

Closer Look

A series of discussion papers for secondary teachers and students

The First Parliament of Australia: the ceremony

Introduction

Tom Roberts' painting of the opening of the first parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia brings to life the major figures present at the ceremony. This Closer Look describes the major events of the ceremony including the speech by His Royal Highness (HRH) Duke of Cornwall and York, the King's message to Australians and the Governor-General's swearing in of members of each house. This paper will give secondary students and others a valuable insight into that momentous day in 1901. It also explores the functions of Australia's first parliament and contains the following areas of content:

- Main points
- Tom Roberts' painting
- Who attended the opening ceremony?
- Extracts from the Age 10 May 1901
- Conclusion
- More information

Main points

- Tom Roberts' painting captured the opening of Australia's first parliament.
- The ceremony included a hymn, a prayer, an opening speech by HRH the Duke of Cornwall and York and a message from King Edward VII.
- Members of both houses of parliament were sworn in during the ceremony.
- The ceremony closed with the Hallelujah Chorus, Rule Britannia and a resounding cheer as the royal party withdrew.

Tom Roberts' painting

Tom Roberts called his painting 'the big picture'. He was commissioned to make the painting by a group of Melbourne businessmen who had established a company called The Art Association of Australia. They required Roberts to complete a painting that included 250 miniature portraits of famous people who were present at the ceremony. Roberts sketched all the leading people and recorded their age, height, weight and hat size. He also attended the ceremony to make more sketches. Roberts painted most of the people dressed in black because Queen Victoria had recently died (22 January 1901) and the royal party and guests were still in mourning.

The large canvas was worked on between September 1901 and November 1903 during which time Roberts worked in both Melbourne and London. In 1904, the Australian Government presented the painting to King Edward VII in gratitude for his son, the Duke of Cornwall and York (who later became King George V) performing the opening ceremony. The painting was hung in St James Palace London, from 1904 to 1957 and was returned on loan to Australia in 1958. It now hangs in Australia's Parliament House in Canberra.



Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by HRH The Duke of Cornwall and York (later King George V), May 9, 1901 (1903) Tom Roberts (1856-1931) oil on canvas, 304.5 x 509.2 cm. On permanent loan to the Parliament of Australia from the British Royal Collection. Courtesy of Parliament House Art Collection; Department of Parliamentary Services, Canberra ACT. Photo credit: Bruce Moore.



Tom Robert's painting with pointers to people of note. Read the key for identification.

Who attended the opening ceremony?

Key

1. HRH the Duke of Cornwall and York
2. HRH the Duchess of Cornwall and York
3. Marquis of Linlithgow (Governor-General)
4. Marchioness of Linlithgow
5. State governors
6. Rt Hon Sir Edmund Barton (Prime Minister)
7. Rt Hon Sir John Forrest (Minister for Defence)
8. Rt Hon CC Kingston (Minister for Trade and Customs)
9. Hon Alfred Deakin (Attorney-General)
10. Members of the House of Representatives and Senate

Extracts from the Age, 10 May 1901

Description of the opening scene

WITHIN THE BUILDING

A Vast Concourse

Impressive Scenes

Crowded as it was yesterday in every annexe and corner within seeing or hearing distance, with chairs full, galleries full and every inch of standing room occupied, the Exhibition Building presented a spectacle worthy of the event. It was a solemn; an impressive meeting hall. Every tint of too blazing colour had been subdued. Only the four Royal standards, hanging between the roof and the raised dais, suggested a day of high festival. For the rest the eye wandered over tier after tier, row upon row of black and purple attire, with just a tinge of scarlet here and there, and occasionally a glimpse of ermine. Brilliant the coloring was not, but it was rich and warm. It struck the gazer with a sense of subdued magnificence, a sense heightened and intensified by the wide sweep of the arches, the immensity of the distance from dome to floor. The music with which a splendid orchestra beguiled the period of waiting chimed in well with the atmosphere of the place. It was in character, lofty and aspiring; not hasty and impetuous, but impregnated with something of conscious majesty and growing power.

Among the vast audience as it waited were to be seen those who have helped to bring in the councils of the nations and those whom the nation delights to honour. First in rank and dignity were the Governors of the other States, who in their brilliant robes of office graced the platform on which the King's son was to stand. There were his Excellency Lord Tennyson and Lady Tennyson, His Excellency Lord Lamington and Lady Lamington, His Excellency Sir Arthur Lawley and Lady Lawley, His Excellency Sir John Madden and Lady Madden; his Excellency Sir John Dodds.

For upwards of an hour the great concourse waited. It was well on towards mid-day, the building was crowded, and further ingress was impossible, when the voice of the Clerk of Parliaments (Mr Blackmore) was heard distinct and clear. He was reading to the members of the Senate—the members of the other House were waiting in the western annexe—the proclamation of the Governor-General calling Parliament together. The reading ceased, there was a brief interval, filled in by the music of the orchestra, and then the strains of the National Anthem were heard outside. There was a flourish of trumpets, a far off sound of cheering, and it was known that his Royal Highness had arrived.

The opening prayer

His Royal Highness and the Duchess of Cornwall and York entered the building preceded by His Excellency the Governor-General and the Countess of Hopetoun, and the strains of the National Anthem splendidly rendered by the orchestra had not subsided as they took up their positions on the dais near the entrance. His Royal Highness bowed to the gathering, and turning towards Mr Blackmore, the Clerk of the Federal Parliament, commissioned him to summon to the chamber the members of the Federal House of Representatives. There was no necessity to call the members of the Senate, as they were already in attendance. After an interval of a few minutes, the Prime Minister, Mr Barton, appeared, preceded by Mr G H Jenkins, Clerk of the Federal House of Representatives, and followed by his colleagues in the Cabinet—Mr Deakin, Sir William Lyne, Sir George Turner, Mr Kingston, Sir John Forrest and Sir Philip Fysh.

The Old Hundredth hymn, All People That on Earth do Dwell, was then sung by the gathering to the accompaniment of the orchestra, and afterwards Lord Hopetoun read prayers for the King and Queen and the Federal Parliament. No one who heard it could have failed to be impressed by the solemnity of the occasion. His Excellency's voice rang clear through the building, and as he proceeded with the reading of the service the words could be distinctly heard at the farthest corner. Nothing more impressive could be imagined than the hush which fell over the vast assemblage as Lord Hopetoun delivered the prayer for the Federal Parliament:

We pray Thee at this time to vouchsafe Thy special blessing upon the Federal Parliament now assembling for their first session and that Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper all their consultations to the true welfare of the people of Australia, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

As his Excellency bowed his head at the last syllable, the multitude joined in the Lord's prayer. 'For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.' The words rolled in muffled tones through the building, and the religious portion of the ceremony was concluded.

The opening speech by his Royal Highness

His Royal Highness advanced to the edge of the dais, and placing his hat on his head, read the following speech:

Gentlemen of the Senate and Gentlemen of the House of Representatives.

My beloved and deeply-lamented grandmother, Queen Victoria, had desired to mark the importance of the opening of this, the first Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, and to manifest her special interest in all that concerns the welfare of her loyal subjects in Australia, by granting to me a commission to open the first session. The commission had been duly signed before the sad event which has plunged the whole Empire into mourning, and the King, my dear father, fully sharing her late Majesty's wishes, decided to give effect to them, although his Majesty stated on the occasion of his opening his first Parliament that a separation from his son at such a time could not be otherwise than deeply painful to him.

His Majesty has been pleased to consent to this separation, moved by his sense of the loyalty and devotion which prompted all the colonies in the South African war, both in its earlier and more recent stages, and of the splendid bravery of the colonial troops. It is also his Majesty's wish to acknowledge the readiness with which the ships of the special Australian Squadron were placed at his disposal for service in China, and the valuable assistance rendered there by the naval contingents of the several colonies. His Majesty further desired in this way to testify his heartfelt gratitude for the warm sympathy extended by every part of his dominions to himself and his family in the irreparable loss they have sustained by the death of his beloved mother.

His Majesty has watched with the deepest interest the social and material progress made by his people in Australia, and has seen with thankfulness and heartfelt satisfaction the completion of that political union of which this Parliament is the embodiment.

The King is satisfied that the wisdom and patriotism which have characterised the exercise

of the wide powers of self-government hitherto enjoyed by the colonies will continue to be displayed in the exercise of the still wider powers with which the United Commonwealth has been endowed.

His Majesty feels assured that the enjoyment of these powers will, if possible, enhance that loyalty and devotion to his Throne and Empire of which the people of Australia have already given such signal proofs.

It is his Majesty's earnest prayer that this union so happily achieved may under God's blessing prove an instrument for still further promoting the welfare and advancement of his subjects in Australia, and for the strengthening and consolidation of his Empire.

Gentlemen of the Senate and Gentlemen of the House of Representatives, it affords me much pleasure to convey to you this message from his Majesty. I now, in his name and on his behalf, declare this Parliament open.

At the conclusion of his address, his Royal Highness removed his hat, and stepped back beside the Duchess of York. At the same time there was a flourish of trumpets, and the Field Artillery outside the Exhibition Building fired a royal salute.

A message to his Majesty the King of England

As the sound of the guns reverberated through the building, her Royal Highness pressed an electric button, which started a message to England, announcing that the first Federal Parliament had been opened. Almost before the people had realised that the declaration which had called the Heir Apparent expressly to Australia had been made, his Royal Highness announced in a loud and clear voice that he had just received a message from his Majesty the King.

A message from his Majesty the King of England

At announcement the decorous silence which had been strictly preserved throughout the ceremony was broken by vociferous cheering. His Royal Highness waited for the applause to subside, and then read the cablegram which he had received only a few minutes previously:

My thoughts are with you on today's important ceremony. Most fervently do I wish Australia prosperity and happiness. Edward R. I.

The Duke's Reply

The cheering was renewed as his Royal Highness finished reading the message.

The following cable message in reply was despatched by his Royal Highness to his Majesty the King immediately after the ceremony:

I have just delivered your message, and in your name declared open the first Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. I also read your kind telegram of good wishes, which is deeply appreciated by your loving Australian subjects, and was received with great enthusiasm. Splendid and impressive ceremony, over 12,000 people in Exhibition Building.

Swearing in the new parliament

As soon as the applause which followed the reading of the King's message subsided Lord Hopetoun, the Governor-General stepped forward and said:

Gentlemen of the Senate, Gentlemen of the House of Representatives, I am desired by his Royal Highness to acquaint you that so soon as the members of your Houses shall be sworn, and a President of the Senate and a Speaker of the House of Representatives shall be chosen, I will declare to you the causes of this Parliament being called. The members of the Senate and the members of the House of Representatives will therefore now make and subscribe before me, the Governor-General, the oath or affirmation of allegiance, as by the Constitution Act provided, which will be administered by me.

The members of each House were then sworn in by his Excellency, repeating the following oath, as prescribed by the Commonwealth Constitution Act, after him:

I do swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to his Majesty King Edward VII, his heirs and successors, according to law. So help me God!

All the members having been duly sworn in, Lord Hopetoun said:

Gentlemen of the Senate, Gentlemen of the House of Representatives, It being necessary that a President of the Senate and a Speaker of the House of Representatives should be first chosen, you will repair to the places where you are to sit, where you, gentlemen of the Senate, will proceed to choose some proper person to be your President, and you, gentlemen of the House of Representatives, will proceed to choose some proper person to be your Speaker, and thereafter you respectively will present such persons for my approval at such time and place as I shall hereafter appoint.

The band then played the 'Hallelujah Chorus', followed by 'Rule Britannia', and at the closing cadence of the national air the gathering again cheered while the Royal party withdrew. This closed the historic ceremony.

Conclusion

The opening of the Commonwealth Parliament of Australia (the Australian Parliament) on 9 May 1901 was a ceremony to remember. It established Australia's first federal parliament with all the pomp and ceremony due such a momentous occasion.

More information

Closer Look Australia's Parliament House <http://www.peo.gov.au/students/cl/aph.html>

Historical Information on the Australian Parliament

<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/handbook/historical/index.htm>

FAQ 4 Australia's Parliament House http://www.peo.gov.au/faq/faq_4.html

Fact Sheet Series

- No 34 Federation <http://www.peo.gov.au/students/fss/fss34.html>