

# Hawkesbury Railway Bridge 125th anniversary celebrations

## Speech by Ian Thom Dangar Island, 4 May 2014

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Your Excellency, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys.

As one of Henry Parkes' great great grandsons and Chair of the Henry Parkes Foundation I am certainly proud and honoured to be present today.

Sir Henry Parkes was known for many things – among them are:

- His passionate speeches at public meetings opposing Convict Transportation
- His Education Acts for free compulsory and secular education for every child
- His securing 6 trained nurses from Florence Nightingale to start our health system at Sydney Hospital
- Being Proprietor and Editor of his newspaper, *The Empire*
- His fight for the democratic rights of every man to have a vote and his support for women to have the same rights as men
- His involvement in the establishment of an efficient postal service, particularly for overseas mail
- His founding of Centennial Park – “The People’s Park”. (Royal) National Park, which was the second National Park in the world, was founded during his second term as Premier.
- His driving of the expansion of the rail network to encourage, travel, trade and communication between and within the states.

He of course is most famously known as the “Father of Federation” for his push to achieve the federation of a group of parochial independent Colonies.

What you may not know is that he was also known as the “Father of the Electric Telegraph”. It was his motion in the Legislative Assembly that led to the establishment of the first electric telegraph in the colony of NSW.

The introduction of the telegraph made communication faster and later linked all the states into a common network but with rail travel there was still one big missing link between the North and the South before a railway network could be completed.

The gap across the Hawkesbury River posed a difficult problem that had to be solved.

It was during Henry's third term as Premier that he established the Public Works Loan Act to secure the funding for the construction of the bridge and associated rail lines to connect Sydney to Newcastle.

This was to be a world class engineering feat of excavation, embankments, tunnelling and building world record deep pylons into the muddy base of the river. There was also

the problem of placing huge spans of steel onto those pylons. Most of that construction was carried out here at Dangar Island on a huge pontoon. It was approximately 100 metres long by 20 metres wide and 3 metres deep. Just constructing the world's biggest pontoon was a challenge.

The "can do" attitude and the skills and dedication of the Australian and American workers, achieved completion ahead of time and only just over budget.

During the construction, on 9 July 1887, Lord Brassey, who later became the Governor of Victoria, visited the construction site here. Lord Brassey was the son of a famous railway pioneer in Britain.

I have here a book of Henry's speeches that he presented to Lord Brassey, just 2 days later.

In one of those speeches delivered in Melbourne in March 1867, he said.

*I think the time has arrived when these colonies should be united by some federal bond or connexion. I think it must be manifest to all thoughtful men that there are questions projecting themselves upon our attention which cannot be satisfactorily dealt with by any one of the individual Governments. P256.*

Twenty two years later, in his fifth term as Premier of NSW, Henry was still pushing to achieve Federation. Henry Parkes was here at Dangar Island to host the celebrations, on that huge pontoon, for the official opening of the biggest bridge in the southern hemisphere that would enable a direct rail link between the North and the South.

I note that the official guest list of over 760 dignitaries included the Mayor of Tenterfield. Mr Edward Reeves Whereat was the Mayor of Tenterfield when Henry lost the election for East Sydney in 1882. Back then all the elections did not take place on the same day and Mr Whereat, on learning that Henry had been defeated and being the only candidate for the seat of Tenterfield, stood aside and nominated Henry Parkes. Henry was elected unopposed as the Member for Tenterfield.

Henry was grateful to the people of Tenterfield. On his return from visiting the Deputy Premier of Queensland to discuss Federation issues, Henry stopped at Tenterfield and gave his famous Oration, at the Tenterfield School of Arts on 24 October 1889, calling for the Colonies to unite. In part of that speech he said "*What the Americans did by civil war, surely we can do it by peaceful means*".

It is interesting to read the Sydney Morning Herald four days later, reporting the return train trip to Sydney which set a record, only made possible by the new Hawkesbury Bridge. There was just the locomotive and tender, the Premiers carriage and a guards van. A green light run was in place to ensure a clear run. The 480 miles which normally took the mail train 21 hours was completed in just over 14 hours. It indicated the future possibilities of what could be achieved by rail now that the bridge linking the states was in place.

For a boy who left school aged eight, Henry had certainly learnt how to use statistics to great effect. At the opening he detailed these amazing facts.

The railway, then, this grand trunk line, has a length of 1789 miles.

The total mileage of railway in the Australian colonies is 7592. This completed line, which the united colonies have now succeeded in constructing, is nearly one-fourth of the whole railway system. I want to impress upon this great gathering something more. The longest railway journey that can be performed in the United Kingdom is from Penzance to Thurso, 982 miles. Against that, the line we have now completed is 1789, or 807 miles in excess of the longest English railway.

He then detailed how this line exceeded most of the major distances in Europe, even being 249 miles longer than London to Constantinople. He goes on to say,

But we could make a journey in Australia now, starting from Charleville, in Queensland, to Coward Springs in South Australia, a distance of 2591 miles,-- or 490 miles longer than from London to Cairo. I give these distances in order that you may realise the magnitude of the work, we are now celebrating.

As I said, Henry had to leave school when he was eight years old to go to work to help support his family . Times were hard and one of his first jobs was in a ropewalk, for fourpence a day, where he had to drag long lengths of rope as it was twisted together. At the 1890 Federation Conference he used his famous phrase, "*the crimson thread of kinship that binds us all*" to describe the ties that bound the colonies together.

With so many boats here around the island you would be well aware of the crimson tracer thread twisting through the old sisal ropes and the way the fibres bind together. I think that was his early experience in the ropewalk that led to this phrase. However, in researching for today, I found that Henry had previously used a similar expression here at the opening of the bridge where he expressed the need for Federation.

Now, will not this be allowed to remain in the mind of every man here that we met to celebrate the opening of this great bridge in peace, in friendship, and in friendly pride. We have here a representative of the great Government to our south and of the great Government to our north, and why should not this occasion be an emblem of our future relations?

He then goes on to say;

It is said that the time has arrived for the political federation of these colonies. I am afraid that the federation of great communities like this is not to be brought about by any formal enactment or any formal resolution. I think it must develop by the progress of opinions, and it is in that view that I regard the event which we are met here to celebrate to-day as one of potent influence for the welfare of these colonies. In this great system of material arteries which we complete to-day we see the crimson fluid of kinship pulsing through all the iron veins.

He then proposed the toast to

"United Australia."

Sir Henry Parkes' speech at the opening of the Hawkesbury Railway Bridge reignited the flame for the States to unite in Federation. It would be over 11 years before Australia became a nation, just four years after Henry Parkes died.

Thank you.