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# George Reid, The Democrat as Equivocator: Piss and Wind, or Principles in Search of a Constituency?

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George Reid, alas, was a sinner—at least in the political sense, according to conventional wisdom. More than eighty years after his death, Federation's most entertaining and colourful politician remains something of an enigmatic, even obscure figure. In a tribute at his death, Sir John Cockburn wrote how Reid 'loved the light and rejoiced in the full blaze of public opinion', and that people 'flocked to his election meetings as to a popular entertainment.'[1] By this the man clearly stands condemned.

The danger always inherent in the politics-as-theatre school is that form is too often seen as an attempt to mask deficiencies in content. This is rather unfair, and in itself conceals a somewhat prim and narrow view that public life, like sex, ought not to be enjoyed, or if it is, then not seen to be enjoyed. And George Reid, a man of large appetite, thoroughly enjoyed politics and all manifestations of public life which it entailed. That was his sin, the unforgivable sin of this rambunctious, shambling mountain who was apt to disarm an opponent with the invitation to 'have a lolly,' a supply of which he habitually carried in his copious pockets.

In the context of Federation and the early days of the Commonwealth, Reid is popularly perceived as an incongruously insubstantial figure, a relative latecomer to the cause, an opportunist, an indecisive waverer, an equivocator. Deakin, the visionary and Federalist 'ultra', has been lionised; his unkind and quite mischievous words about Reid have been all too well remembered. This was what the man, who revelled in the sobriquet of 'Affable Alfred', recorded for posterity about his adversary, whom he compared to Parkes, but without Parkes' dignity and more formidable in discussion 'because less self-respecting':



> Even caricature has been unable to travesty his extraordinary appearance, his immense, unwieldy, jelly-like stomach always threatening to break his waistband, his little legs apparently bowed under its weight to the verge of their endurance, his thick neck rising behind his ears rounding to his many-folded chin. His protuberant blue eyes were expressionless until roused or half hidden in cunning, and a blonde complexion and infantile breadth of baldness gave him an air of insolent juvenility ... To a superficial eye his obesity was either repellent or else amusing. A heavy German moustache concealed a mouth of considerable size from which there emanated a high-pitched voice rising to a shriek or sinking to a fawning, purring, persuasive orotund with a nasal tinge ... In other respects he resembled Parkes for he was inordinately vain and resolutely selfish, a consummate tactician even more cunning and if anything excelling him in variety and violence of vituperation.[2]

This is the enduring picture we have of Reid: fat, languid, self-indulgent, altogether repugnant, more than slightly ridiculous and not at all trustworthy. Reid has been most ill-served not only by Deakin but by history, for if there were such a thing as a hierarchy, of Federation fathers, Reid appears condemned to permanent relegation to the second rank. His prime ministership in the early Commonwealth was short-lived and uneventful, almost an accident as party alignments and allegiances waxed and waned before they were set in concrete; his role in Federation is best remembered by students of history as 'Yes–No' Reid, a figure seemingly unable or unwilling to come out decisively either way as the forces of history quickly overtook him. This image leaves Reid, if not consigned to history's dustbin, then at least floundering helplessly. There is in Deakin's remarks a persistent flavour of disapproval, the way in which reserved and solemn Victorians often looked towards Sydney and flinched at the bare-knuckle style of public life there.

We have the story as told by Deakin that has become the official line, of Reid's 'studied offensiveness and vulgar jibes' at the Adelaide Convention session in March 1897, the man who arrived there as the most popular, most influential and most generous leader, but who left as 'the most unpopular, least trusted and least respected of all its members'.[3]

Deakin wrote that Reid was simply incapable of making up his mind, and that he wanted to manoeuvre Barton from the leadership

of the federal movement in New South Wales—both of these led to the famous 'Yes–No' policy. Reid, for his part, never denied the element of equivocation in his approach, but took issue at the 'Yes–No' tag, insisting instead that it should be 'No–Yes.'

> I had been called with some reason 'Yes–No'; but a more just and friendly appreciation of my course would transpose the 'Yes–No' into 'No–Yes', quite a usual attitude in all concerns, political or commercial, into which the element of bargaining enters. Some were rather absurdly shocked at the idea that 'bargaining' should enter into so noble a cause; but the fact remained that in every project of federal union a bargain, which means a compromise, or a compromise which means a bargain, must be struck between national powers and provincial interests.[4]

What we have is evidence of a very practical and pragmatic mind at work, a mind able to sift through the rhetoric and see the problems and the processes required to address them. In this, I believe, we get our best glimpse of George Reid, who was essentially a product of a strongly utilitarian school of thought which clearly shaped and informed his politics, as did his lifelong commitment to the very Victorian idea of self-improvement. Whereas the working class and lower middle classes had their Mechanics' Institutes, middle-class professionals and business people had their debating societies, and it was in such a milieu that Reid developed his ideas and his approach to public life.[5] He was an unabashed generalist, a professional gentleman in nineteenth-century society, who educated himself 'above the narrow bounds of mere professional competence, to teach him about men and life, not to impart one skill but to discipline his mind so that he could grapple with any kind of problem'.[6] Extolling the virtues of a liberal education, Cardinal Newman described his ideal in words that could easily apply to Reid:

> It is the education which gives man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgements, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, to discard what is irrelevant.[7]

Much has been made of Reid's simple tastes in regard to cultural pursuits, Affable Alfred sniping that he 'had no taste for literature,



for art, for bric-a-brac, or the study of the past ... and ... at the theatre his preferences were those of the crowd'. Manning Clark was unable to conceal his delight at Steele Rudd's account of a meeting with Reid when he was prime minister, during which Rudd asked Reid whether he had heard of Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Ethel Turner and a whole collection of Australian writers. Reid replied with a chuckle: 'Never heard of one of them. Not one. Were they before or after the flood?'[8] It is just possible that Reid had a lend of both Rudd and Clark.

An appetite for fiction, which Reid considered unhealthy, was something with which he was no longer afflicted, having found a cure for it in the works of Macaulay, for which he felt immensely grateful.[9] Reid was no scholar but was an avid learner all the same, and his developing utilitarianism was reflected in his memoirs when he wrote of having found school to be a sort of treadmill. He began to relish knowledge only after starting work: 'When I climbed on an office stool I felt as if I had been emancipated from aimless drudgery, and had come amongst people who could really teach me something worth learning.'[10]

His father's sermons had given him a taste for the spoken word and he joined a debating society at fifteen, later advising other young men never to give up on efforts to improve the mind. An abiding hero was the irrepressible Dr John Dunmore Lang, whom he quoted as citing the memorable words of Dr Arnold of Rugby when reproached for mixing his sacred duties with those of politics —namely that 'the desire of taking a part in the concerns of government is the highest desire of a well-regulated mind'. The political career that followed was very much in keeping with this ideal for, whatever his other shortcomings, Reid's devotion to the improvement of the mind was ever in evidence. But this devotion had no priggish edge to it; Reid entertained no such notion, consciously cultivating the good humour that was to characterise his entire public life. Preserving one's good humour, he wrote, achieved at the very least a moral victory, giving what one said a pleasant appearance. Bores were in a class of infinite variety, and the worst were those occupying public time. Reid was called many things in his time, but never a bore.

It is further characteristic of his devotion to self-improvement that, when first offered a portfolio in New South Wales in 1883,

just three years after being elected to parliament, Reid rejected the proffered Treasury job for that of Public Instruction, partly because he had previously been a subordinate in the Treasury, but more because he regarded education as a matter of supreme importance and one ripe for progressive change, which he began to implement.

His approach to the federal issue was, again, characteristically practical. Anxious to preserve the free trade basis of New South Wales, Reid looked askance at the proposals of the 1891 National Australasian Convention which he likened to a reformed alcoholic setting up house with five drunkards, leaving the question about beverages to be decided later by majority vote.[11] Once popular support for union was apparent, Reid turned his considerable energies to achieving it along with securing the best deal he could for New South Wales. A man of consistent democratic temper, Reid was able to cut through the dross and focus on the main themes, which he later described:

> The main controversy from beginning to end—apart from river and railway questions—was that between those who wanted to diminish and those who wanted to enlarge the powers of the Senate. The smaller populations wanted to enlarge, the larger to lessen them. [12]

Alone among the key Federation players, Reid had a precarious balancing act to perform during the crucial final decade of the nineteenth century. As L. F. Crisp pointed out, unlike Barton, Wise and Deakin, Reid never had the luxury of being a backbencher or political freelance, having led his party continuously from 1891 until Federation, including five years as premier.[13] To him fell the role not of advocate or partisan, but rather the deliberate impartiality of a judge addressing a jury. Reid knew the pitfalls of his chosen path but could take no other, as he explained.

> I had publicly declared my intention to vote for the Bill, in spite of its drawbacks, and I felt that laid on me a heavier obligation to leave no one in doubt as to its defects. The more emphatic I became in my analysis, the more irritated the extremists on both sides became. One set denounced me for seeing so many defects in the Bill, the other set for not seeing more. If I had shut my eyes to its defects and magnified its merits I should have been extolled by those who shouted 'Yes'; if I had seen nothing but defects I should have been extolled by those who shouted 'No'.[14]



It was a constant source of amusement to Reid that he was labelled 'Reid the Wriggler'; just how a creature of his dimensions and build could wriggle was a laugh in itself. But what were Reid's reservations? The work of the 1897–98 Convention had greatly improved the bill of 1891, but now he was concerned that if the people waited for a perfect bill they would wait forever. First, he did not find the supremacy of the House of Representatives over all matters of taxation and appropriation sufficient (in times of crisis, he feared, and especially with regard to the tariff, the constitution of the Senate might make it paramount); second, the formula for apportioning revenues was not satisfactory; third, the question of the rivers was not resolved; fourth, there was the issue of the site for the federal capital; and fifth, he was uncertain about procedures to amend the Constitution. But in spite of these defects, he had decided he had to support the federal cause.[15] As we know now, Reid succeeded rather brilliantly in effecting changes, notably the sunset clause on the 'Braddon blot' of apportioning revenues, and in winning the federal capital for New South Wales.

Immediate reaction to Reid's marathon speech at the Sydney Town Hall was mixed, bewildered even. The *Sydney Morning Herald* said the premier 'had fulfilled his duty in offering the public his candid opinion on the measure'.[16] The *Daily Telegraph*, which for its own reasons had opposed Federation, trumpeted that 'No great public measure was ever more effectively damned with faint praise', but conceded that while Reid might be right in his political prescience, 'the method by which he ... arrived at this conclusion is not calculated to either aid the cause of Federation or to add to Mr Reid's reputation as a sincere and wholehearted advocate of that cause'. The staunchly pro-Protectionist *Age* in Melbourne, ever wary of Reid and his free trade policies, hailed the speech as 'calm, balanced and carefully weighed'. The pro-Federation *Argus*, in Melbourne, said that Reid was to be thanked for not arguing the 'vulgar question' of who had obtained the better of the deal:

> The peroration of the Premier of New South Wales was all that could be desired, and the tone and temper in which he spoke will, we hope, obtain throughout the contest. There are pedlars who, says Emerson, conduct their business as princes, and princes who transact their affairs as pedlars. Mr Reid was not a pedlar. We hope no Victorian politician will be.[17]

The muted and equivocal message that Reid delivered to his constituents he proceeded to sell, and he enjoyed himself as much, if not more, on the hustings as in parliament. As was noted by a London newspaper at the time of his death in 1918, Reid's enormous popularity owed less to any power of statesmanship or administrative capacity than to gifts of manner and temper, to adroitness and capacity for speech:

> He had a shrewd and racy, if not a very delicate humour, great good nature, and the ability to convince men that he was a practical man and a man and a brother ... His speech was of the platform, plain, broad, blunt, relying for some of its best things on the chance of the moment or an opponent's interruption.[18]

His repartee was legendary. When challenged from the floor of a public meeting that he had two faces, Reid shot back, to the evident delight of his audience: 'Which, sir, you evidently have not. If you had, you would have left at home the one you have brought here.' And, facing a tumultuous audience, who for some minutes loudly hooted him after he had uttered the single word 'Gentlemen', he waited for a lull to say in feigned amazement: 'What have I said wrong, except to call you "gentlemen"?' At the same gathering (if a later report is to be believed, as this same quip has been attributed to several figures, Churchill included), a woman called out: 'If I were your wife I'd poison you', to which Reid replied: 'If you were my wife I'd poison myself'. On another occasion he was hit with a bad egg and, wiping the mess from his face, observed that it was a striking instance of the unsound arguments of his opponents. When he was hit with a bag of flour, he calmly adjusted his trademark monocle and, dusting his shoulders, observed how even his enemies were 'at pains to show my whiteness as a politician'. Once, at one of the federal conventions, a Tasmanian delegate expressed exasperation at one of Reid's statements, saying: 'What am I here for?' Reid, calmly placing his monocle in position, looked at the interjector thoughtfully before replying: 'Only divine Providence can answer that question'.

And what of that monocle? The man himself said it was for an entirely altruistic purpose—to help the newspaper cartoonists who were trying, without success, to capture him. To prove his point, he liked to relate a story about a visit to Adelaide during which he



was introduced to a man, who said, somewhat incredulously: 'You George Reid? No fear. Why, I know George Reid as well as I know my own father. I've met him in the papers every week for years.' And the cartoonists? Well, 'Hop' of the *Bulletin* was adamant in denying that his hundreds of drawings of Reid could be regarded as caricatures. 'They should all be in the National portrait gallery', he declared.

Reid's great bulk was a source of constant mirth, not least for Reid himself. A heckler at a rally in Newcastle, pointing at Reid's great belly resting on the balustrade of the hotel balcony from which he was speaking, asked what it would be called. Reid shot back: 'If it's what I think it is, all piss and wind, I'll call it after you, young feller'. As a popular after-dinner speaker in Australia and later as High Commissioner in London, he was assured of a laugh when, struggling to raise himself from a sitting to a standing position, he uttered the words: 'Mr Chairman, I rise with great difficulty to propose this toast'. When travelling in a tram or a bus, as he was fond of relating, it was a privilege peculiarly his own to rise and offer his seat, not to one but to two ladies.[19] When he visited a town in England well placarded with advertisements for Reid's Stout, he is said to have remarked to a companion: 'Of course he is, but they need not proclaim the fact'. When he lamented to Lord Kitchener at the outbreak of the First World War that, despite being over seventy, scarcely able to walk and unable to ride or shoot, he wished there were something he might do to help the cause. Kitchener looked at him steadily and replied: 'Yes, I should think we could make you a base for something'.

By the time of his death in 1918, Reid was fondly considered a man from an age that had vanished, embodying certain public virtues that were no longer general. At a memorial service for him in St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne in 1919, Dean Godby paid eloquent tribute: 'He always tried to do the thing which was right, without considering whether it would be popular. He succeeded to the great tradition of the old school of Australian statesmen, of whom he proved himself a worthy inheritor'.[20]

The image of the waverer (unfortunately revived in 1944 by the posthumous publication of Deakin's account) had given way to a more statesmanlike appreciation, removed from the passions of pre-Federation. The *Advertiser* in Adelaide, which had viewed Reid

with some concern before Federation, said of him that he was a 'genuine Liberal, and history will acknowledge that his broad-minded statesmanship has contributed materially to Australian progress and development along democratic lines'.[21] The *Irish Times* observed that in Australia his name would forever be associated with the successful conclusion of the Federation issue for 'it was he who raised it from a purely academical level and made it a question for the people to solve'.[22]

Reid himself was in no doubt about the key role he played in achieving union and he never regretted his course of action, explaining at the time: 'I felt I ought to give the Bill a chance of being considered fully ... I felt, as the man who practically brought it into life, that I should give it a show; because I knew that if I took up a hostile attitude the Bill was dead'.[23]

When, after leaving Australian politics, he wrote a letter to the *Morning Post* to clarify certain comments about free trade and Australian union, he took the opportunity to define his role as he saw it:

> There were Free Traders and Protectionists on both sides. As for myself, it is quite true that in the earlier stages of my career I preferred Free Trade to Federation. But from 1894 to 1899 when I was Premier of the Mother State, I took the movement from the shelf and in co-operation with my brother Premiers, carried it to a successful issue ... Before I left office the Federal union was an accomplished fact, waiting for the Imperial Act.[24]

Deakin notwithstanding, this is difficult to dispute. Reid should be restored to the front rank of Federation fathers; indeed, without him, it is not easy to see how the miracle, in the end, could have been made.

# 6

# 'It Would be a Glorious Finish to your Life': Federation and Henry Parkes

ALLAN MARTIN

This title refers to the well-known remark which Lord Carrington, governor of New South Wales, made in a conversation he had with Henry Parkes on 15 June 1889. Parkes, then seventy-four, was, for the fifth time, premier of the colony. He had recently been one of four guests at a luncheon which Carrington gave in honour of a visiting Canadian advocate of imperial Federation, a fad which argued for some arrangement by which England and its self-governing colonies would decide imperial policy jointly. Privately, Carrington was not impressed. As he told his diary, 'the idea of a huge Council representing England and the colonies, debating whether we are to go to war &c. seems to me absurd'.

Talking the matter over with Parkes later on, Carrington noted, all the same, how much more influential Canada was in imperial affairs than any of the Australian colonies. 'That must be so', Parkes observed, 'until we federate'. And then, seemingly apropos of nothing, he added: 'I could confederate these colonies in twelve months'. As La Nauze has remarked: 'Perhaps Carrington made the correct response a little too quickly'.[1] 'Then why don't you do it?' he said. 'It would be a glorious finish to your life.' Parkes smiled: 'There are difficulties'.[2]

Why Parkes suddenly made this claim, and what subsequently happened, is not my primary concern. In the early 1970s La Nauze wrote that 'for young historians, Parkes's motives at any time of his long political life will continue to provoke speculation'.[3] At that time, still youngish, I myself wrote, not altogether speculatively, about Parkes' sudden enthusiasm for Federation as an attempt by a politician consummately skilled in one form of leadership to construct a new power base as his old one seemed to be collapsing.[4]

# Makers of Miracles

## The Cast of the Federation Story

Edited by
David Headon and John Williams

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died away. They are often the real makers of miracles, although the players on whom the spotlight falls are given most of the credit.

In this approach—of history as a play—the historian takes on the role of the sympathetic and erudite critic who guides us through the various acts and scene changes, who helps us explore and interpret the real meaning of the performance. Without such a guide, we may fail to fully grasp the significance of the action and events that have taken place. That's why history and historians are so important. They help us understand better than anyone else why the world we live in is the way it is. And by helping us to understand our world, they help us to understand ourselves.

I wholeheartedly commend this book to anyone who is seeking to discover more about why Australia and Australians are the way they are today. It will point you in the right direction with many interesting and entertaining diversions along the way. Enjoy the journey.

Hon. Bob Halverson OBE
Former Speaker of the House of Representatives
Ambassador to Ireland

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