

PART TWO

1856–1901

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A Commonwealth  
for the British Race,  
a Commonwealth  
under the Crown

## Keeping the Magic

Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* was published just before the passage of the *Second Reform Act* in 1867. Bagehot's pithy prose, acid wit, and visual eye for the theatrical elements of government, combined with his deeply conservative and sometimes condescending view of human nature, produced what would later become a classic elucidation of the core myths of the English Constitution. His description of the workings of the balanced constitution of England in 1865–1866 — Kings Lords and Commons — Monarchy, Aristocracy and Democracy — would be repeated in one form or another throughout the British dominions in the late nineteenth century and beyond.

In Bagehot's eyes, one of the key roles of monarchy in the English constitution was to disguise the essentially republican nature of political institutions. Monarchy was the magical element of the constitution, a hereditary caste of street theatre performers delivered into the world by God to distract the people from governing their own affairs. In short, Bagehot saw the monarchy as a useful propaganda tool. And despite the arrogance and self-satisfied air of his prose, he understood the importance of mass emotional attachments to political and national identity, attachments that would partly explain the popularity of the monarchy for at least a century to come in Australia.

In 1876 when David Blair, co-editor of the *Argus* in the early 1850s and long-time political colleague of Henry Parkes, wrote his introduction to Henry Parkes's collection of speeches, he extended Bagehot's argument to the Australian colonies. For Blair, the Australian colonies, having been granted responsible government, were already self-governing republics. Like Bagehot's views of the typical Englishman, and Parkes's earlier columns in the *Empire* in the 1850s, Blair's image of ordinary Australians was that of a people with limited aspirations and capabilities. They were not proud or defiant, and they lacked 'enobling anticipations', unlike the Americans. Blair believed that the absence of nationality in the Australian colonies was due to the

strength of the British connection. Yet it was precisely this shared affection for Britain that would ultimately enable a squabbling group of colonies to unite in 1901.

In the 1880s and 1890s the topic of ‘nationality’ dominated much of the political debate in Australia. The NSW ‘democrat’ and member of parliament E. W. O’Sullivan’s vision of the coming Australian republic in 1884 embodied the central motif of Australian nationalism during this period — whiteness. The desire to protect the purity and superiority of the white British race was one shared by British Imperialists like O’Sullivan and the leaders of the labour movement in the late 1880s and 1890s. Republicanism in late nineteenth-century Australia would indeed be connected intimately with the ‘feeling of nationality’, either as the nationalist gloss on socialist rhetoric, the alleged solution to ‘national’ security concerns or the prospect of federation. Yet, much like the ‘magic’ of the commonwealth ‘under the Crown’, the promise of republican ‘daylight’ remained the exclusive property of white Australians.

#### 40 Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*

Oxford University Press, London, 1949 (first published 1867) pp. 30, 34–5, 48, 53

##### The Monarchy

The best reason why a Monarchy is a strong government is that it is an intelligible government. The mass of mankind understand it, and they hardly anywhere in the world understand any other. It is often said that men are ruled by their imaginations; but it would be truer to say they are governed by the weaknesses of their imaginations. The nature of a constitution, the action of an assembly, the play of parties, the unseen formation of a guiding opinion, are complex facts, difficult to know, and easy to mistake. But the action of a single will, the fiat of a single mind, are easy ideas: anybody can make them out and no one can ever forget them . . . We have whole classes unable to comprehend the idea of a constitution — unable to feel the least attachment to impersonal laws. Most do indeed vaguely know that there are some other institutions besides the Queen, and some rules by which she governs. But a vast number like their minds to dwell upon her than upon anything else and therefore she is inestimable. A Republic only has difficult ideas in government; a Constitutional Monarchy has an easy idea too; it has a comprehensible idea for the vacant many, as well as complex laws and notions for the inquiring few. A family on the throne is an interesting idea also. It brings down the pride of sovereignty to the level of petty life. No feeling could seem more childish than the enthusiasm of the English at the marriage of the Prince of Wales. They treat it as a great political event . . . the women — one half of the human race at least — care fifty times more for a marriage than a ministry . . . To state the matter shortly, Royalty is a government in which the attention of

the nation is concentrated on one person doing interesting actions. A Republic is a government in which that attention is divided between many, who are all doing uninteresting actions. Accordingly, so long as the human heart is strong and the human reason weak, Royalty will be strong because it appeals to diffused feeling, and Republics weak because they appeal to the understanding . . .

Constitutional royalty [also] . . . acts as a disguise. It enables our real rulers to change without heedless people knowing it. The masses of Englishmen are not fit for an elective government; if they knew how near they were to it, they would be surprised, and almost tremble . . .

Above all things our Royalty is to be revered, and if you begin to poke about it you cannot reverence it. When there is a select committee on the Queen, the charm of royalty will be gone. Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic.

#### 41 Separate, Independent and Self-governing Republics

David Blair’s introduction to *Speeches on Various Occasions connected with the public affairs of New South Wales 1848–1874* by Henry Parkes, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1876, pp. vi–vii

The sentiment of nationality has still to be created amongst [the Australian republics]. Or if there be some first faint stirrings of any such sentiment, they are confined to a few individual minds of superior stamp . . . There is probably less of those ennobling anticipations amongst us than there was amongst the American colonists long prior to their earliest movements towards independence. Nor, let it be observed, is there in the language I am here using any intentional latent reference to the British connexion. The future of the Australian colonies is now, in fact, quite independent of their continued allegiance to the Crown of England. They are separate, independent, and self-governing republics, to the full extent that they would be such if their common connexion with Great Britain were entirely severed. No such immediate and marvellous expansion in population, trade, commerce, and general enterprise, would result from the severance as followed upon the achievement of independence in the American colonies. The simple truth is that the British supremacy here — in so far as it affects the internal development of the several colonies, the growth of a sentiment of Australian nationality, or the republican freedom and simplicity of our institutions — has ceased to be anything more than nominal. The fact reflects glory on the mother country. When she gave us our freedom, she gave it in amplest measure, and with no grudging hand. May the silken bond that unites the venerated parent and

her children in the sunny South prove of . . . strength and durability! But, although an Australian Colonial Governor keeps constantly a dutiful watch over the interests of the distant Power whose delegate he is, the change to the colony he governs would be quite imperceptible if, tomorrow, his patent of office were to be exchanged for that of first President of an independent Australian Republic.

The absence of the sentiment of nationality, then, is in no degree owing to the presence of the British connexion. It is due, indeed, to far different causes — to the intensity with which individual and purely local interests are regarded, to lurking mutual jealousies amongst the various colonies, and to the littleness of mind and narrowness of view which these engender.

## 42 The Coming Republic

E. W. O'Sullivan, *Democrat*, 29 March 1884

This is the age of unification of races . . . let us ascertain if a similar step cannot be taken by our own race. Fortunately for us it can. More than a century ago, through the blundering stupidity of the Ministry of the day, and the unreasonable prejudice of a semi lunatic king, thirteen of our most flourishing colonies severed their connection with the mother country. Before doing so, they protested against the injustice under which they laboured, they petitioned for a redress of their grievances, and resorted to every constitutional means to have their wrong rectified, but without fail. Goaded into rebellion, they manfully fought and gained their independence, and have so well flourished since, that they now far outnumber the mother country in population and are certainly equal, if not superior, to her in wealth. The great majority of the people of these lands are similar to ourselves in language, religion and interests — in fact, we are one and the same race. The minor points on which we differ being the outcome of the greater amount of liberty which our American cousins have enjoyed or the different life which they have led. The question then arises, why can we not unite with them as the different German and Italian States have united, and transform these rival and sometimes hostile countries in one powerful civilising; and liberty promoting nation, which shall curb the aggrandising proclivities of tyrants; secure the freedom of those countries which already enjoy it, and save mankind much of the misery, bloodshed and degradation brought upon it through the ambition of despots to distinguish themselves.

About the power of Great Britain and the United States combined to do this, there cannot, I think, be a reasonable doubt. Their fleets could sweep the sea of all opposition, and as they represent nearly 100,000,000 of the most progressive race in the world — to say nothing of the inferior race which

they govern — they could place such a force in the field that no nation or race could for any length of time withstand them. Strengthened by such an accession of wealth, power, and population, Great Britain could afford to laugh to scorn all attacks upon her territory, whether by the Russians on the Indian frontier, or by any attempt to wrest the Emerald Isle from her; while the United States themselves would be relieved of all danger of a war with England — the only foe which could harm them — and the last remark holds equally good with regard to England, whose only dangerous opponent is her eldest daughter, the great Republic.

Gigantic as such a nation might be, it could easily be governed upon the Federal principle, which, while strong enough in itself to resist all attempts to snap it, is yet so elastic as to allow of each and every state under its influence preserving its own peculiar institutions. The United States afford an illustration of the success of the Federal principle. There we see that thirty-four distinct governments can all be regulated and controlled by a central authority (the Congress). Great Britain herself is another instance of the success of federation, for under her Imperial sway we find distinct governments in India, Canada, the Cape and Australia, all of whom pay obedience to the central controlling power of the whole (the Parliament of Great Britain). What works so well in the United States and Great Britain now, would operate equally as well under the system I propose. The fable of the bundle of sticks is symbolical of federation, and the application of the principle has many times in history saved small States from subjugation by more powerful neighbours — notably in the case of the free cities of Germany. Under this federative principle, Ireland might safely be trusted with Home Rule; and thus a long agitated for boon could be granted to a noble and suffering people. Australia might also be organised so that no foreign foe would ever violate her shores. I may be told that such a nation would be too large and cumbersome, and a menace to other countries. With regard to the first assertion, it may be answered that, in proportion to what was known of the world, the Roman Republic was quite as large as the Anglo American Republic would be now; yet the Romans governed their vast territories with ease from the Eternal City. As to the other statement, the Anglo-American race have territory sufficient to exercise their genius for colonization for centuries to come, and would therefore, be very unlikely to go to war for the sake of obtaining more. Such a nation, composed of people with whom freedom and liberty are a second nature, would offer a safe guarantee for the maintenance of those boons not only for themselves, but for all others who deserved or needed them; and as the Anglo American race is now at the apex of civilisation, the influence of their nation abroad would undoubtedly be exercised in the interests of mankind.

Now as to the mode of Government for this extensive and powerful nation. For all advanced races, I hold that the Republican is the best form for administering the affairs of a nation. It is the only government under which all classes may meet upon a common platform, and it is the only government which does not allow of those relics of barbarism — class distinctions and privileges — A republic means government by the people. Vox Populi Vox Deo. A nation is more likely to be led by patriotic and virtuous aims when governed by the people than when governed merely by a class, however educated and refined the latter may be, because a class has always its interests to conserve and extend. As Junius says: 'The people in their judgement may err, but in their aspirations they are never wrong.' . . . It was the people who rectified the abuses of France; it was the people who carried the Reform Bill of England; it was the people who abolished slavery in America. It was class government which opposed all them. The people, then, should have the power in this proposed Anglo-American Republic. They already possess it in the United States, and I believe it is a mere question of a few years till they will possess it in Great Britain also. Year by year we see the nobility being stripped of their power and their privileges; and when they are all taken away, Great Britain will virtually be a Republic. I believe that this Republican form of government will be a better, more vigorous, and more just form of government than a Monarchy can possibly be. If all sovereigns were like Victoria, or like the Prince of Wales promises to be Monarchy might be endurable, but unfortunately they are not, for where we have one Victoria we have a dozen bad monarchs. The system is too liable to abuse to be palatable to those who have the instincts of freedom and liberty. Think of the pernicious effects upon the nation of a Charles II or a George IV. The people take their tone from the Court, and thus the whole nation may become demoralised by one man. Under a Republic this could not happen, because if the President were a bad man, he could be got rid of at the end of his term, but a bad King must be tolerated till he dies. Under a Republic, people are not only more virtuous, but more patriotic, because then every man feels that he has a stake in the land equal with the highest in it. Witness the gallant struggle made by the Athenian Republic against the enemies of Greece; the long career of victory of the Roman Republic, which declined and fell when transformed into an Empire; the heroic struggles of the Dutch and American Republics against their oppressors; the power of England under the Commonwealth . . . and lastly the Titanic struggles of the French Republic against the combined armies of Europe. This is the kind of Government I would have for the land of free men — the Anglo-American Republic, I propose — and this I believe to be the only form of government fit for free men to live under.