



GOVERNMENT HOUSE  
SYDNEY

**SPEECH AT THE RECEPTION FOR THE  
2014 SIR HENRY PARKES ORATION**

**THE ENDURING LEGACY OF SIR HENRY PARKES**

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**GOVERNMENT HOUSE  
SYDNEY**

**Friday, 25 July 2014**

**HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR DAME MARIE BASHIR AD CVO  
GOVERNOR OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

It is a deeply felt privilege to have been asked to deliver an address on Sir Henry Parkes, 19th century English immigrant who was indeed a titan in the history of modern Australia. He stands as an individual who from any appraisal of qualities of character, and from his life history, his specific contribution to the building of a great nation will continue to inspire thoughtful Australians with a sense of gratitude as well as admiration. It is a delightful coincidence that today, 25 July 2014, is the day in 1839, 175 years ago, when Henry Parkes arrived in Australia on the passenger ship “Strathfieldsaye”.

Modern Australia, often described as “the lucky country”, or “the happy country”, can attribute, I believe, these valid descriptions to the vision, the energy and the inspirational leadership of Henry Parkes. Many of those characteristics for which Australians are renowned across the world – egalitarianism, the rewards of integrity, access to education, fine health services, and working towards the common good – can find these ideals in an examination of the example and leadership of Henry Parkes.

It is fitting that the Henry Parkes Foundation desires that we might reflect upon the life history of the man, sometimes so aptly referred to as “the Australian colossus”, and that we appreciate the development of his outstanding contribution, a legacy from which so many Australians have continued to benefit throughout the 20th century and now beyond.

Since my appointment as Governor of New South Wales in 2001, I have indeed been privileged to occupy the fine office of the colonial secretary where I am surrounded by the superb furniture, and personal memorabilia of Sir Henry Parkes. His magnificent portrait by the artist Cecil Holmes hangs above the marble fireplace, looking down upon the occupant, evoking recollection of his prophetic exhortation “one people, one destiny” – still so relevant to 21st century Australia.

A fine biography of this great man has been recently published in 2013. Written by an Australian writer, Stephen Dando-Collins, it is entitled *Sir Henry Parkes – the Australian Colossus*, and I am indebted to the author for enriching my knowledge further on this exceptional man.

Henry Parkes was born in Warwickshire England in 1815, to a family of very limited means. The security, the livelihood of his father, a yeoman farmer, had been deeply affected by the Industrial Revolution, and as a consequence, young Henry, between the ages of 8 and 10 years was compelled to leave school in order to assist in supporting his family, securing

work as an apprentice for a bone and ivory turner. Avid for education throughout his life, Henry later attended a Mechanics Institute. Ever enterprising, at 22 years he established his own bone and ivory carving business. But success continued to elude him, first in Birmingham and later when he moved to London.

In Birmingham, however, he had witnessed at close hand the political energy which resulted eventually in the passing of the reform bill in the British Parliament, legislation which aimed to improve the harsh lives of working class people. Impressed by these developments, Parkes joined the political union, the group which had successfully advocated for this humanitarian reform.

Becoming aware of the Australian colonies' desire for more British immigrants, Henry together with his pregnant wife Clarinda, set sail for Sydney in 1839. In Australian waters, two days before disembarking in Sydney, Clarinda gave birth to a baby girl, Clarinda Sarah. Her two previous children had died soon after birth.

Neither Henry nor Clarinda had any personal contacts in the colony to assist them in any way; but after disembarking, Henry found employment as a farm labourer with Sir John Jamison at his Regentville estate, but later he returned to work in a foundry and brass works.

Eventually, by 1845, six years after arriving in Australia, he was able to establish his ivory turning trade in a shop in Hunter Street, Sydney, residing above the shop with his wife and baby daughter.

Because of the gracious generosity of members of the Parkes family descendants, I have the unique honour of displaying quietly in my office, Sir Henry's office, a letter opener of bone, created by Sir Henry, which he has decorated in most delicate carving a small scene of South Head Lighthouse, the Francis Greenway lighthouse of Governor Macquarie's period. This historic treasure will be returned to the care of the family following my retirement from the office of the Governor.

### **Personal and social interests**

Able to understand and to identify with those who had experienced social deprivation in their formative years, Parkes gave much consideration to social progress and opportunity, and he began to attend such meetings regularly, thus gaining further insight, and the opportunity to present his opinion on behalf of the free immigrants and working classes.

As with a number of other committed citizens, such as the Reverend John Dunmore Lang, he was strongly opposed to the transportation of convicts to the colony, but he favoured an extension of a limited franchise being granted to free settlers. Clearly, he was already demonstrating significant political insight.

It has been said (reference– Lucy Hughes Turnbull, *Dictionary of Sydney*) that – and I quote – “his views offered a more-or-less middle course between liberalism and radicalism through much of the 19th century”. In 1850, he established a newspaper, which he believed would be able to offer a different perspective to John Fairfax's *Sydney Morning Herald*, and which he named *The Empire*.

This publication was said to provide a combination of liberal and radical thought, in contra distinction to the conservative viewpoint. However, Parkes' financial management was, like that of many idealists, never sharply astute, and *The Empire* finally ceased publication within 8 years – in 1858.

With the retirement from the Parliament in 1854 of William Charles Wentworth, however, Parkes was able to stand for election in Wentworth's former seat. Elected by a 2:1 majority,

Parkes had decisively defeated Charles Kemp, who had been a co-owner of the Sydney Morning Herald.

Parkes' historic parliamentary career had now begun, with his major support essentially coming from free immigrants of middle and working class background, whose interests he had been promoting for some time.

Unfortunately, with the high cost of supporting the continuing publication of *The Empire*, which had been absorbing significant sums of borrowed money, and with a young family to support, Parkes' difficulties in financial management continued to mount. Across the following years, he would have no option but to be declared bankrupt.

Nevertheless, his parliamentary career, with some intermittent periods of electoral loss would span four decades.

An early public responsibility assigned to Parkes once elected, was to chair a Parliamentary Select Committee from 1860 into the condition of the working classes. Housing conditions were described as appalling, rents were high, overcrowding was common, and a significant number of homeless children, said to be around 1000, were roaming the streets at considerable risk, some young girls. Indeed young women being forced into the sex industry.

It seems that Parkes' excellent chairmanship of that Select Committee resulted in greater attention being drawn to these issues by the wider community, and importantly by his fellow parliamentarians.

He was subsequently elevated to the important post of Colonial Secretary in the Ministry of James Martin in 1866.

Consistent in his concern for the wellbeing of vulnerable young people and aware of their potential strength to a nation, Parkes established a nautical school (one could say "a small naval college" perhaps) for male orphans, utilising a hulk moored in Sydney Harbour for their training experience.

And when the inadequacies of the critical care of hospitalised patients were brought to his attention, he approached Florence Nightingale – (of Crimean War renown) to arrange assistance.

This resulted in the decision of Miss Nightingale to despatch Miss Lucy Osborn, as matron, with five other nurses from London, arriving in March 1868, to establish at Sydney Hospital an Australian nurse training school. Indeed within a few years, Osborn-trained nurses would be found contributing significantly to better health care across all New South Wales hospitals.

Many of you would be aware of the Nightingale wing and the Lucy Osborn Museum at Sydney Hospital, which honour that vital contribution to the development of early health services in Australia, and especially to the noble profession of nursing.

And in direct response to a decisive decision by Parkes, emanating from a royal visit with dramatic and unexpected consequences, the citizens of Sydney acquired a great hospital, renowned today for clinical and teaching excellence across Australia, and also internationally – the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

As history records, on 12 March 1868, the second son of Queen Victoria, HRH Prince Alfred, during a visit to Australia and whilst attending a picnic at Clontarf in his honour, became the intended victim of an audacious assassination attempt by a gunman of Irish origin – one James O'Farrell.

As the gunman was speedily apprehended, the Prince fell to the ground, wounded but free from spinal injury.

The Prince was transported across the harbour to Government House, where Lucy Osborn and her team of splendid nurses ensured that recovery would be full and speedy.

An indication of Parkes' extraordinary insight and diligence can be noted in the fact that, as news of the assassination attempt reached him in his office, he himself set off to lead a search of the rooms where O'Farrell had lodged. Amongst the items examined, Parkes' appraisal of the assassin's notes and behaviour could not convince him that O'Farrell, despite his past history of epilepsy, heavy alcohol use and suicidal thoughts, was of unsound mind.

Refusal by the Governor to approve calls for clemency followed, and O'Farrell was sentenced to death by hanging.

The citizens of Sydney however, jubilant and grateful that the prince had not perished, thus also sparing the loyal colony's reputation as a responsible member of Queen Victoria's empire, were determined to endow a lasting memorial.

In generous outpourings of thanksgiving, a substantial sum of money was collected by the citizens, which Parkes and his advisers believed should be directed to upgrade deteriorating conditions of Sydney Hospital.

However, the citizens resolutely directed that an entirely new hospital should be established in the Prince's name. And the University of Sydney, newly established in the Camperdown district, adjacent to the city, readily provided the land on their western boundary, aware of the potential of a well-endowed teaching hospital with Australia's first university. Thus Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, centre of excellence in many medical, surgical and research streams, today continues to fulfil the hopes with which it was inaugurated.

In the impressive 19th century entrance hall of Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, magnificent and extensive glass murals record the Prince's image and that dramatic relationship with the hospital's foundation.

But certainly, one of the greatest and most enduring contributions of Parkes to our nation, I believe, was the high priority which he placed on education – education for all children – ever mindful of his own years of deprivation. And driven also by his intellectual strengths and energy, ever wishing to rectify this, he would endeavour to ensure the education of all children.

As premier, Parkes speedily established a special council to oversee denominational and religious schools.

Parkes believed that children of all denominations, should be educated together, and separated only for specific scripture classes.

Indeed, as chairman of the Parliamentary Select Committee, Parkes had learnt a great deal about the circumstances of children, especially children from poor families. And I believe that a determination was thus developed within his mind to provide opportunities to rectify their appalling and unfair disadvantage. (Because of his concern for adequate health services, for education for all young people, and his advocacy for the poor and marginalised, you may understand why I consider it the greatest honour to occupy his office, to sit at his desk, appreciate his richly carved furniture around me and have his great portrait looking down from above the fireplace, monitoring everything I say and do.)

It is well established that Henry Parkes possessed in abundance, impressive physical, intellectual and psychological strengths. A handsome man of proud stature and perhaps leonine features. Most significantly also, he had developed - because of his devotion to learning and no doubt to reading and self-improvement - powerful gifts of oratory which would command even demand attention from all sides.

After some years away from parliament, essentially the result of his financial difficulties and ever-mounting debt from loans awaiting payment, Parkes in 1872 made a dramatic return to the political arena and was elected forthwith as Premier of New South Wales, thereby providing an opportunity to promote his free-trade policies and also to initiate a major public works program.

But within 3 years, Henry Parkes no longer occupied this high office, the consequence of heated parliamentary conflict arising from divided opinion regarding the right of the New South Wales Governor to remit the length of a gaol sentence imposed upon a certain Frank Gardiner, a notorious bushranger of the period. Allow me to note that this prerogative of mercy of the Governor exists to this day, and on very infrequent occasions in consultation with the Attorney-General of the day, the submission is presented with significant supportive material to justify such request.

Whilst the Governor and the Premier agreed on this policy, public opinion was strongly against remission of the sentence, even though the bushranger had served 10 years of his sentence in an exemplary and trouble free manner, demonstrating, the Governor and Premier Parkes believed, that he possessed "a capacity to abide by the law". Parkes' political opponents however, fermented public opinion, it is believed, and thus losing control of the legislative assembly, he ceased to be Premier for another 3 years.

However, on his return to the leadership, Parkes vigorously set about strengthening the education system, always an issue of high priority for him, in the light of his childhood experience and relative educational deprivation. This would have been a major personal issue for an individual with high intellectual ability and an ever enquiring mind.

Under Parkes' strong and persuasive leadership, enriched by his considerable powers of reason and oratory, education became free for all children; indeed, it was to be compulsory and secular. The passage in 1866 of Henry Parkes' Public Schools Act was a landmark event, I believe, in the nation's history and was adopted with the opposition's support.

State Aid was withdrawn from religious schools, which understandably would become a sensitive issue for such schools over many subsequent decades. And further, this gave rise to a sense of anger from the affected section of the community, some of whom believed that it was a direct form of religious discrimination. But both secular and denomination systems of education were placed "under a council of education" which would also oversee teacher training and the content of secular lessons. By contemporary world expectations, these developments were insightful and visionary.

In 1877, Parkes was appointed a Knight Commander of St Michael and St George by Her Majesty Queen Victoria.

Free libraries had been established in the previous decade; in 1878, a working man's college was inaugurated, and within 14 years there were 2000 enrolments, the institution developing later into Sydney Technical College. This college was further comprehensively expanded some decades later into the splendid University of New South Wales, officially inaugurated in 1949.

However in 1883, a period when Australia had been adjudged by overseas banks (including Scotland) to have the most buoyant economy in the world and the highest per capita income, Parkes' government lost office.

His reputation however as an outstanding politician had spread as far as great Britain with The Times newspaper describing him as the "most commanding figure in Australian politics".

Ever resilient, Parkes continued to advocate for free trade and honest government, raising also the need for a bridge across the harbour and a railway line going inland from the north shore of Sydney. Returning to victory, he led New South Wales again from 1887 to 1891. And during the maritime strike of 1890, he undertook the control of the police and also the military.

Looking back over his career at this point, one can surely identify so many significant achievements from which the vast majority of New South Wales citizens would benefit and thus enshrine his reputation as one of the greatest leaders in the history of modern Australia.

However, one major issue was now in the forefront of his mind, one which would bequeath an incomparable legacy to all Australians. This was his avowed, unshakeable dedication to a federated land - a united land, one which would bring all Australian states and territories together as one nation.

It is not easy to imagine today this great south land as being composed of distinct separate colonies, each independent from one another. Indeed, when crossing the Murray River to enter Victoria, prior to Federation it was necessary to pass through Customs and to pay a toll.

Furthermore, the adequate provision of military services and Australia's security were increasingly under consideration, given the regularity of conflict and war in other parts of the world, and concerns about Russia's increasing interest in the region. Therefore, the colony of Victoria, in its independent wisdom, had moved to establish its own navy and had already acquired some naval vessels. Victoria was "always acutely conscious of being less under the protection of Royal Navy guns than their northern cousins".

Consequently earnest discussions were now taking place around unity, around federation and it is noteworthy also that they were proceeding towards this goal in a respectful and inclusive way.

### **Federation of the Australian colonies**

So in 1889, following Parkes' fifth re-election as Premier, he resumed his determined advocacy for Federation. It is recorded that (*Wikipedia Australia*) that "as far back as 1867, Parkes at an intercolonial conference had said – 'I think the time has arrived when these colonies should be united by some federal bond of connexion'." This was soon followed by an appropriately worded bill which was approved by both parliamentary houses. But subsequently it had been put aside by the secretary for the colonies in Britain. Thus for the next 20 years, this highly important initiative did not develop further.

However, in late 1889, an ever more confident Parkes responded to a critical report on national defence, which put forward the notion of the federation of all the defence forces of the Australian colonies, and also a uniform gauge for railways.

The time had come for more decisive, more definitive action.

In October 1889, Parkes telegraphed his fellow state Premiers, suggesting a conference, which would take place later in Melbourne.

Enshrined as one of the most significant days in Australia's history, on 24 October 1889 at the Tenterfield School of Arts, Parkes delivered the Tenterfield Oration, a resounding

clarion call for a convention, and I quote his words verbatim, “to devise the constitution which would be necessary for bringing into existence a federal government with a federal parliament for the conduct of national undertaking”.

And in a passionate comparison with the United States’ move to confederation, Parkes noted that the populations of both Australia and the United States of America were comparatively equal, and declared “what the Americans have done by war, Australians can bring about in peace without breaking the ties that hold us to the mother country”. (ref: Stephen Dando-Collins)

Within a few months, in February 1890, the Federation Conference took place in Melbourne, and it was followed the following year in Sydney at the 1891 national Australasian Convention, at which Parkes was appointed Convention President and Sir Samuel Griffith of Queensland, the Vice President.

It was at this convention that the first draft of a bill to constitute the Commonwealth of Australia was developed. And it must ever be acknowledged, that it was Henry Parkes himself who put forward the name “Commonwealth of Australia”.

In regard to Parkes’ towering and complex personality, limited attention is given to the more tender aspect of his character, except perhaps it is implied in various allusions to his virility, his three marriages and indeed the comments, sometimes insensitive, regarding the speedy nature of his third marriage to Julia Lynch, so soon after the death of his second wife Eleanor Dixon.

Despite the many assertive, even leonine aspects to his energetic character, I consider that beneath so many undoubted strengths, there was, in Henry Parkes, a deep, powerful and enduring need for being nurtured.

Despite the material impoverishment of the Parkes family during Henry’s years of childhood and adolescence, the love and supportive encouragement from Martha, his mother and from Sarah, his older sister, were undoubted. Indeed, Stephen Dando-Collins’ splendid biography relates that “Henry’s mother would take him by the hand, and sitting in front of the fire, would re-tell Daniel Defoe’s “Robinson Crusoe” to amuse him until Sarah came home from work (at Allsops). Although Martha was illiterate, she had succeeded in committing whole slabs of the text of the novel to memory, word for word. As for Sarah, Henry would say that she increasingly became like a second mother to him, and he felt able to confide his innermost thoughts to her.”

Little wonder that Henry had an enduring love for, and an enduring need for nurturing women in his life.

And this softer aspect of his character can be observed in his relationship with many of his children, who numbered a total of seventeen!

During a visit to the United States in late 1881 hoping to negotiate improved trade issues, Parkes went on to Europe, dining with royalty and then to the town of his birth, Stoneleigh.

There he met with a gathering of local school children to whom he delivered some stirring advice. “You will not all rise to a position of power, honour, influence and responsibility such as that I now fill. But by resolving to discharge the duties of life, in being of use and service in your day and generation, you will do far better than I have done”.

Words of wisdom to children perhaps, but 175 years after Henry Parkes began his life of contribution to Australia, he continues in so many ways to inspire and to enrich the nation.

I thank you all.