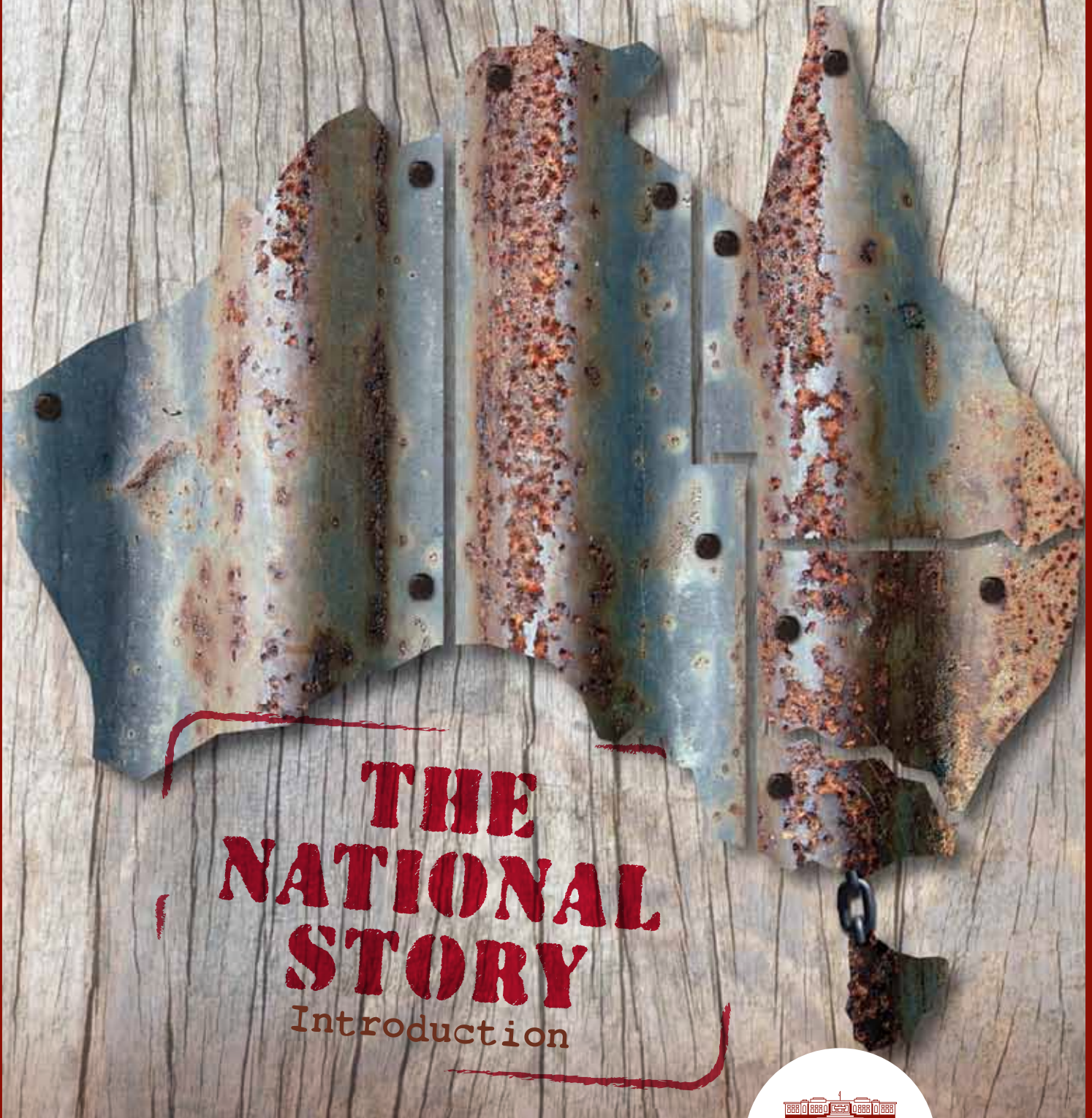


GETTING IT TOGETHER

From Colonies to Federation



THE NATIONAL STORY

Introduction



MUSEUM
OF AUSTRALIAN
DEMOCRACY

OLD PARLIAMENT HOUSE

INVESTIGATIONS OF
AUSTRALIA'S JOURNEY
TO NATIONHOOD
FOR THE MIDDLE
YEARS CLASSROOM

MOAD
LEARNING

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From Colonies to Federation

THE NATIONAL STORY

At midnight on 1 February 1895, post office clocks in the Australian colonies paused to standardise their times into three zones. Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane would have the same time, 10 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time in London. Adelaide would be nine and a half hours ahead, and Perth would be eight hours ahead. After that, telegraph operators would know the time in other colonies without having to check complicated tables of local times. Train timetables too, would be more reliable and easier to understand. The Australian colonies had agreed to cooperate on a uniform system of time. Six years later, they would cooperate again and agree to Federation with the blessing of the Imperial Parliament in London.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Australian continent was divided into six colonies, each with its own government. Governments made laws and decisions for their colony. Some protected their local industries by charging intercolonial tariffs, or taxes, on goods imported from other colonies. Railways made the transportation of goods and people between colonies easy. However, different rail gauges, or track sizes, meant that travellers often had to change trains to get from one place to another. They were also stopped at customs houses along borders and searched for any goods that could incur tariffs.

Although they valued their independence and fiercely protected their own interests, the colonies did get together from time to time at intercolonial conferences to work out common problems, such as how best to defend themselves and the British Empire in the Pacific, or how to stop the immigration of non-Europeans. The Australian colonies were proud to be part of the British Empire. The colonists who came to Australia were overwhelmingly British. They shared a common language, culture, traditions and values. The work of free settlers and convicts contributed to the pastoral societies of the colonies, which were controlled by wealthy squatters. The first gold rushes in the eastern colonies in the 1850s–60s made the colonies wealthy, but changed their societies in the process. This undermined the power of the squatters, and encouraged political reform. Gold also attracted European, American and Chinese miners. Some of these new immigrants were seen to pose a threat to a homogenous, egalitarian society.

By the 1870s, the young people born in the colonies began to see themselves as Australian. They started to celebrate the things that made them distinctive from the British and their parents' generation. It was not difficult to begin to imagine that the six colonies would one day

be united under one government. In 1889, when the New South Wales Premier, Henry Parkes called for the colonies to unite, he echoed a sentiment felt by those people who were beginning to occupy important positions in the colonies. When Federation became a distinct possibility in the 1890s, it was an organisation called the Australian Natives Association that led the campaign by starting federal leagues.

Democracy had taken root with the introduction of responsible government between the 1850s and 1890s. Federation was politically impossible without the agreement of the people of the Australian colonies. Throughout the 1890s, fierce debates were conducted in newspapers and at the Federal Conventions of 1891 and 1897–98, as representatives of the colonies negotiated the clauses of the draft Australian Constitution. The Constitution would become the founding legal document that outlined the rights and responsibilities of the proposed Commonwealth Parliament.

The Australian Constitution received the assent of Queen Victoria in 1900. With the exception of Western Australia, which retained import duties on goods for five years after Federation, the Constitution removed the intercolonial tariffs on goods sold between the new States, and gave control of the defence forces to the new Commonwealth Government. It also ensured that the democracy prized by the people of the colonies would be guaranteed in elections for the Commonwealth Parliament. The colonies, soon to be States, would continue to have a large measure of independence and control over their own affairs. When the Duke of Cornwall and York opened the first Commonwealth Parliament in Melbourne on 9 May 1901, he set Australians towards a destiny of their own choosing.



Your tasks

For you to investigate

There are three themes for you to investigate. Each has information and activities to help you dig deeper into the story of Australia's journey from colonies to Federation.

People and Places

Investigate aspects of life in the colonies in the years before Federation when there were many changes taking place.

Road to Federation

Investigate the issues influencing opinions on Federation, why there were different points of view in the colonies, and the referendums on the proposed Australian Constitution.

Celebrations and Futures

Investigate how Federation was celebrated, and how being part of the Australian Commonwealth continues to be celebrated today.