principles, Dibbs at the penultimate sitting of the Convention collaborated with Sir George Grey in moving for a plebiscite in each Colony on the draft Constitution Bill. Their motion received the support of Deakin of Victoria and Cockburn of South Australia, but in all it had eight supporters against 21 (including Barton, Parkes and Griffith) who insisted on leaving it to the Parliaments.²⁹

Earlier on the same day, in a little bit of 'symbolic politics' by way of registering his overall dissatisfaction at the deal New South Wales had received, and, doubtless, of playing to the home-Colony gallery, Dibbs moved an amendment to the Draft Bill to fix Sydney there and then as the Federal Capital of the future Commonwealth. The motion was seconded by Sir George Grey, but went down to defeat 4 to 26, the only supporters being Grey's New Zealand colleague, Sir Harry Atkinson, and Alex Forrest of Western Australia - not another New South Welshman

28. *Ibid.*, p.754.

29. *Ibid.*, 8 April 1891, pp.900-904.

stood to Dibbs.³⁰ As he later put it to the Legislative Assembly on May 28: 'Your traitor Premier and his traitor colleagues voted against New South Wales'. Meanwhile, on April 9, with Dibbs questioning and querulous to the end about the contents and balance of the Draft, the Federal Bill was carried on the voices by the Convention.

The more Dibbs reflected on the Draft Bill through the following month, the less he liked it and the more he appreciated how the small Colonies had stolen a march on the larger Colonies and, in particular, on New South Wales whilst its Premier and Delegation Leader basked in his Presidency of the Convention and his seeming prospects of soon achieving the glorious status of 'Father of his Country'. The small Colonies' interest had been reinforced from the outset, not only by virtue of their in-built majority in the Convention, but by the determination of Parkes and the other hard-core Federalists from the larger Colonies that they wanted Federation and they wanted it now. This put them to some extent in the hands of the shrewder leaders of the small Colonies. Significantly, three at least of the delegates from the latter - S.W. Griffith (Queensland), C.C. Kingston (South Australia) and A. Inglis Clark (Tasmania) were lawyers who came with draft Federal Constitutions in hand. These had been prepared from a 'small Colony' viewpoint (though Kingston himself was fair

30. *Ibid.*, pp.899-900.

and broad-minded) and all of them drew more or less heavily on the United States model which, more particularly if read without some of the later amendments and interpretations, was a 'States' Rights Charter' *in excelsis*. Behind the scenes during the Convention, moreover, it was Griffith who made the running with the drafting work. Another factor playing into the hands of the 'small Colony States' righters' was that this Convention did not really go into financial details and realities in anything like a full and thorough way - otherwise even the 'small Colony' ascendancy could hardly have called the tune as it did. The fact was that, at that stage in the Federation Movement, all too few of the leaders of the Colonies had really considered in any depth the financial implications of Federation. And it suited some who *had* gone deeper than others to stay fairly silent on that side of the issue.

Dibbs decided to strike immediately at the Draft Federation Bill in the new Session of the Legislative Assembly and so pre-empt the parliamentary initiative which Parkes expected to enjoy upon early tabling resolutions for acceptance of the draft Constitution - even as George Reid (who had not been a delegate) was taking the initiative outside the House with speeches and articles whenever opportunity offered. Before Parkes could move *his* resolutions, Dibbs introduced a censure motion in a speech quite as hard-hitting and effective as his attack of October 30, 1884, on Parkes for turning his back on virtually

his own Federal Council proposals. On May 28, 1891, he moved to the attack:

'If ever a country was on the eve of being tricked', he told the House, 'if ever a man in the important and responsible position of Premier shuffled, and tricked and betrayed the Colony of which he was the leader, that state of things exists here now. The resolutions of the Government upon the business paper are in accord with the resolutions passed in the Convention, betraying this Colony into the hands of the subordinate Colonies of Australasia....If one little Colony refuses to come into a Convention, then the Draft Bill, with all its sins and wrongs, all its curtailment of our liberties, will become the law of the land....[Tasmania] may say, "We require no Convention" and, under the resolutions of the Premier, no Convention is held....You, the Members of this House, representatives of the people, are asked to betray the best interests of New South Wales.[278] ...We all know that every attempt made to bring before the Convention the question of what was fair to New South Wales was simply ignored. The idea was that we must have federation at all costs and at any sacrifice, in order that the plan which the Premier had formed might be carried out. I should like to remind the Premier and the Colonial Treasurer [William McMillan] that, during the Convention, they step by step gave up the whole position which New South Wales holds.[281] ...We were blind. The Premier, with but one idea still dominating his mind - the one idea that he would have his personal vanity gratified by being the author of something like a consolidated Australia - was prepared to give way, and did give way, both in construction and argument in every conceivable shape to the master mind of the Premier of Queensland. Sir Samuel Griffith played battledore and

'shuttlecock with the members of the Convention, because Sir Henry Parkes found for once that he had met a mastermind; and that the operation of that mastermind would secure for him the carrying out of that object, which would counter-foil every act of his political opponents. Setting up this question of Federation, no matter what the cost to New South Wales, sacrificing everything to the other Colonies in order to secure Federation, his vanity was being tickled while the subtlety and cleverness of the Queensland Premier dominated the Convention. There was no length to which he would not be prepared to go to sacrifice New South Wales, and the Colony was sacrificed.' [282]³¹

In closing what he had to say about the Federation Bill, Dibbs reiterated his opposition to federation being slipped through by Parliamentary action alone:

'When the Convention resolutions [i.e. Parkes's resolutions of 1890 to provide for New South Wales representation in the Convention] were debated I said that the honest way of dealing with the question was, first of all to appeal to the people and ask them if they were in favour of federation, and to get from the people an expression of their desire for federation, and then - as every government must be governed by the people - when it was found that the people were ready for federation, set to work and prepare a Bill, which must be submitted to them as they alone were the first parties to be considered. When I spoke in the Convention I pointed out, and I reiterate it, that this

31. NSW *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.LI, 28 May 1891, pp.278, 281, 282.

'Parliament never had the power to legislate or to pass resolutions to destroy the Constitution under which we live. I said so when the Convention resolutions were before the House. I said so during the sitting of the Convention. And I say so now!'³²

Within five months, after an inconclusive election and a short, vain attempt by Parkes to carry on, Dibbs gained the Premiership. His holding and utilising of it required a steady sufficiency of support from the three dozen Labour men whose return for the first time in June-July 1891 so shocked established Parliamentarians. Even formation of his own Cabinet had required hard bargaining. Barton, for instance, like Dibbs a Protectionist convert, had said during the election campaign that 'so long as Protection means a Ministry of enemies to Federation, they will get no vote from me'; and that 'on Federation Mr Dibbs is a daily conundrum. What can we do but give him up?'³³ In the event, Barton and O'Connor joined the Ministry - as Attorney-General and Minister for Justice respectively - but only after exacting from Premier Dibbs a firm undertaking that they should be free to take the parliamentary

32. *Ibid.*, p.284. Significantly, most of the rest of this speech of censure dealt with the state of Colonial finance, borrowing overseas and support from and for the banks - a subject which was to become closer and closer intertwined with that of national unification in Dibbs's mind.

33. Martha Rutledge, at p.196 of Vol.7 of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

action necessary to advance the Federation Bill and the Ministry would support the Federation resolutions.

Of this undertaking Barton on November 22, 1892, took full advantage to move in the Assembly:

- '(1) That this House reaffirms its opinion in favour of the federation of the Australian colonies and...approves of the main principles...in the Draft Bill.
- (2) ...That the said proposals should be considered in Committee of the Whole, and that such amendments as may be desired by the legislative bodies of this and of the several other Australian Colonies should, together with the Draft Bill, be remitted to the consideration of a second Convention, similarly appointed by and reporting to the several Parliaments, and that the question of final adoption by any Colony of any proposal for a Federal Constitution should be submitted to the People thereof in their electoral capacity.'

In the ensuing debate there was poured out a great deal of unhappiness about the Bill's provisions. Labour Members, amongst others, expressed dissatisfaction with this project for Federation itself. But Barton carried the resolutions on January 11, 1893, Dibbs loyally honouring his undertaking and voting for them. At that point, however, land, electoral and emergency banking measures pushed Committee consideration of the Federal Bill aside. Indeed it was not called on until almost the eve of the departure from the Cabinet at the end of 1893 of Barton and O'Connor, consequent upon Parliamentary censure for their taking

retainers, whilst Ministers, against the Government's own Railways Commissioners.

Douglas McCallum has pointed out that '... unless you are going to have unification, then this is precisely one of the conditions of Federation - that the member States are prepared to come together for certain purposes, but are not prepared to surrender all their local interests'.³⁴ If anything was crystal clear in New South Wales by early 1894 it was that many interests and many of the citizens - not least, the Parliamentarians - concerned about the Federation issue were very unhappy about the set of powers proposed for the National Parliament in the 1891 Bill. Some were unhappy because they felt that some of the designated Federal powers had not been carefully thought through in context and had not been sufficiently thoughtfully drafted. Most were not happy because they felt proposed Federal powers and provisions did not, in total effect and on balance, do justice to the two most populous Colonies and, more particularly, to New South Wales.

34. D.M. McCallum, 'Sir Henry Parkes and Federation', *Roy.Aust.Hist.Soc.Journal*, XXXIV, 1, 1948, p.42.

III.

In 1894, the Government having had 125 new single-Member electorates for the Legislative Assembly drawn under its new Electoral Act to replace the electorates of one, two, three or four Members which returned 141 Members to the old Assembly, Premier Dibbs secured a dissolution. In the previous nine months he had survived some 13 censure or confidence motions; his support from the Parliamentary Labour Party had become uncertain; the E.W. O'Sullivan wing of his own party, the *Bulletin* and other occasional supporters were not very happy about his Government. Since 1885 Dibbs had been Member for the Murrumbidgee, in southern New South Wales. This time he nominated for Tamworth in the north, whose capture would give him the fourth electorate (and second rural electorate) of his Parliamentary career. The polling was fixed for July 7 - under the new Electoral Act all polling was - for the first time in New South Wales - to be held on the same day.

On May 21 the Premier delivered his opening campaign speech in Tamworth. As usual, it covered the highlights, as he saw them, of his Government's record in the old Parliament and of its policies for the new. It went on to proclaim at some length his championship of Unification rather than of Federation as the true constitutional basis for Australia's nationhood. The text on that theme ran:

'...I am now going to refer to the question of Federation, which has been disturbing the public mind of these Colonies for the last five years.

Some years ago, when the Freetraders were going down and Protectionists were coming to the front and their flag rising high in the sky, and protectionist principles were gaining ground amongst the people, a certain gentleman [i.e. Parkes. LFC] conceived the idea that the Colonies of Australia should all federate. The idea was that Federation was the one thing needful for these Colonies to become a great empire. Australia would become a great nation in one turn, but we would remain a dependency of the British Crown.

One poetic genius went so far as to write a poem in honour of the flag of the new nation, quite forgetting that, as long as we remain a dependency of the British Crown, we can have no other flag than the British. Poets are, of course, allowed a certain licence in discussing matters of this kind. For my part, I hope we shall long have the British flag flying over us.

Anyway, the Colonies were communicated with some four years ago and their representatives met in Sydney in what was termed a Federation Convention and everything was done in a moment with the stroke of a magician's wand to change these separate Colonies, which are competing and fighting with each other by means of their tariffs, into a Federation which is to resemble the United States of America.

Most eloquent speeches were delivered. A gentleman who has since become the Chief Justice of Queensland, and one or two others, went on a little picnic up the Hawkesbury River and returned two days later with a spic-

'and-span Constitution for the new nation. That Constitution was put into a Federation Bill and has been tossed about for the last three years, but no advance has been made towards actually bringing it to life.

That Bill just could not be brought to life. It never will be brought to life. And the simple reason is that the idea has not caught on with the masses of the people. Nowhere were its sponsors able to rouse enthusiasm amongst the people for Federation. The scheme as proposed in Sydney was no doubt admirable. Without doubt it was desirable that people inhabiting one territory should have the right of ingress and egress as between the Colonies and should be free of fiscal barriers.

So far, so good! But when the question came to be carefully considered it was found that the scheme proposed was absolutely unworkable - and for the best of reasons: the people were already taxed enough and did not want to have any more burdens imposed on them, if they could help it. They did not want to be taxed for 'glitter and gunpowder', as Mr O'Sullivan, that keystone of the democratic arch, put it. They did not mind being taxed for anything practical, but the mere idea of starting an additional layer of government above those already existent - at the cost of some extra millions a year - that was simply repulsive to the majority of the people. People just will not wax enthusiastic about any proposal in that direction unless they can see that it is going to be financially beneficial for them.

In the Federation Bill it is proposed that all the Colonies should remain separate and independent States. But if the several Colonies are to retain their State's rights, they must have not only the two branches of their legislatures, but, over and above that,

'a Federal Parliament which will be able to make certain laws - but certain laws only - which will apply to all the States. So long as the idea of States' Rights lasts, so long will there exist germs of disorder and disturbance amongst the States. We could have a repetition of what took place when the Northern and Southern States of America came into collision. Continuing separation and independence of the States, in my opinion, is a most serious blot upon the Bill.

During the last few years this whole matter has been the subject of academic discussion only. Yet to propound a scheme which will make for harmony and peace between the Colonies, and at the same time reduce the cost of government, is one of the most important issues we can ponder in these hard times.

I have thought over the Federation question a very great deal. Rather than this business of States' Rights, is it not possible for the people of the whole of Australia to knock down all the barriers and become one people? Is it not possible to stop all the tariff competition, which threatens to destroy the financial position of each and eventually to lead to war between the several States?

Is it not possible for a country like this, with a population of about four millions, to do with one Parliament and one set of laws, instead of having six Parliaments and six sets of laws and then over them yet another Parliament and a set of Federal laws?

Is it not possible to reduce the cost of government by wiping out at one stroke of the pen six Parliaments and six Governors and having in their place one Governor, one Government, and one Parliament? If Britain with its 40 million people can manage with one Parliament and one Monarch, why should we

'not do likewise?

As things are, look at our predicament. Take the cost of our railway systems - which, under the Federation Bill, would remain separate. At this very moment Victoria is making attempts to plunder our New South Wales revenue by taking the Riverina wool traffic to Melbourne. Victoria says to the New South Wales squatter in the Riverina: "We will carry your wool from 100 miles north of the Murray to the port of Melbourne for 4 shillings a bale", whilst saying to her own people a hundred or more miles closer to Melbourne on her own side of the Murray: "We charge you 7 shillings and 2 pence a bale for freighting your wool". This Colony of ours is pursuing a similar policy with regard to Southern Queensland.

Each Colony has built railways at an immense cost, and each system is cutting the throat of the next. An immense waste is thus resulting. South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, instead of working one railway system are working four systems, with separate gauges, and are cutting one another's throats.

To sum up my scheme for Australia in a few words: I should have one Governor and one Government for Australia; one Parliament and one set of laws from Cape Howe to Cape York; one railway system from Coolgardie to Sydney; one tariff, one excise, one defence system and one public debt for all Australia.

Instead of the Colonies fighting on the London money-markets for loans, I should consolidate the loans and I would stake my life that the result would be the saving of a million sterling annually to the people of Australia.

All this I should do along the lines of

'commonsense and practical utility. If anything like Federation is ever to be brought about, it must be brought about on economical and practical lines. If we are to be economical in small matters, we cannot afford to be other than economical on a question like Federation.

We must economise the cost of government and the cost of working all our larger institutions, which at the moment are wrecking and destroying and injuring the people of this country from one end to the other. We must have one nation and one economical system of government.'

³⁵

This section of Dibbs's speech reflects a view he had held for some years and shared with H.N. MacLaurin, in particular, amongst his Ministers.³⁶

Predictably, it received a bad press from his old enemies the *Sydney Morning Herald* ('...a project for some better world where self-sacrifice in politics is not unknown') and the *Daily Telegraph* ('What Sir

35. This text is derived by collating the reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 22 May 1894.

36. Cf. MacLaurin's unrepentant speech in the Legislative Council, August 5, 1897 (NSW *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.LXXXIX, p.2620): '...First of all, I think it might be as well to remind the House of the line I have always taken upon this subject. I have always been opposed to federation; but I have always been in favour of union. The kind of union I have always been in favour of is the one of which we have such a striking example in the most successful union that has ever taken place in any country - the union between England and Scotland, which is legislative union

George Dibbs proposes is not federation but annexation') and from most Australian newspapers further afield in other Colonies where the name Dibbs was something less than a household word. Thus the *Courier* (Brisbane) on 16 June 1894, wryly remarked of the Dibbsian initiative:

'Until now the other federationists could not get him to join them in their march towards their goal. Now, suddenly, he steps into a balloon of his own and sails away towards an ideal which is beyond the farthest point ever reached in their dreams.'

The *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, in its determination to remove the Protectionist Dibbs from office, sought to cordon off all Federalists from his support. It represented his Tamworth proposal as distinguished by 'its originality and its audacity - the bitterest enemy of federation never suggested anything better calculated to injure the movement than

- a union which would leave us with one paramount Parliament, and which would abolish local Parliaments, bodies which would no longer be necessary - a union which would give us one supreme power, with the necessary local and municipal government for the different divisions of the continent. Such a union, I am certain, would be for the best interests of everyone. But a federal union is one with which I cannot at all agree, because I believe that the evils which would result from it would far more than counter-balance any benefits which it might produce. I believe that it would be so cumbrous, so inefficient, and so attended with expense, that it would do very much more harm than good to the community'.

this'. It characterised his Tamworth Unification proposal as no more than a spanner thrown into Opposition Leader Reid's tactics for advancing the Federation issue and as a mere diversion of popular attention from the less successful aspects of Dibbs's record as Premier by a show of New South Wales chauvinism in the national field. In the event, the merits and demerits of Dibbs's Unification proposal do not seem to have been widely or seriously discussed in the reported speeches of other Parliamentary candidates.

Yet, granting that Dibbs may have seen an immediate 'electoral-tactical spin-off' deriving from this section of his speech, it undoubtedly represented *both* his long-since revealed personal convictions regarding the best basis for national government *and* the new urgency which he felt the Australian financial and economic misadventures of the previous two years had placed upon its adoption. Indeed, Dibbs's official paper of 1893³⁷ in reply to A.G.V. Peel on the Australian financial malaise, already contained traces of the thinking which was to issue in his Unification arguments of the following year.

The sequel and justification of the Tamworth proposals were not long in coming. On June 12, 1894, Dibbs despatched a long formal letter to the Victorian Premier, Sir James Patterson, advocating his unificationist approach to national union in a more systema-

37. See above pp.16-17.

tic and detailed formulation, underpinned with telling facts and figures, than he had had time to unfold in his Tamworth manifesto. In the tactical qualifications he now admitted - notably an 'instalment' advance to the goal, with a Victorian/New South Wales merger as the first stage - he was conceding to political reality.

None had insisted more vociferously or consistently on referenda in these national constitutional matters than had Dibbs in 1890-91. As a realist, however, he now appreciated that referenda on unification, if held in 1894 against the background of the recent small-Colony, States' Rights 'coup' on the 1891 Commonwealth Bill, would not bring into a *unified* Commonwealth scheme all - or perhaps any - of the less populous Colonies.

Accordingly, he was suggesting *as a first step* that the two richest and most populous - and, happily, contiguous - Colonies should unify, demonstrating thereafter in action the efficacy of that course in respect of everything from economic strength and public financial economies and consequentially reduced interest rates on British developmental loans to rational, economical political processes. That demonstration would assuredly attract into the union the smaller Colonies as they contrasted with it their own growing relative economic, commercial and political disadvantages.

As election day approached, the Sydney *Bulletin* (30 June 1894) offered this low-key and

characteristic judgment of Dibbs's letter:

'His published scheme contains no gorgeous imagery about the destinies of this great nation, or the Southern Cross, or any other Parkesian heroics. It is perhaps the most promising that has yet been advanced....It is a plain and dismal matter-of-fact statement of certain cash advantages to be gained, and, being what it is, it appeals to the ordinary intelligence as the great Convention fantasy never did.'

The immediate reflection one has today is that, had Dibbs sent this same powerful, detailed argument and step-by-step proposal to Patterson earlier - on May 20, 1894 - and released it to the press at mid-day on May 21 (i.e. the day when he delivered his Tamworth policy speech) the impact of the Unification section of the speech should have been much more positive and fortunate. Even had he had the Patterson letter ready in May, however, as a practical politician and candidate Dibbs would probably have felt that its release simultaneously with his policy speech might well have led in *New South Wales* to an unfortunate relative overshadowing of the vote-winning 'baits' he had carefully worked into the speech.

For all that, the *letter*, coming three weeks *after* the main policy flurries of the parties, probably got more extensive and serious textual consideration from editorial writers and concerned citizens at home and across Australia by virtue of that timing. This, it can be urged, ensured it the

more surely a place amongst the landmarks of the Federation story as we read it with the advantage of hindsight in 1980.

Here, then, is the text of the Dibbs letter to Patterson of June 12, 1894, as published complete with newspaper subheadings in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on June 15, 1894:

Chief Secretary's Office, Sydney
12th June, 1894

To the Hon.
Sir James Patterson, KCMG, MP,
Premier, Victoria.

My dear Sir James Patterson,

I wish to place before you, and before the people of Australia, for consideration the bearings as they have impressed me of those great political, financial, and commercial questions which are summed up in the word "federation". It would be impossible successfully to convey in a speech imperfectly reported the figures I have before me as to the advantages and disadvantages of Australian unity; and at this period any speech of mine necessarily wears a political aspect, and not unnaturally induces criticism of a party character. But the unity of Australia, to be successfully accomplished, must be lifted above party; and in directly communicating with yourself upon the matter I can point out more effectively how the financial and commercial advantages of union can be best secured to all sections of the people - how the obstructive spirit of provincialism can be curbed within the least harmful limits. As for the gain to these colonies from political unity, they are too obvious to need more than a passing attention.

Federation v. Commonwealth

The consideration I have given to the various aspects of federation since the National Convention of 1891, but more especially since the fiasco of the banking crisis found us so injuriously divided, has led me to the conclusion that it would be easier first to completely unify the interests of the two great colonies of Victoria and New South Wales, and then to attract neighbouring colonies within the sphere of our extended influence. But if our neighbours should elect to unite with us forthwith, I quite admit they should be welcomed cordially. The following observations will, however, sufficiently indicate that it is not "annexation", but a "partnership". I desire to see cemented between us a partnership necessarily giving a great enlargement of area to Victorian producers, merchants, and capitalists, which you will agree with me their enterprise undoubtedly needs; but, at the same time, a partnership securing to New South Wales producers and manufacturers an unfettered enlargement of markets likewise. The room for exclusion on either side must be narrowed down to inconsiderable proportions. I need only refer to one fact among many to show the light in which I have always regarded the measure endorsed by the National Convention. Under the Commonwealth Bill, the major portion of the southern and western trade of New South Wales would have been thrown into the hands of Melbourne and Adelaide, while New South Wales coal could, and probably would, have been excluded from the Victorian and possibly the South Australian railways systems. When freedom without favour has been secured to the producers in both or all the colonies, and when the provinces - there must necessarily be provincial administration - agree to equitably share results, I become as strong a federationist as any on this continent. I

have opposed the Commonwealth Bill because it is at once un-English in principle, unfair and unworkable in its provisions.

Commonwealth Too American

In the first place let me briefly recall certain conditions laid down in the Commonwealth Bill, as in so doing I shall be the better able to impress, not only the views I entertain as to the striking shortcomings and malformations of that draft measure, but also what provisions such a measure should include. It is worth remarking that all the colonial Legislatures which have discussed that proposed bill have admitted the need of alteration, but have stopped short of those material provisions which the founders of British North American unity considered essential at the outset to the establishment of the Dominion of Canada. I propose referring to those essentials later. The Commonwealth Bill leans too much towards American terms and constructions (whole pages are merely a paraphrase of the American Constitution), each colony being converted into a State retaining its Governor, Ministry, and two Houses of Legislature, while it superimposes a Governor-General, a Ministry, a Senate, and a House of Representatives.

Federal v. State Government

Were Australia or Australasia partially united for purposes of intercolonial trade, postal and telegraph services, and defence under this arrangement, the representation would stand thus:

	FEDERAL GOVERNMENT				STATE GOVERNMENT			
	Governor-General	Ministers	Senators	Representatives	Governors	Ministers	Legislative Councillors	Members of Assembly
N.S.W. ...	)	(	8	41	1	9	70	125
VIC. ...	)	(	8	40	1	9	48	95
S.A. ...	) 1	7 (	8	11	1	7	24	54
QLD. ...	)	(	8	14	1	8	39	72
W.A. ...	)	(	8	4	1	5	15	33
Total, Australia	1	7	40	110	5	38	196	379
N.Z. ...	-	-	8	18	1	7	40	75
TAS. ...	-	-	8	5	1	4	18	36
AUSTRALASIA	1	7	56	133	7	49	254	490

Multitude of Counsellors

As the State Governments would be retained with extensive, and financially supreme, powers, there would, if the Commonwealth embraced the whole seven colonies, continue to be 744 State legislators, and in addition 189 joint legislators, making 933 in all, with eight Governors, and 56 Ministers of the Crown to govern 4,000,000 of people, while the United Kingdom has hardly a greater number of legislators, and only about one-fourth the Ministers to govern 40,000,000, exclusive of over 300,000,000 in India and the colonies. Is not the maintenance of one paid legislator

to every 1000 people preposterous? England is content with one to every 40,000, and pays him nothing. Western Australia would be represented by one paid representative to every 1000 inhabitants.

Financial Aspect of Commonwealth

The additional expenditure entailed under this Commonwealth Bill, I estimate as follows:

<u>GOVERNOR AND LEGISLATIVE</u>				<u>Per Annum</u>
Governor-General's salary (as provided)	....	....	....	£10,000
Governor-General's establishment	..			10,000
Cost of two additional residences (interest on)	....	....	....	20,000
Seven Ministers (as provided)	....			15,000
56 Senators (as provided) @ £500 each	....	....	....	28,000
133 Representatives (as provided) @ £500 each	....	....	....	66,500
Interest on cost of new Houses of Parliament	....	....	....	30,000
Maintenance of Parliament and officials	....	....	....	25,000
Additional <i>Hansard</i> and Government Printer	....	....	....	80,000
				£284,500
<u>MINISTERIAL ESTABLISHMENTS</u>				
Head office - Ground and buildings (interest on cost)	...			£60,000
Additional expenditure incurred in working dual establishments in all States (net)	....			500,000
Interest on cost of defence works, Custom-houses, post-office, etc., purchased from provincial Governments	....	....	....	480,000
				£1,324,500

A Prospective Loan of Twelve Millions

The Commonwealth Bill, it should be remembered, provides that "the fair value thereof" shall be paid by the newly-created Government to each State for all "lands, buildings, works, and materials" appertaining to the departments taken over, including defence works, post and telegraph offices and lines, Customs and excise establishments, lighthouses, and so on. This would immediately entail the raising of a loan for upwards of £12,000,000, the proceeds to be handed over to the separate States to spend how they chose, and that in payment for works and establishments which, I maintain, should be handed over free of cost. As a Commonwealth at its outset must borrow excessively, it would have to pay 4 per cent for its money, which would involve the £480,000 annually in interest stated above; and even then there would be a large expenditure on alterations and adjustments. Probably the loan would prove to be a couple of millions more than in my estimate as I have placed it.

Commonwealth Revenue Proposals

But this would not be all. Chapter IV, clause 9, of the Commonwealth Bill provides:

"The revenue of the Commonwealth shall be applied, in the first instance, in the payment of the expenditure of the Commonwealth, which shall be charged to the several States in proportion to the numbers of the people, and the surplus shall, until uniform duties of Customs have been imposed, be returned to the several States or parts of the Commonwealth in proportion to the amount of revenue raised therein, respectively, subject to the following provisions:

1. As to duties of Customs or excise, provision shall be made for ascertaining, as nearly as may be, the amount of duties collected in each State or part of the Commonwealth in respect of dutiable goods which are afterwards exported to another State or part of the Commonwealth, and the amount of the duties so ascertained shall be taken to have been collected in the State or part to which the goods have been so exported, and shall be added to the duties actually collected in that State or part and deducted from the duties collected in the State or part of the Commonwealth from which the goods were exported.
2. As to the proceeds of direct taxes, the amount contributed or raised in respect of income earned in any State or part of the Commonwealth, or arising from property situated in any State or part of the Commonwealth, and the amount contributed or raised in respect of property situated in any State or part of the Commonwealth shall be taken to have been raised in that State or part.
3. The amount of any bounties paid to any of the people of a State or part of the Commonwealth shall be deducted from the amount of the surplus to be returned to that State or part. After uniform duties of Customs have been imposed the surplus shall be returned to the several States or parts of the Commonwealth in the same manner and proportions until the Parliament otherwise prescribes."

"Incomprehensible, Unsuitable, and Unworkable"

Now this clause, which I regard as one of the most important machinery clauses in the entire bill, is, I maintain, at once incomprehensible, most unsuitable, and altogether unworkable. It starts with the provision that "the expenditure of the Commonwealth shall be charged to the several States in proportion to the numbers of their people". This, if it were followed by any consequences, would be altogether unfair. I need only point out that the far larger areas and the longer distances to be traversed in New South Wales and in Queensland than in Victoria would entail a larger proportion of the expenditure in the northern colonies than in Victoria. But the bill having made this division proceeds at once to ignore it. For if the Commonwealth in its completed shape raised a revenue of £13,000,000 as under:

Customs	£8,000,000
Excise	2,000,000
Posts and telegraphs	2,000,000
Miscellaneous	1,000,000
	£13,000,000

the Commonwealth Bill proceeds to provide that there shall be next to no expenditure so to be charged to the separate States and that even then the charge shall mean nothing at all. It is the provincial Governments which are to retain the spending of the money. There would, it is true, be an outlay of rather over £2,000,000 on postal and telegraph services, and a further transfer of about £1,000,000 to the Commonwealth expenditure in the collection of customs and excise, on defence, and for lighthouses and quarantine stations. But the accounts of the Commonwealth would, in the main, consist of a grand surplus for each rival State to contend for

and dispute about, and, when secured, to expend just how it liked. This is approximately how the accounts would work out:

Revenue as above	£13,000,000
Expenditure taken over from the provinces	£3,250,000
Added cost of the Commonwealth (as already stated)	1,325,000
	4,575,000
Surplus for division	£8,425,000

In addition to this £8,425,000 the separate Parliaments would have internal revenue to the extent of over £12,000,000 so that the provincial Parliaments would, amongst them, have the disbursement of some £21,000,000 of income over the head of the so-called supreme Government. In short, the Commonwealth would, financially, be a costly engine to raise money that others might have the entire control of it. I admit that the Commonwealth Parliament would have power to legislate for marriage and divorce, weights and measures, currency, and the control of what may remain of the Pacific islands. But its financial subordination would be complete.

As I have stated, the charging of this £4,575,000 to the colonies is in reality a make-believe. I have estimated that there would be a surplus of £8,425,000 to divide amongst the States, and the clause I have quoted provides that this surplus shall "be returned to the several States or parts of the Commonwealth in proportion to the amount of revenue raised therein respectively"; that is, ignoring the previous sums charged

altogether. Then the clause interprets the meaning of the words "revenue raised therein", as far as Customs and Excise are concerned, as dutiable goods consumed therein. But how is it possible for these departments, after the goods have paid duty, say in Melbourne or Sydney, to follow every parcel to its ultimate consumers? The work thrown on the Customs and Excise would be vast and overwhelming, and there would always be contention and scheming and ill-will engendered over the division of this surplus. But, apart from this endless trouble and expense, the arrangement would soon prove most unfair to Victoria. Each State would have its railways, debt, education, roads, and other outlays to provide for, and, while New South Wales would receive a larger proportion of the surplus, she would also retain her enormous land revenues, and I consider such a division would extensively deplete the Victorian Treasury. As for permitting each colony to continue a system of distributing bonuses to industries which were not in force in other colonies, it would at once destroy the freedom of internal trade provided by the Commonwealth Bill. The Victorian Government might, we will say, grant a bonus of 6d per bushel on all wheat exported to neighbouring States, and enable her farmers to cut all outside growers out of the field. The bonuses, where granted, would have to be Federal. But I have written enough to indicate my opinion as to the hopeless unfairness and the unworkable provisions of this all-important clause. It must be swept away entirely.

Further Criticism Unnecessary

There are other provisions contained in the Commonwealth Bill I consider objectionable. That Western Australia should be entitled to return eight senators at the general expense, as against only four representatives of the people (on a population

basis she would only be entitled to two representatives) is absurd; and I hold that no State should appoint a greater number of senators than the number of its representatives in the Lower Chamber. That each State should support a separate Governor, and some of them ministries and legislatures as numerous, extensive, and costly as those of the entire Commonwealth, would be simple waste of money. But there is no need to continue this criticism to show the cumbersome, costly, unfair, and even unworkable provisions of the Commonwealth Bill.

Consequential Queries

Its omissions are even more ominous. Each State would retain its debt, its railways, and the control over revenues derived from its public lands and works. There would thus be not the slightest federal control over its expenditure of borrowed money; no control over the railway competition for business between neighbouring States - a competition already severe and harmful, but which would become yet keener and more costly as fiscal barriers were removed; while those colonies with extensive and attractive lands for occupation would be placed at a very decided advantage. No reference is even made in the Commonwealth Bill to a consolidation of the Agents-General offices in London, so that rivalries at that point would be as keen as ever. Why should there be this partial and vastly expensive system of dual control established throughout the length and breadth of Australia, with dual, and probably hostile, establishments in every State? Why should many of the greatest and most immediate advantages to be derived from federation be wilfully rejected? And why should heavy loans be again raised to pay for works already constructed, and for which money has already once been borrowed?

An All-Round Pool

How far more beneficial in every way; how far more likely to extend our revenues and minimise our expenditure; how far more impressive to the outside world and to our creditors in England, would be a complete pooling of our debts, our railways, our national establishments generally? We are none of us so badly off that we cannot be permitted to meet each other on equal terms. In such a partnership New South Wales would not be disposed to say to her neighbours, "Your debts are more burdensome; your railways and lands less productive than ours". We would give to the united Government that prestige and supreme control which is almost entirely denied under the Commonwealth scheme, wherein the Federal Legislature would be numerically and structually wholly overshadowed by the provincial governments; and without haggling over the items, we would be prepared to hand over our Customhouses, post-offices, and other necessary establishments for the common good, provided others did the same.

Plea For Local Government

That there would have to be local government, which would naturally take the dimensions of historic boundaries, as in Canada, is certain. But, as in Canada, those local governments would be confined within subordinate limits, and their expenditures restricted to purely local purposes, while their revenues would be derived from direct taxation, including, if need be, the right to levy a land tax (apart from municipal rates) and from a division of the surplus revenues of the supreme Government on simple and equitable lines.

Unification of New South Wales and Victoria

At the same time I am of opinion that New South Wales and Victoria, the two most prominent, populous, and wealthy colonies of Australasia, could far more speedily and readily arrange the terms of such a union of interests than would be the case if the other colonies entered into the compact at the outset. Since the days of our separation the boundaries of the two colonies have joined in reality as well as in name; and instead of being communities widely separated we are in touch and intercourse all along our extended borderline. It is for these reasons I have prepared the following draft outline of a scheme for your consideration and for that of the people of the two colonies: "Unification of New South Wales and Victoria as a preliminary to complete Australian Union". Union for all national purposes to be complete as under:

1. One Viceroy, or Governor.
2. One Parliament of two Chambers.
3. One Customs tariff.
4. One scale of Excise duties.
5. One joint debt.
6. One railway management.
7. One land revenue and one land law.
 Until the laws are consolidated
 existing regulations to hold good.
8. One defence administration.
9. One postal and telegraph administration.
10. Provincial Government, with wide local powers.
11. Surplus revenue of the Supreme Government to be apportioned to the provinces - partly on a population basis - partly on an occupied mileage area basis.
12. Certain departments of the Public Service removed from political influence may have their head-

- quarters in Melbourne, others in Sydney.
13. One High Commissioner's establishment in London, representing the whole.
 14. One Supreme Court.
 15. Title, "The United Colonies".
Afterwards, when South Australia and Queensland come in, the title to be "The Dominion of Australia" or "United Australia".

Thirteen Proposals Essential to Unity

I ask your consideration of these proposals *seriatim*:

1. One Viceroy or Governor. To retain four or five, or even more, subsidiary governors on their present footing would at once be costly and ineffective, and no good men from the United Kingdom would accept the apparently subordinate position. The Viceroy could enter into residence in the various provinces during a considerable portion of each year, and could, with the advice of each provincial administration, appoint a deputy or lieutenant governor in each province; but the multiplication of viceregal establishments must be avoided, and the expense saved.
2. One Parliament of two Chambers. In the Commonwealth Bill the provisions of the American Constitution therein adopted were unsuitable. We have not the population to support both an extensive and costly Federal Parliament, and at the same time more extensive state parliaments. The New South Wales Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly would be more numerous bodies than the "Senate" and the "House of Representatives" of all Australia; and while the best men in each colony

would certainly aim at securing seats in the Federal Parliament, the State Parliaments would be handed over to less experienced representatives, who, in such numbers and with such powers as were reserved to them, would always be giving trouble. While I should be prepared to see the existing members of Parliament, or a proportion of them chosen on a population basis, constituted as the first united parliament, I consider that, as regards the Upper Chamber, the provisions of the Commonwealth Bill were entirely inadequate. A Legislative Council consisting of 35 or 40 members from each of the two colonies of New South Wales and Victoria, and a Legislative Assembly (a far more Australian term) of 150 members, elected upon a population basis, would constitute far more serviceable legislative bodies, and with certain allowances for the expenses of members who had to transfer their establishments during the session, an adequate Parliament would be provided. Ministers - not less than seven nor more than ten - would be appointed by the Governor, and hold office so long as they had the confidence of the majority of the Assembly. It is curious that under the Commonwealth Bill, the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives would have been entitled to vote in divisions as ordinary members, and there was no provision for their remuneration.

3. One Customs Tariff. This joint tariff would have to be arranged by a joint committee and confirmed. New South Wales would not, I think, accept what would be regarded as prohibitive duties, but would be prepared to continue duties which are revenue-producing, and to meet Victorian wishes at many points. Such a tariff should be more revenue-yielding

than the tariffs of New South Wales and Victoria are separately. Last year the yield was:

New South Wales (with lighter duties)	£2,127,645
Victoria (with far higher duties)	1,610,020
	£3,737,665

and we should look to a scale of duties which should recoup the loss of the border duties and yield at least £4,000,000.

4. One Scale of Excise Duties. These would have to be dealt with in the same way as the Customs tariff. It should be an instruction that the yield should not be less than the existing two scales of excise duties. With enlarged markets this would prove one of the most expanding items of revenue.

Until rearranged by Parliament the death duties and, except in certain instances, the stamp duties and licenses might be permitted to continue as at present.

5. "One Debt". At present the public debts of, and interest borne by, the two colonies stand roughly as under:

	Public Debt	Interest, etc
N.S.W. VICTORIA	£57,000,000	£2,250,000
	49,000,000	2,000,000
	£106,000,000	£4,250,000

There are also trust funds which would have to be combined. New South Wales has the heavier debt and interest charge; on the other hand, New South Wales railways and public works pay better. But already our $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent inscribed stocks have advanced to par, and that of Victoria is practically up to the same level. With unification there would be a further substantial rise, and this will, within a short period, enable the joint Government to effect a conversion of the entire indebtedness on very favourable terms. This is a most important question, and we should be fully prepared to seize our opportunity when the London market is favourable. Conjointly, I consider such a conversion could almost immediately be effected upon a net $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent basis, the interest being reduced to £3,710,000, thereby giving at starting a joint saving of £540,000 per annum; and in a few years a still greater reduction in interest could be secured. I look for an eventual saving of fully £1,000,000 under this head. Unity would give New South Wales and Victoria fully the same prestige as that possessed by the Canadian Dominion in the London market, and it should be borne in mind that already Canadian 3 per cent stock is therein quoted practically at par. At 3 per cent our savings would be £1,000,000, and looking to the future as well as to the present this would be one of the most attractive and valuable results to be secured.

6. One Railway Management. At present the two systems of railways give the following figures in combination:

	N.S.W.	VICTORIA	TOGETHER
Miles	2,351	2,975	5,326
Capital, opened lines	£34,657,571	£35,806,977	£70,464,548
Gross revenue	£2,927,056	£2,925,948	£5,853,004
Working expenses	£1,788,516	£1,800,291	£3,588,807
Net revenue	£1,188,540	£1,075,657	£2,264,197
% on capital	3.48	3.12	6.60

	Deficiency to cover interest
New South Wales ...	£163,106
Victoria ...	344,267
Together	<u>£507,373</u>

There are working savings to be effected under joint management, but until there is established a uniform gauge between Melbourne and Sydney there is not room for great curtailment except in the item of stores. I have received an estimate, however, that at least £150,000 can be at once gained from a proper adjustment of rates in respect to the border traffic, and the re-establishment of the stock traffic, and that joint savings to the amount of £100,000 would also be possible in traffic charges. But a far

larger sum would accrue from an expansion in the general traffic between the two colonies. If we place this expansion at £250,000 net per annum - and it would in time be much larger - there is a total gain of £500,000 to be obtained by a unification of the railways of the two colonies, which would be largely increased when the Queensland and South Australian systems were included. I have already referred to the reduction in interest to be derived from a consolidation of the railway debts; and thus, with the joint interest on the railway debt reduced to about £2,500,000, and a gain of £500,000 in the net result obtained, we may look to convert the existing deficiencies on the two antagonistic railway systems, amounting to £507,000, into a joint railway surplus of fully £250,000 per annum after covering all interest charges.

7. One Land Revenue and One Land Law. The land revenues of the two colonies are at the present time altogether disproportionate:

New South Wales	...	£2,206,272
Victoria	...	474,038
		£2,680,310

Under the Commonwealth Bill the separation of these revenues would always have proved a powerful lever in the hands of the New South Wales Parliament. But the time is surely approaching when that part of the land revenue derived from alienation should definitely be appropriated either to repayment of debt or to new public works, and I for one should aim at limiting sales to the needs of genuine settlement. It has become evident that the land laws of this colony must be

revised, and it would, at the same time, be of advantage if the laws could be unified. Naturally, the higher New South Wales revenue involves a higher expenditure. But the appropriation to the common fund is essential to a full measure of union and a full Treasury chest.

8. One Defence Administration. General Edwards, when in Australia, urged this matter more forcibly than I can do, and its necessity is fully recognised. Increased efficiency rather than reduced expenditure should be at the same time the aim of the United Federal Government.
9. One Postal and Telegraph Administration. In this case a somewhat heavier loss is incurred in New South Wales than in Victoria, as distance tells, but there are savings to be effected by uniting the services, and they may be made to pay their way, apart from cable subsidies.
10. Provincial Administration With Wide Local Powers. The transfer of all national heads of income and expenditure to the Government of the united colonies naturally restricts the powers of the Provincial Administrations to local purposes. There would fall to their charge the maintenance of the inferior courts of justice, police, education, the control of municipal and county or shire councils, mining, agriculture, asylums, and the benefits derived from existing water, sewerage, and irrigation works, the whole capital cost of which would be taken over by the supreme Government. The constitution of these provincial Administrations might be left largely to the provinces themselves, with a power to veto objectionable actions by the supreme Government. There would in this way be effected a very substantial saving, which of itself would

cover the cost of the supreme Government.

11. Surplus Revenue of the Supreme Government to be Apportioned to the Provinces: Partly on a Population Basis - Partly on an Occupied Area Basis. I find that to effect a division upon a purely population basis would be impossible for the reason that occupied area necessitates a corresponding maintenance outlay. This may at once be understood from a comparison of the expenditure for local purposes of New South Wales and Victoria; but I point out that the surplus for division, after payment of interest on the debt, railway charges, and other outlay of the united Government, would not be extensive. It might, too, be absorbed by definite appropriations, *per capita*, for local administrative and educational purposes, and per area for grants towards the maintenance of roads and defined local works, care at the same time being taken to leave a surplus for eventualities in the Treasury of the supreme Government.
12. Certain Departments of the Public Service Removed from Political Influence May Have Their Headquarters in Melbourne, Others in Sydney. As far as possible, a fair division of independent offices, such as railways, justice, postal and telegraph services, which are better removed from political influences, may have their headquarters separated from the political capital. In commercial countries like these there is no need to combine our "Washington" and our "New York".
13. One High Commissioner's Establishment in London. The antagonistic political elements which now manifest themselves in Australia are manifest in London in an accentuated form. We are almost on all questions at variance in our representa-

tions to Downing-Street, and the main result of our multiplied establishments is to neutralise their combined influence. The consolidation of these agencies I regard as an essential to unity, thereby increasing our influence politically and commercially, and saving considerable charges.

Financial Paradoxes and Anomalies

Now, I have thus criticised the Commonwealth Bill of 1891 - I have made these suggestions with regard to what I consider a fair, workable, and effective scheme of union - because the people of Australia have never yet had the financial paradoxes and anomalies comprised within the hurried Convention Draft Bill fully set before them; and because I also desire to show why I have from the first strenuously opposed that ill-considered measure. The bulk of our deliberations were before, not after, that draft was set before us.

A Contrast: Wasteful Competition v. Effective Unity

Let me contrast the two proposals. The Commonwealth proposals would, as indicated, involve an additional charge of £1,325,000 per annum: would convert exclusion into wasteful competition between the colonies; would divide the vast surplus revenues of a powerless "Supreme Government" unfairly; would add greatly to the already cumbersome nature of our respective legislatures; and would have our official representatives in London even more hampered and antagonistic than they are now. It would simply be a machine for collecting large revenues, without the least control over their expenditure; and at many points the bill is altogether contradictory

and unworkable. Effective unity, on the other hand, as I have endeavoured to make clear, could save the two colonies at least £1,440,000 annually in our expenditure - a most important consideration at this crisis in our history:

Reduced interest on the joint debt (a saving to be increased after a time to £1,000,000)	: £540,000
Gain on railway administration	: 500,000
Savings in other departments from combination, fully	: 400,000
	£1,440,000

While, in added prestige, the internal strength in the unfettered enlargement of markets, in the supremacy of the national Legislature, and in addressing the British Government with one voice, the gain would be immediate and steadily increasing.

Sir George Sinks the Ego, But Speaks For New South Wales

I have not laid down hard-and-fast lines, which would not be open to discussion and modification in details. Neither you, Sir James Patterson, for Victoria, nor I for New South Wales, can definitely agree to unite upon such and such lines. It rests with the people to endorse and adopt them. But when I find sincere and ardent federationists pinning their faith to an unworkable measure, by reason of their having failed to grasp its operation, it is right to tell them that New South Wales will not be a party to such a scheme, and to state definitely why she will not be so. We did not join the Federal Council, because it was an effete and powerless body. We have not adopted the Commonwealth Bill, because it is a costly makeshift, and practically leaves us divided and rivals as before.

Joint Revenues and Expenditure

Under the scheme I have sketched out, the revenue of the two united Australian provinces would, in round figures, be:

JOINT REVENUES

Customs	... ..	£4,000,000
Excise and Inland Revenue	...	2,000,000
Land	... ..	2,700,000
Railways (excluding tramways)	...	6,300,000
Post and Telegraphs	... ..	1,400,000
Other sources (say)	... ..	300,000
		£16,700,000

The expenditure would roughly be:

JOINT EXPENDITURE

Vice-regal and Executive		
including printing	... ..	£250,000
Ministerial departments	... ..	300,000
Interest, etc.	... ..	3,750,000
Railways	... ..	3,600,000
Post and Telegraphs	... ..	1,600,000
Lands	... ..	500,000
Revenue Collecting Services	...	300,000
National Public Works (say)	...	1,000,000
Other services, contributions,		
subsidies, etc. (as may be		
arranged)	... ..	2,000,000

National Expenditure ... £13,300,000

leaving for division amongst the provinces:

Contributions to Provincial Admin:

(population basis).. £750,000

Education

(capitation grant).. 1,000,000

Roads & Bridges, and

local works .. 1,250,000

£3,000,000

Surplus (for reduction of debt) ... £400,000

These figures are purposely in outline, as details would have to be adjusted.

The Advantages Mutual

In what way, let me ask you, would this plan be either inequitable or impossible? I maintain that it would work with that minimum degree of inevitable friction essential to all good government. The provincial administrations, it is true, would not be the supreme spending departments; but you would have scope to sustain local interest, and to satisfy local requirements. Should they desire to borrow money for local works, they might do so through the Supreme Parliament, which would then retain the requisite interest from its annual contributions; while railways and national works would be constructed directly at the cost of the Supreme Government. I know that to Victoria, within comparatively confined boundaries, this enlargement of her area is a greater and more pressing essential than it is with us. I know that it will stimulate the trade of Melbourne. But, on the other hand, unity on such lines means many and important advantages to be gained by the people of New South Wales, advantages which will render the gain mutual. We here suggest no reservation of special or particular industries, and can tolerate none whenever we may enter into partnership. But we are, I think, ready and willing to enter into a bond of union, largely founded on Canadian precedent, which will enable us to become in reality, and not merely in name, a united people.

I remain, my dear Sir James Patterson,
Yours faithfully,

GEORGE R. DIBBS

Given the *facts* of the 1891 Convention and its draft Federal Constitution Bill, there was probably no better time in the aftermath than mid-1894 at which Dibbs could have put his proposition to Victoria. That Colony had been 'through the wringer' in the 1893 financial crash and was still floundering in a deflationary mire, losing trade, losing population heavily, much industrial and construction capacity at a standstill, much misery in its homes and streets. Some inter-Colonial comment gave Dibbs high marks for making his proposal at that time. After considering the letter to Patterson, the *Brisbane Courier*, for instance, wrote on June 16, 1894:

'The scheme is put forward with true Dibbsian courage....Last year's banking crisis found Australia injuriously divided....Virtually, the New South Wales Premier looks across the Murray with benevolent intentions and says: "Let us again be one. We separated for a while to our mutual advantage. For the same reason, let us now become one people"....He honestly proposes unification, which is not absorption....The letter to Sir James Patterson may be of genuine service. It at least emphasises the waste of disunion where union is possible in practical affairs, such as management of the debts and the railways. So it may assist in giving a wider breadth to Federation than is embodied in the Commonwealth Bill [of 1891]. Whatever influence it will have will tend to strengthen nationalism as against provincialism.'

To the South beyond the shadow of the election, too, there was an appreciation amongst Victorian businessmen of the force of points being made by Dibbs in his letter to their Premier. The

editorial of the *Australasian Insurance and Banking Record* on June 19, in Melbourne, came a good way to meet Dibbs when it commenced:

'The depression which prevails throughout the Australian Colonies is directing the attention of our public men once more to the question of Federation and the advantages which its accomplishment might be expected to bring. It is, above all, desirable that the Inter-Colonial jealousies which exist between the Colonies of New South Wales and Victoria, and which are causing a great deal of mischief in commercial and railway matters, should be terminated, and the relations of the two Colonies be placed on a satisfactory footing. For this and for other reasons the feeling is growing that, in default of federation of all the Colonies, the unification of New South Wales and Victoria might first be attempted. That accomplished, the rest of the work of federation would be a comparatively simple matter, for a powerful and wealthy State, such as that which would be formed by the union of the two Colonies, with their population of some 2,300,000, and their industrial and commercial advantages, would soon attract other Colonies into the fold.'

There was certainly in Victoria at that time something of a self-recognised guilt-feeling about their predatory economic policies, upon which Dibbs's proposal played, whether intentionally or not. Thus the Melbourne *Argus* wrote in a leader of May 31, 1894:

'The annoyance said by Sir George Dibbs to exist about the Victorian railways is readily understood. On our river frontier we are making huge reductions to the wheat-growers and to the traders across the Murray. In some instances we are letting them use our lines for half the rates we are charging our

'own people....Going to the Wimmera, we find the department which specially invites the New South Wales colonists to use our [railway] system is imposing special and prohibitory rates in order to prevent the Victorian farmers and traders using the South Australian lines [to an export port]. We can explain all this to ourselves, but we can scarcely hope to convince our neighbours that such a policy is federal or friendly.'

And on June 7, 1894, the *Argus* was again breast-beating:

'Melbourne is to some extent built upon the central Australian trade [i.e. that of areas inland from the Murray] and if we irritated our neighbours sufficiently it would be possible for them to take steps...to divert that traffic, [which is] nearly one-fourth of the trade of the port of Melbourne....It largely helps to make Melbourne a commercial and financial *entrepot*....We present a ridiculous and contemptible figure before the world when, instead of being intent on creating a nation, we are found to be eager only in picking each other's pockets.'

New South Wales politicians had been ready enough to lambaste some of this Victorian exploitation of the New South Wales Riverina and further hinterland - it fitted ill with the separation cries of an earlier Victorian generation. But neither were other Colonies given to weeping for Victoria's self-inflicted wounds of the early 1890s or for her temporary loss of commercial thrust and financial buoyancy. Thus the *Adelaide Register* on May 23, 1894, wrote sceptically - if not cynically - of

Victoria's Federalist knights-errant:

'So long as that Colony had markets in the other provinces for her protection-stimulated manufactures she held selfishly aloof when federal union with its concomitant of inter-Colonial free-trade was proposed; but now that she has got commercially into a *cul de sac* out of which [inter-Colonial] free-trade points the only way, she is eager to federate.'

The Melbourne *Age*, in some ways more critical of Dibbs's proposals than the *Argus*, still found some appealing *political* possibilities in the Dibbs scheme. Its leader of May 23, 1894, advanced these points:

'There is something very alluring in the thought of making a clean sweep of all the cumbrous legislative machinery which loads the various Colonies with useless forms and expensive ceremonials. A Colonial Parliament, with its effete senility of forms and trappings, its vice-regal imitation of royalty, and its costly system of party and responsible government,³⁸ is a spectacle that no man can contemplate with satisfaction. Sir George Dibbs's proposal would have the supreme merit of making at one swoop a clearance of all the petty aping of meaningless pomp and flourish; and in the place of these local Parliaments there would have to be planted a large system of provincial government similar to that which is projected for Scotland and Ireland under the Unionist plan of Home Rule. Moreover, in the sweeping away of Colonial boundaries we should settle all territorial

38. It will be remembered that Syme did not like Responsible Government and was a champion of 'Elective Ministries'.

controversies [e.g. Victoria and South Australia had been at odds in this regard. LFC], and the vexed questions which spring out of inter-State rights.'

Victoria was not only the other populous Colony, and basically wealthy. It was also one which had successfully asserted its separation from and independence of New South Wales within the memory of many still politically concerned, and even active, in the 1890s.

This may suggest some insensitivity and imperfection of political judgment in Dibbs in making the particular 'first step' proposal he did in his letter to Patterson. Ironically, he might have done more shrewdly to copy the outline of Parkes's 1879 Unification proposal³⁹ with simultaneous initial invitations to *both* Victoria *and* South Australia to join New South Wales in an initial unified nucleus. Then he would have been proposing to include at the outset one 'breakaway' along with one Colony (and a smaller one at that) which from its foundation had been independent of New South Wales. That formula would not have been open to the reaction that he was just trying to re-absorb a 'breakaway'. Moreover, New South Wales had ready-to-hand some 'sweeteners' or 'evidences of benevolence' to offer South Australia at that time - rail access to and a virtual monopoly of smelting and shipping benefits from Broken Hill and

39. See above, pp.i-ii & 23.

its mineral wealth, together with assurances about a favourable agreement on use of the Murray-Murrumbidgee -Darling river system and an end to all hard thoughts about the boundary differences with Victoria.

As it was, Parkes in fact accused Dibbs of stealing his 1879 'Unification' proposal.⁴⁰ This was, however, plainly not true and Dibbs promptly - and doubtless truthfully - denied ever having read Parkes's 1879 *Melbourne Review* article until it was brought to his attention after he had already despatched his letter to Patterson. He pointed out that the inspiration of his own letter and proposal (in substantial part at least) had been the Canadian Federation development and constitution of the 1860s, including the process whereby two or three provinces 'made the running' and provided constitutionally for the others to come in and subscribe to the Dominion Constitution (which, as Dibbs spoke, Newfoundland had as yet still not done).

40. See above, *Ibid.* In fact, once again, Parkes seems to have been in a senile fury at the thought that someone else might be a contender for his coveted title of 'Father of Federation' or 'Father of his Country'. Cf. his unamiable reference to Dibbs in a speech to St. Leonards voters on May 22, 1894, the morrow of the Dibbs Tamworth speech: 'Does anyone dream that each of the other Colonies would consent to be swept out of existence, and all their political institutions swept away in order to gratify the scheme of some madman who wanted to erect a Government for the whole of Australia, which is as large a continent as the territory of the United States?'

The reactions of the press of the smaller Colonies to the Tamworth speech and the letter to Patterson (from two or three of which quotations have already been offered) have a special interest. Some newspapers in those Colonies saw them as the proposal of an altogether false step as far as a system of national government was concerned. Thus the *West Australian* on June 18, 1894, commented on Dibbs's key proposal of a first-step merger of New South Wales and Victoria:

'If this be effected, it will still further bar Federation, for no other Colony would enter a federal [*sic*] constitution in which one of the members had such an overpowering predominance as would a united Victoria and New South Wales.'

From within New South Wales itself had been suggested a strong historical reason for doubting that the other three Eastern Colonies would accept the Dibbs proposal for 'incremental' Unification of the continent. The *Daily Telegraph* on June 15, 1894, posed the question: 'Can anyone who has the slightest familiarity with the reason which led to the secession of Van Diemen's Land, Port Phillip and Moreton Bay from the control of the central government in Sydney possibly believe that the forcible bringing together of these Colonies again under one government-

al domination would be practicable?'⁴¹

To this straight question by the *Daily Telegraph* may be joined Patterson's earlier sceptical challenge as reported by the *Sydney Morning Herald* of May 23, 1894:

'Patterson agrees with the Premier of the Mother Colony that it would be most advantageous to have one national debt, one defence force, and one tariff. But he points out that if there are to be no local Parliaments (even with reduced numbers of Members) local wants will be neglected and soon there will be a clamour for "Home Rule".'

In fact, after he and his Cabinet had bent over backwards to give Dibbs's letter some careful consideration, Patterson explained to the New South Welshman that the Victorians would welcome a two- or three-a-side Ministerial conference on the proposal, that they would welcome a virtually immediate customs union, but that they could *not* envisage an end to the Colonial Parliaments - or Sydney as national capital!

41. One wonders whether Dibbs, reading this kind of comment, ever regretted his impulsive and very public attempt to have Sydney written into the 1891 Bill as the Federal Capital. At the time it may have been good local politics and an understandable 'letting off of steam' after the Convention's adopting a 'States' Rights/weak Commonwealth' formula, but it was to be remembered against him and to cast doubt on his purity of motives when he declared for unification in 1894.

Some newspapers beyond New South Wales anticipated, or subsequently echoed, the *Sydney Morning Herald* criticism of June 15, 1894:

'The [1891] draft Bill was the result of consideration and debate on the parts of the representatives of *all* the Colonies, expressing the views, making the claims, representing the aspirations, and defending the interests of each and all....[If the Dibbs scheme were to be adopted] the effect would be to make two Colonies into one, and, therefore, if others were attracted afterwards, and the attraction became too strong to be resisted, they would simply be absorbed....Would it not be altogether unnatural to suppose that the other Colonies, not having been asked to have a voice in the [initial] terms, would be repelled rather than attracted?'

Yet not all the small-Colony press saw the proposals that way. In fact, the Hobart *Mercury* of June 20, 1894, had this to say:

'It is quite possible, though as yet hardly within the range of probability, that Sir George Dibbs has hit on a practicable road to Federation [*sic*]. At all events, he has done one good thing: he has broken once and for all with the [1891] Commonwealth Bill... That Bill must now be set down as "one of our failures". It will in future, we take it, be useful as showing rather what to avoid than what to adopt, and must be regarded as practically dead and almost forgotten already. We are disposed to agree with Sir George Dibbs that the machinery provided for in the Bill is altogether too cumbersome, or, as he puts it, too much on the American lines, so far as the retention of full powers by the separate Colonies is concerned....We have to consider whether his method of getting at Federation [*sic*] is likely to be the

right one. We incline to the opinion that it is. There cannot be a question that the union of these two (New South Wales and Victoria) would gradually draw in the others with an irresistible force. All things would work to that end. We hold, therefore, that if the two chief Colonies can unite, Federation [*sic*] has been made, what it is by no means at present, an absolute certainty within no long period of time.'⁴²

42. On Tasmania and the matter of union or unity, cf. T.A. Coghlan (*Labour and Industry in Australia*, Oxford, 1918, p.1950): 'At various times the Colony had felt its isolation very keenly, and on more than one occasion it had proposed fiscal union with one or other of the mainland Colonies, and even the idea of annexation to Victoria had met with some support. The question of Federation was therefore not one of party'.

IV.

As a live, operative document of Government (rather than simply one man's essay at influencing some of the minds of the Federation generation) the official Dibbs 'Unification Letter' of June 12, 1894, had the shortest of short runs.

At the polls on July 7, Dibbs personally won the Tamworth seat but lost the reins of government - and with them the only basis for any official initiative in the matter of *Unification*. Moreover, his successor, as a notorious and consistent Freetrader, lacked the fiscal rapport with the Victorians which had at least given the practising Protectionist Dibbs important common ground upon which to approach them. On the other hand, the new Premier, George Reid, was pledged to and intent upon a new move for *Federation*, albeit with ideas of a national level of government in significant respects stronger than that provided for in the 1891 Bill.

By the end of September 1894, the Victorian Premiership, too, had changed hands - from Patterson, the conciliatory but by no means wholly compliant recipient of Dibbs's June letter, to George Turner, a leader with arguably even more restricted vision and imagination than his predecessor. The federalism of the latter could be reckoned to be informed by 'the spirit of 1891'.

On neither side of the Murray in 1894, then, was there any ground for expecting a moment's further

official consideration of - much less any decision for Governmental action upon - anything resembling even Stage I of the Dibbs Unification plan. This does not mean, however, that some of his arguments, facts and figures, would not exercise some continuing influence amongst Colonial leaderships in the onward march of events. It had certainly contributed to a crucial 'raising of consciousness' in some strategically-placed minds about the financial aspects of Federation and the inadequacy in that direction of the 1891 Bill. It had also brought to the fore the possibility that union or federation might advantageously come by incremental rather than 'all-at-once' merger of the Colonies.

It is to be noted, for instance, that the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which had been so scathing about the Tamworth speech, had by June 20, 1894, absorbed the letter to Patterson and now editorially came half way or more to acceptance of at least the Dibbsian incremental formula for nation-making:

'...This journal has always been prepared to welcome the federal union of any substantial portion of the Colonies as a satisfactory beginning of the work of federating Australia. There are good precedents for such a partial union. The Federal Constitution of the United States provided that it should be brought into force when it had been ratified by nine of the [thirteen] States. As a fact, two of the thirteen States remained for some little time outside the Union. The federation of Canada began with four provinces. The Australian National Convention made provision for a similar

commencement by recommending that as soon as the Constitution had been adopted by three of the Colonies the necessary action should be taken to call the Constitution into operation in respect of those Colonies. There would be no surrender of principle nor of prospect in making such a limited beginning, provided that the federation so effected was a genuine and complete one.'

At the further (and premature) New South Wales general elections of 1895 George Reid was triumphantly confirmed in the Premiership, whilst George Dibbs lost the Tamworth seat to A.B. Piddington and retired finally from Parliament. (The 1895 election campaign was, incidentally, brightened - or saddened? - by a little comedy of geriatric frustration initiated by the Reid-hating Henry Parkes. 'Out of tune with Reid's fiscal and social reformism', writes A.W. Martin, 'he became obsessed with an ambition to head "a new party"'. In the 1895 elections he joined his old enemy Dibbs [in an attempt] to form a shadowy "Federal Party", which was labelled by the *Sydney Morning Herald* "an act of flagrant political immorality - an insult to the country").⁴³

Following this second electoral victory, Reid was able to push forward towards securing the democratically-elected Convention and the renewed drive for a more satisfactory draft Federal Constitu-

43. A.W. Martin, 'Henry Parkes', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.V, p.405.

tion for which he had gained agreement at the Hobart Premiers' Conference of January 1895. He was, however, by no means fully successful in convening it. First, Queensland failed, for various domestic reasons, to send a delegation at all. Secondly, Western Australia played an extremely equivocal role. Its 'Establishment' Parliamentary majority, under John Forrest's leadership, held off 'T'othersiders' of the Goldfields at gerrymandered arm's length. Now, despite the Hobart agreement, it insisted upon itself choosing the West's Convention delegates, rather than risking the influence of the thousands of rumbustious Federalists in the mining areas in determining their choice in a popular election. So, even without Queensland, the three small Colonies still had 30 delegates as against the 20 from the large Colonies of Victoria and New South Wales whenever the voting should divide along that line. This made the going more than difficult for men like Reid; it was fatal to ideas like those entertained by Dibbs, MacLaurin and men of like mind - ideas which were all but unrepresented in the Convention.

Dibbs's part in the Federation story after he left office and Parliament can be very shortly told.

He did not seek to participate in the 1897-98 Federal Convention. But he subsequently made not a moment's secret of his deepest disappointment in and disapproval of its handiwork, or of his determination to campaign to the end to prevent its acceptance.

The first (Adelaide) Session in early 1897 sufficed to demonstrate that, though some advances in detail from the 1891 Bill were achieved or brought within reach of a determined thrust, the new draft Constitution would fall well short even of Reid's requirements for an Australian federal system. The beams Dibbs and others had before-times shone on the current financial and economic weaknesses of the Colonies and on the economic and financial needs of an Australian nation caused some delegates to look longer and harder at the financial sections of the draft Bill they were preparing. Yet features like the 'Braddon Clause'⁴⁴ (which Reid and Dibbs equally abominated) were still resolutely voted into the Bill.

Moreover, the financial provisions were not alone nightmares to many New South Wales citizens - and notably to Citizen Dibbs. Peculiarly offensive, too, were the undemocratic provisions for representation in the two Houses of the proposed Commonwealth Parliament. First, equal representation of the States in the Senate meant that, at the outset, some 2.6 million persons in two States would return 12 Senators, whilst 1.3 millions in the other four States would return 24. This was the more significant and for-

44. The original 'Braddon Clause' (so-called for its sponsor, the Premier of the smallest State of all, Tasmania) as it emerged in 1898 from the Convention, provided that most of the customs and excise revenue of the Commonwealth would be remitted to the States indefinitely down the years ahead.

bidding inasmuch as the control of the Lower House over Supply and Money Bills had *not* been secured. Nor was that all. The Commonwealth Bill provided for many years of over-representation of the small States in the House of Representatives as well. Through whatever number of years it would require the populations of original small States to *justify* their having five seats each, the Constitution nevertheless guaranteed them each a *minimum* representation of five seats, however short their respective populations might remain of the mark qualifying them for that strength in the House. This meant that, at the outset, some 370,000 persons in two small States would have 10 Representatives, whilst from the other four States some 3,700,000 persons would have only 66 Representatives.

It was little wonder that men like Dibbs seethed at the work and fruits of the 1897-98 Convention - as he, at least, had those of its 1891 predecessor.

Indeed, after the Adelaide Session (1897) - by a nice irony - A.B. Piddington (opponent of Dibbs and his Unification plan in Tamworth in 1894, and in 1895 successful challenger there for the seat) had joined those, like Dibbs, who were so loud in their deploring of the 'Small State/States' Rights' dominance in Federal constitution-making. Suffice it to quote here just one Piddington sally - his indictment in the Legislative Assembly on October 26, 1897, of what he alleged was the 'bad faith' of the Western

Australians (who often held the balance of power in the five-Colony Convention):

'The Western Australian delegates', he complained, 'are playing nothing more nor less than the part of marplots....It is not the intention of Western Australia to come into the Union at present. My own belief is that the Western Australian delegates attend at the Convention for this purpose and this purpose only: that whereas they do not intend now to come in, they may give the Bill a colour which will suit them when they do come into the Union.'

45

Despite the 1897-98 Convention's giving more (and, thanks in part at least to the writings of Dibbs, Coghlan and others, more sophisticated) attention to the financial clauses of the new draft, some of these - *both* after the Adelaide *and* after the final Melbourne Sessions - greatly disappointed those who had stressed the need for great improvements in this direction in the 1891 Bill. 'The Chinese alphabet', said the New South Wales Statistician, T.A. Coghlan, in exasperation, 'is simplicity itself compared with the financial clauses of the Bill'.

45. NSW *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.XC, 26 October 1897, p.4155: By 1898-99 Piddington, from the Anti-Convention-Bill League platforms, sometimes spoke under Dibbs's chairmanship. His special targets were the Senate's proposed powers and their threat to Responsible Government; States' Rights; and the proposed financial provisions of the Bill. He proclaimed a preference for the Canadian Constitutional model.

If, at the end of the Convention, Reid could in all honesty go no further than his so-called 'Yes-No' distance with the Bill, it is hardly to be wondered at that a man of Dibbs's convictions found it altogether unacceptable, or that a man of Dibbs's temperament had no hesitation about trumpeting that judgment to the nation. He never ceased to make clear that Federation with a strong array of central government powers within a Canadian-type constitution was his *minimum* demand, with Unification his strong preference.

In 1898, Reid's Attorney-General, J.H. Want, left the New South Wales Ministry in order to have a free hand to oppose the Federal Bill root-and-branch in the referendum campaign of that year. Want was elected President of an Anti-Convention-Bill League in Sydney. The League campaigned widely and vigorously in the State for a 'No' vote, upon the central ground that the Bill fatally failed to provide for 'majority rule'. Dibbs, his banker brother Thomas, H.N. MacLaurin, and other community leaders were active in the League.

In at least its leadership, the League seems to have been an organisation of conservative commercial and other middle-class men of affairs. At all events, they were men of standing in their communities, many with close links with Legislative Councillors (in particular) and with influential Members of the Lower House. Consequently there seems, until the *second* referendum campaign of 1899, to have been

limited effort only to get together in opposition to the Bill with other elements, such as the rising Political Labour leaders, who were equally unhappy about the Bill and equally outspoken about its deplorable shortcomings. (In the 1899 referendum campaign, by contrast, Labour provided in Hughes, Holman and others, some of the most tireless speakers sponsored, in part at least, by the League).

In the 1898 referendum the Bill was carried in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania, not presented to the people in Western Australia or Queensland, and did not achieve the statutory majority in New South Wales. Want was promptly re-admitted to the Reid Cabinet. Dibbs, though not in uniformly good health, was elected on the motion of MacLaurin to replace Want as leader of the Anti-Convention-Bill League. His brother Thomas was already joint-treasurer.

Before he took up the leadership of the League Dibbs had chaired many of its meetings and done much heartfelt public speaking against the Bill. He was, after all, still the 'immediate past Premier' and, as a speaker, a major attraction. In a big pre-poll rally in the Protestant Hall, Sydney, on May 30, 1898, Dibbs unrepentantly affirmed that:

'I still hold to what is termed Unification ...because a union of the Colonies for the good of *all* the Colonies could be entered into upon fairer and cheaper lines to the taxpayers than the proposals of the present Bill....I believe that the power given to the States will be the curse of the whole

business. We want a perfect union of one nation. We do not want the smaller States fighting to take away what should be common to the whole.'

Dibbs and other spokesmen of the League were especially critical of, and incensed about, what they regarded as frequent 'double-talk' by Barton during the 1897 and 1898 debates in and out of Parliament on the significance of the Bill and some of its particular provisions. Dibbs was scathing, too, about those 'Billites' who lumped together and indiscriminately condemned as anti-union and as anti-Federalist all those who, from whatever political position, opposed the passage of the 1898 Bill as it stood with all its imperfections and inequities. In his opposition to the Bill and the 'Billites' Dibbs found himself on the same side as his old unfriendly critic the Free-trade Sydney *Daily Telegraph*. Both were able to stand the shock of this situation and it must have amused Dibbs to find himself so copiously and approvingly reported by his old scourge.

Nor did the limited number of concessions and partial concessions in the Bill's terms which Reid extracted from his fellow Premiers in Melbourne in January 1899 mollify Dibbs. On March 6 of that year, when Reid was hurrying through Parliament another Enabling Bill to allow of the submission of the Bill as revised by the Premiers to a second referendum, Dibbs returned to the fray in a colourful speech attacking both Reid's cavalier passage of the Enabling

Bill ('whipped through Parliament as though one were putting on a half-penny tax') and rallying the Anti-Convention-Bill Leaguers of yesteryear into action again. To the latter end it was a typical politician's speech, intermingling constitutional points with cheer-raising home-Colony chauvinism. The following excerpts from that speech will convey something both of its substance and its flavour:

'Are the citizens of Sydney willing to sit under this yoke which has been forged for us, ...which settles our hash as an individual Colony for all eternity and brings about a union which cannot be dissolved without the shedding of blood? Or are we going to open our mouths and, incidentally, our pockets, to fight? ...There has been too much of a slavish Chinaman copy of the American Constitution, which has been but slightly altered to suit local requirements. The revised Bill today is absolutely worse than the one sent down to the Melbourne Conference of Premiers....Our representative [i.e. Reid] who was sent to Melbourne to confer with other Premiers, and was backed up by both Houses of Parliament, has, to use a well-known term, been "nobbled". Those gentlemen [i.e. the other Premiers] closed the doors of the Conference against the press and the public and took upon themselves what the Czar of Russia dares not do....The Premier has betrayed us. Mr Reid has undoubted ability, but he had no right to give us away. He has shown marked ability in everything but in sticking out for our rights and privileges as Australians....I have been denounced as a unificationist. I don't really see the difference between Federation and Unification, if only we kill State rights in the first act. If State rights could be wiped out tomorrow the Colonies would unite the same day....If

the Braddon Blot was bad, then it is no better now. [Reid had won in Melbourne agreement on a limitation to ten years "and thereafter until Parliament otherwise provides" on the Commonwealth's spending no more than a quarter of its income from customs duties and excise, the rest going as of right to the States. See *Constitution*, Sec.87. LFC] But we are to have the taste of it for at least the first ten years!.... As for the Melbourne "concession" on the National Capital, a greater piece of impertinence could not have been offered to this Colony. Is Sydney a leper spot? Yet people who would not accept everything that the Victorians laid down are called provincialists!....Under this Bill, New South Wales is not getting fair and equitable representation and I for one am willing to fight to the last, with purse as well as voice, against the Bill.'

46

Dibbs delivered another such rousing oration before a capacity audience of some 5000 in the Sydney Town Hall on the occasion of the official opening of the League's 1899 Anti-Bill referendum campaign on March 27. At Paddington, on May 23, Dibbs displayed fairly accurate prophetic powers when, condemning Reid's deal for the permanent Federal Capital in New South Wales in return for its temporary presence in Melbourne, he declared: 'If the Capital is in Melbourne for three months it will be there for 30 years. There is a land-booming crowd in Melbourne prepared to

46. Excerpts are from the versions of the text reported in the Sydney press (principally the *Daily Telegraph*) of March 7, 1899.

subscribe flm. to keep the capital in Melbourne for even five years'.

That Dibbs's basic complaints, notably his complaints on financial and economic contents of the draft Commonwealth Bill - even after the January 1899 Premiers' Conference - met with some sober, solid sympathy even south of the Murray is evidenced by the editorial 'Federation' in the February issue of the *Australasian Insurance and Banking Record* (published in Melbourne). A short extract will make the point:

'....It is still to be keenly regretted, however, that the Bill does not provide absolutely for a consolidation of the public indebtedness of the Colonies, or for an equitable settlement of the existing railway rivalry. Intermittently for many years to come most of the Colonies have to face one of the most troublesome financial problems, viz., the redemption or conversion of maturing loans....The conversion process would be facilitated, and the arrangements regarding the future of Australasian indebtedness would be improved, could every conversion from this time forth be effected by the issue of an Australian consolidated stock. The Federal Parliament is *permitted* by the Constitution Bill to take over the public debts of the States, but something better than a promissory clause is desirable. The question of railway rates is left in an ambiguous position....The Constitution Bill will therefore actually have the effect not merely of perpetuating, but largely also of augmenting provincialism in railway control....The fiscal provisions of the Constitution Bill remain in all their faultiness, and it is to be feared that for several years after they come into effect there will be much

confusion.'⁴⁷

The Anti-Convention-Bill League's many branches formed throughout the Colony in 1898 were reactivated and a hundred and more new ones added for the 1899 campaign. Speakers, literature and funds were contributed from Sydney. Henry Bournes Higgins - a dissenting member of the 1897-98 Convention - was brought from Victoria to reinforce the local speakers. Men like A.B. Piddington were enlisted to speak with him - at times under the chairmanship of none other than his predecessor as Member for Tamworth, George Dibbs. But the tune of Piddington was now very much the long-time music of Dibbs. Piddington's speech at the Protestant Hall, Sydney, on June 9, 1899, was frequently punctuated by enthusiastic applause as he declared:

'Once this Bill is rejected, it cannot be long before a fresh step is taken to produce a measure that will re-echo all the principles of liberty which Englishmen have established in their Constitution in the Old Country and in those of all the Colonies of the Mother Country. But first this Bill must be defeated before construction can commence. We must make the bounds of freedom wider instead of restricting them as is done under this Bill.

'The key to all successful government is

47. *Australasian Insurance and Banking Record*, Vol. 23, 20 February 1899, p.76. It was not until 1928 that the first substantial amendment in these areas of the Constitution was made - the first, and - to this date - the last.

finance. If we have strong financial provisions we shall have strong government; if we have weak financial arrangements we shall have weak government. If we have complicated, unnatural and difficult provisions in regard to finance, we shall find these evils reflected all through government. It is the paltry financial basis of union which will cause all the troubles under this Bill. There are in its financial provisions every element of friction and inter-Colonial dissatisfaction, tensions which do not exist in the comparatively isolated Colonies of today. If we are to have under this Bill a huge Federal surplus which is to be distributed upon no principle but a Parliamentary scramble, we should ask ourselves how much longer our pure, uncorrupted political life will continue. There is no precise principle upon which the Federal surplus is to be distributed. The financial scheme embraced in the Bill is not Federation at all.

'In a Federation we should have expected that the Federal Government would be absolutely supreme in its own sphere. It would owe no obligations or duties to the States, which in their turn would be independent within their field of powers. Let the two planets - the Federal and the State planets - revolve in entirely different orbits, because should their orbits cross there will be serious danger of collisions. This scheme of Federation would kill Responsible Government. This Bill is empty of the fruits of experience and full of the seeds of fateful experiment.'

(At the conclusion of the speech three cheers were given for 'majority rule' and three more for the Chairman, George Dibbs).

But the Bill yearned for by Dibbs, MacLaurin, Piddington and their allies - whether modelled on outright Unificationist or upon Canadian Federal lines - was not to be. At the polls on the 1899 version of the Commonwealth Bill - polls spread over the months of April 1899 to July 1900 - all six of the Australian Colonies adopted the Constitution and in the latter month Queen Victoria signed the Commonwealth Constitution Act, proclaiming it two months later. In New South Wales the Anti-Convention-Bill League failed by a clear margin. They had increased the 'No' vote from 66,228 in 1898 to 82,741 in 1899. But Reid, Barton and their allies achieved an increase in the 'Yes' vote from 71,595 in 1898 to 107,420 in 1899.

In a letter to the able but ill-starred Lord Beauchamp, Governor of New South Wales, written a few days before the Governor sailed for Britain on November 1, 1900 - just two months before the Commonwealth of Australia came into being on January 1, 1901 - George Dibbs indicated that he had not even then struck his flag:

'I am sorry that you are going', he wrote, 'and I consider you have not received very kindly support from our peculiar people - they want continual change, and they are about to have a change which, after the excitement subsides, they will find a permanent blister. I am not at all in love with the scheme of federation and would have preferred unification - but our statesmen took an object lesson from Colonel Bill's country and to a large extent have made a

blind copy of the American plan. I fear it will lead to trouble....'

.

George Dibbs lived under the Commonwealth Constitution he abhorred for three and a half years, dying at his Sydney home on August 4, 1904, less than a fortnight before his one-time ally in criticism of the 1891 Commonwealth Bill and his ultimate antagonist on the question of the 1899 Bill, George Reid, was sworn in as fourth Prime Minister of Australia in that dread twenty-seven-year temporary Southern national capital, Melbourne!

In the Federal constitutional struggle of the 1890s, Dibbs lost every round except that of 1898. Yet very different men who knew those days and the great events in which Dibbs was involved paid tribute to his contribution, overwhelmingly disappointing though he himself felt it to be. In retrospect, Fred Johns, writing of Dibbs's 1894 approach to Patterson, when the issue of Australian union was rather in the doldrums, held that 'his unification scheme helped to make the Federation issue a real one'.⁴⁸ Quick and Garran, opponents on the Federation question, frankly admitted in 1901 that his 'unification idea has undoubtedly had some influence on the structure of the

48. Fred Johns, *Australian Biographical Dictionary*, Melbourne, 1934, p.101.

Constitution as it stands today'.⁴⁹

Finally, there was B.R. Wise. As a New South Wales Free-trader and Federalist 'Ultra', he was one of Dibbs's most trenchant and unrelenting opponents. In the late 1890s he had gone about commending the Federation Bill as a panacea which would annually cost his fellow citizens only three shillings and sixpence a head, 'about the same as the cost of registering one's dog'. But long afterwards, living under the unitary constitution of the United Kingdom in 1913, he recorded that 'Sir George Dibbs was a gallant figure at all times'. He made one of the most telling revaluations of Dibbs's 1894 letter to Patterson and the living significance and value of its contribution for Australians:

'This scheme, impracticable as it was at the time, was supported by arguments which must carry greater weight with every year's experience of the inconvenience of a federal system, and every quickening of the spirit of Australian nationality. With great force, Sir George Dibbs pointed out the ridiculous division of control over public debts, railways and land revenues; the expenses of a double system of government; the absurdity of equal representation in the Senate; and the immense advantage, by contrast, of a "complete pooling of our debts, our railways, our national establishments generally, with a view to extending our revenues and minimising our expenditures"...The practical advantages of a more unified Government are so great that, if present indications are a guide to

49. Quick and Garran, *The Annotated Constitution*, Sydney, 1901, p.157.

the future, the arguments of Sir George Dibbs will receive greater consideration as the years go by.⁵⁰

It is a hard lesson, much more pressing than it was in 1913, which Australians have yet to shed enough blinkers and prejudices to master.

From the vantage-point of 1980 it is clear that the Dibbsian message of 1894 (and the years before and after) is one of the richer threads in the tangled skein of Australia's Federation story. It was not a thread inserted by Dibbs alone. By 1899 there was a remarkable spread of men whose diverse political and economic policies and ideologies brought them to share at least a conviction about the need for a much stronger national government than was dreamt of in the philosophies of the dominant Federalists of 1891 and 1897-98, or reflected in the Constitutional drafts they fabricated. By 1899 George Dibbs and Normand MacLaurin were sharing platforms with A.B. Piddington, some of the more aware pioneer Political Labour leaders, and sharing their disappointment and frustration with men like Henry Bournes Higgins from beyond the boundaries of New South Wales. The Commonwealth Constitution of 1900 was not their choice. Amendments made and judicial interpretations given since have brought it a little way in their direction. There is much more ground to be made yet.

50. B.R. Wise, *The Making of the Commonwealth*, London, 1913, pp.196-8.

A Bibliographical Note
On Sources of Varying Usefulness

A Dibbs bibliography - even for those few public aspects of his career to which this short monograph has been directed - is a much more difficult project than one for, say, Barton or Parkes. Dibbs apparently left no memoirs; wrote no articles of consequence; few, if any, of his speeches, parliamentary or otherwise, gained wide circulation in off-print or pamphlet form. He has not been the subject of a published biography; only one thesis has apparently been focussed on him - and that was less than satisfactory on his Federation/Unification story, apart from tending too heavily to the 'received' Federation story as it has come down through the Federalist 'Ultras' and their historian-disciples.

So most of the Dibbs history has to be prospected afresh and quarried piece by piece from such sources as the NSW *Parliamentary Debates*, the reports of the proceedings of the 1883 Inter-Colonial Convention and the debates of the 1891 Australasian Federation Convention. Beyond that there are the NSW metropolitan and appropriate provincial daily and weekly newspapers, monthly journals and the like. Occasionally - as in May/June 1894 - the press of the other Australian Colonies briefly notices Dibbs.

There is no one corpus of 'Dibbs Papers' in Sydney or Canberra. Patient use of the Mitchell or

National Library card-indexes to their manuscript collections will yield 'a few ounces to the ton'.

A modicum of initial assistance may be found in the *Australian Encyclopaediae* of 1925-26 and of 1958; in Philip Mennell's *Dictionary of Australasian Biography* (1892); in Fred Johns's *Australian Biographical Dictionary* (1934); and in Percival Serle's *Dictionary of Australian Biography*, Vol.I (1949). In a higher class is B.E. Mansfield's article on Dibbs in volume IV of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Melbourne, 1972), though the author unfortunately gives little attention to our principal preoccupation here - Dibbs's place and ideas in the Federation Movement.

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