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The intertwined history of Canberra and the Parliament

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THE INTERTWINED HISTORY OF CANBERRA AND THE PARLIAMENT

It is an honour to deliver this Canberra Day Oration before this distinguished Society, which is devoted to the study of the history of Canberra and its region, a very worthy subject for our attention.

Let us begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal people, whose association with this area goes back considerably further than the period here considered.

It is a truism that there is a relationship between places and the institutions that function in them, and that places and institutions are shaped by each other. The theme of this talk is the relationship between Canberra the place and Parliament the institution, and it is hoped that a few insights might be provided on that relationship.

It is not generally appreciated how remarkable were the choices of the framers of the Constitution. They chose a federal system, and also chose to have a federal territory and a new federal capital. There was no necessary connection between a federal system and a federal territory and capital, in the sense that it was not necessary for a federal system to have a new capital in a federal territory. The federalists at the constitutional conventions regarded the bicameral structure of the Parliament as essential to the federal system. It was more of a stretch to say that the federal territory and the new capital were essential to a true federal system. They could have made other choices there. It is remarkable that they chose a foreign system completely outside their own British traditions, adapted from two foreign federal republics. No doubt it was partly because of the rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne that the American model of federation, including the Washington model for a capital, commended itself, as distinct from the Canadian model, which was regarded with disfavour as not being truly federal. There were other deals that could have been made, however, to satisfy Sydney and Melbourne, and the choices are no less remarkable because they may have had a certain element of pragmatism.

The choice of a federal system therefore determined the shape of the Parliament (two houses, one representing the states equally, of virtually equal powers), as well as the nature of the city it would meet in.

The choices were made, not only by those in a different century from those who would put the choices into effect, but in the context of parliaments very different from those of the following century.

The late nineteenth century was a period of great optimism. Those who practised parliamentary government in free countries thought that it would soon spread throughout the world, and every country would become a parliamentary democracy within a short time. They could see a bright and expansive future before them. It was widely supposed that by 1950 Australia would be a federation of twelve or more states with a population of 40 or 50 million people, a sort of United States in the South Pacific. This optimism inclined them to commit to bold plans, including the establishment of a new city. Their decisions committed their successors to carry out their bold plans when the foundations of their optimism had seriously eroded.

The second remarkable choice was made after federation, to establish a completely new city rather than build on an existing one. The early Commonwealth parliamentarians, still largely imbued with that nineteenth century optimism, did not hesitate to commit themselves to that onerous task on which few countries have ever embarked. The story of the selection of the site for Canberra has been well told, particularly by David Headon. Again, there was a great deal of pragmatism and compromise, but again the choice of the boldest course was remarkable.

The most remarkable feature of the process, considering later events, was that it was a very parliamentary occasion. The Parliament, the two Houses and their members, extensively debated and considered the alternatives and made the choice. This was entirely in accordance with the constitutional framers' plan. They envisaged a powerful Parliament, with two powerful Houses. They were accustomed to such in their colonial parliaments. In the colonies in the nineteenth century parliaments were strong and executive governments were relatively weak by today's standards. The colonial parliaments were particularly marked by strong bicameralism, and disagreements between the houses were common and significant. This was largely due to very loose party ties; what were then called parties were loose organisations of liberals and conservatives, and party discipline was extremely weak by today's standards. The framers expected that this would be the kind of Parliament that would govern the Commonwealth. Their expectations were met; the federal Parliament between 1901 and 1910 largely conformed to this colonial model. It was therefore not surprising that the choice of the site was a parliamentary occasion.

When the foundation stone for Canberra was laid in 1913, a very different Parliament had come into existence. Between the choice of the site in 1908 and the laying of the stone in 1913 the Parliament had radically changed. The immediate cause of this change was the election of a Labor government in 1910, which brought to the Parliament the party pledge

and the caucus rule, initiating the tight party discipline to which we have now become accustomed. It was not as strong then as it is now, but it was still far removed from the nineteenth century political culture. The Labor government also had a majority in both houses. The effect of this was that Parliament as an institution became much less significant than it had been in the scheme of things. The government may have been controlled by the party, but it was certainly not controlled by the Parliament. The relationship between the executive and the legislature had shifted.

This change was reflected in the Canberra naming ceremony in 1913. Unlike the choice of the site in 1908, the naming was a government-dominated occasion. The government had chosen the name of the city and monopolised the event, and had brushed aside attempts at parliamentary intervention in those choices. The occasion signified that the era of the two party system and of executive domination, and of the consequent downgrading of Parliament as an institution, had arrived.

The next major stage in the establishment of Canberra, the choice of the type of parliamentary building to be erected and the time of the move of the Parliament to the new city, could have been regarded as signalling a parliamentary revival. In 1923 the Parliament was allowed to debate the type of building and the choice of the time to move, and there was at least an appearance of parliamentary input into those choices. It proved to be a false dawn. It may have been due to the newly-installed Bruce government being a little unsure of its grip on power, particularly with its supporters consisting of a coalition of disparate conservative elements, including the new Country Party and the remnants of the old Labor politicians who had subsequently become Nationalists. Soon, however, the government was only too sure of its control.

At this point a digression for an anecdote is justifiable on the basis that it may have some symbolic significance. I apologise to those who have heard the story before, but it is well worth retelling. Around the ceiling of the lavishly decorated Legislative Council chamber in Melbourne, where the Senate met until 1927, were a series of winged female figures variously described as angels or goddesses. They represented several desirable attributes, and each one held an object symbolic of her attribute: a hammer for industry, a set-square for ingenuity, and so on. One of them held a broken chain, and represented liberty. When the federal Parliament was about to depart, a team of maintenance men were engaged to made any necessary repairs, so that the Victorian Parliament could not complain about the state in which their federal tenants had left the building. The tradesmen saw the broken chain and “fixed” it. This story was told to me by one of my predecessors, Rupert Loof, who had served the Senate in Melbourne and who lived to the age of 102 years. When I next visited the Legislative Council chamber I noticed that the chain was still joined, and asked the local staff about it. They claimed that the figure represented unity. This seemed unlikely, given the values systems of mid-nineteenth century parliamentarians, but Loof’s

story also appeared doubtful. A search turned up some photographs of the chamber in the nineteenth century, however, and these clearly show that the chain was originally broken, so that the seemingly apocryphal story appears to have been true. In spite of the proof being presented to them, the Victorian authorities have not held a ceremonial breaking of the chain to restore the angel to her original provenance. The symbolic element in this episode is that perhaps the substitution of unity for liberty reflects the reduction of the role of parliaments in the system of government and the exaltation of executive power.

In the 1927 opening of the new Parliament House, government control was reasserted. It was an executive-dominated occasion. This was symbolised by Prime Minister Bruce's acceptance of the keys to the building from the Duke of York after the doors were opened, and by the Duke's and the Prime Minister's speeches being the only ones made on the occasion. The President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives were silent guests. It was also a very British occasion, with declarations of loyalty to the empire and to the British system of government abounding. Then the two houses were sent packing for an adjournment of nearly five months.

The ceremony reflected the times. Two significant developments had taken place. The 1920s and 1930s became the era of the Westminster hegemony. Australia's system of government came to be seen as essentially British, and its elements had to be made to conform to British norms. That the constitutional framers had chosen a very un-British system of government was forgotten or ignored. The House of Representatives was the local House of Commons, the Senate was the local House of Lords, and the states were the provinces. Whenever any parliamentary question arose, the Westminster model was appealed to, in marked contrast to the early years of federation, when the President frequently invoked the differences between the Australian and the British systems. One of the constitutional framers, subsequently President of the Senate, Richard Baker, had referred in the constitutional convention debates to what we now call the Westminster system of government as a "British sham". Such a statement would have been regarded as traitorous in 1920. The Westminster system had become a system of executive domination, with strong executive governments and weak parliaments, and a contest between two ideologically opposed party blocs, and the Australian political culture had followed suit. The combination of the first-past-the-post electoral system, not much improved by preferential voting, and the two-party system, meant that the Senate had lopsided majorities for the most part reflecting the conservative majorities in the House of Representatives.

It was also a time of intense empire loyalty, when Australians described themselves as British and saw their country as a branch of the empire. The election slogan of the conservative parties in the 1931 general election, "Tune in to Britain", captured the spirit of the time. The 1920s and 1930s were also a period of conservative governments, broken

only by the brief and unstable interlude of the Scullin government in 1929 to 1931, brought down by the economic crisis. The conservatives of that era, in contrast to some of their predecessors such as Baker, regarded Britishness as an essential part of their ideological makeup. The credo of federalism, bicameralism and checks and balances that had appealed to both conservatives and radicals among the constitutional framers had less appeal to either the socialists, who adhered to centralised state control of the economy, or to the British-oriented conservatives.

Both of those developments, executive domination and empire loyalty, had been reinforced by the enormous trial of the Great War. Having saved their institutions in a desperate struggle, the people of the time were not about to critically analyse them.

The result of this was that the Parliament as an institution went into a long sleep. Parliamentarians were generally content to allow the prime minister and the ministry to run the country, and content to interfere only occasionally in the decision-making process. There were exceptions to this, particularly in the Senate. Party discipline was still relatively loose by current standards amongst the conservatives, partly reflecting their origins in the various disparate groups that had come together to oppose the socialists. Conservative politicians were accustomed to making declarations of their independence from party or executive direction, in contrast to their Labor opponents, and their senators in particular claimed to be free of party direction because of their status as members of the upper House. There were a few significant parliamentary reforms, particularly the establishment of the Senate Regulations and Ordinances Committee in 1932. This was partly a response to the perceived misdeeds of the Scullin government. Generally speaking, however, it was an age of parliamentary inactivity.

Apart from the legacy of the Great War, executive control over all aspects of governance was greatly strengthened by the economic crisis that lasted through the 1930s. It was a very different world to that of the nineteenth century. Parliamentary government and political freedoms were in retreat, and the problems of the time appeared too great to be solved by parliamentary debates and messages and conferences between the Houses.

Canberra and the Parliament were both victims of this age of crisis; their development was equally stifled. The question is whether Canberra influenced the deterioration of the institution. The new capital was out of the way, lacked the amenities of a real city, and the politicians were anxious to spend the minimum amount of time there. The Parliament met in a temporary building of British design with a decidedly colonial look about it. It looked as if it was intended for Cape Town or the Bahamas and had simply been transferred to another province of the empire. The imperial arms appeared at the front of the building. and the Union Jack flew over it, in conjunction with what was then called the Australian ensign. Parliamentary weakness and executive domination may well have been reinforced

by the character of the national capital as it then was. The wonder is that, given the difficulties of the times, the whole project of building a new city was not abandoned or at least put on permanent hold.

After another great war, both Canberra and the Parliament experienced an awakening. The city was lucky in having a prime minister in Robert Menzies who was enthusiastic about its development. He was supported by a new parliamentary enthusiasm for the development of the capital. It was a time of expanding horizons, supported by postwar prosperity. This favoured the Canberra project. The most significant factor in the parliamentary revival was the adoption of proportional representation for elections to the Senate, which meant that the Senate again escaped from executive domination. The parties were much more closely divided in the Senate, and rebels in the ranks of the conservatives became much more important. More often than not, the government lacked a party majority in the Senate. The old nostrums of the constitutional framers and the checks and balances of the federal and bicameral systems were slowly rediscovered, particularly by senators who asked themselves what their role was intended to be. Now that war and depression no longer dominated the political process, parliamentary reforms began to gather pace. The rapid development of Canberra and the revival of Parliament occurred together.

As a final reflection, we may turn to the next major stage in the development of Canberra, from the parliamentary point of view, the choices of the design and site of the new Parliament House. These choices, like that of the site of Canberra itself, but unlike the opening of the provisional building, were very parliamentary: the Houses and their members had a strong influence over the choices through formal parliamentary processes. Recently we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the new building, and reflected on its influence on the institution. Unlike the old, relatively small and low, and colonial-looking building, the new building is monumental, impressive and unique in its design. It suits a confident and independent country. It is also a very bicameral building, with separate wings for Senate and House of Representatives, indicating an acceptance in concrete of the bicameral nature of the Australian Parliament. The scale and amenities of the building have encouraged the parliamentarians to think of themselves as legislators and not simply the recipients of crumbs dropping from the government table. A significant number of parliamentary reforms have been undertaken, coinciding with the move to the new building, and the connection between the two may not be merely coincidental. At least, it has had this influence on the Senate; the House of Representatives, unfortunately, remains as government-dominated as ever, if not more so, but even there there have been some parliamentary improvements. Much remains that could be done to make the Parliament function as a true legislature.

I have been in Canberra for over forty years. During that time it has come from a collection of disconnected suburbs in the bush with a few government buildings to a true city, and a true capital city. It is no longer new, but has an air of firm establishment about it, while still impressing foreigners with its neatness of design and execution. The politicians now have a greater appreciation of the facilities the city has to offer. Parliament has changed in ways that match its greatly improved location, but has been slower in its development than the city. Parliament needs to catch up with Canberra.

Harry Evans