

With the benefit of

hindsight

If Henry Parkes, Edmund Barton or Alfred Deakin were alive today, what would they think about the national parliament they helped create?

What's happened to the vision they held and worked so hard to achieve?



Photos: (left) Alfred Deakin, Prime Minister of Australia, 24 September 1903 – 27 April 1904; 5 July 1905 – 13 November 1908; 2 June 1909 – 24 April 1910. Photo: A1200-1.11179. Photo reproduced with the permission of the National Archives of Australia; (right) Edmund Barton, Prime Minister of Australia, 1 January 1901 – 24 September 1903. Photo reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Australia

The answer to the first question will never be known. But a new book on parliament explores the answer to the second question through the views of various scholars.

Parliament, The Vision in Hindsight presents a collection of essays that examine some of the key issues that have challenged the federal parliament during its first century. The essays consider how parliament has exercised the powers granted to it under our Constitution, and ask what the past century has taught us about the role parliament should play and the powers it should have in the future.

"The powers vested in the national parliament have proved more than adequate in helping to secure the basic objectives of federation," says Professor Geoffrey Lindell (co-editor) in his introduction to the book. But the constitutional provisions granting legislative powers to the parliament, coupled with a generous interpretation of those powers by the High Court, have enabled the parliament to pass laws which "went far beyond what might have been contemplated at the time of federation".

Among the important issues considered in the book are federal-state relations, the federal conciliation and arbitration power, parliament's changing role in treaty making, and the success rate of efforts to bring about constitutional change.

An increase in the centralisation of power in Australia has been one of the consequences of the way parliament has exercised its legislative powers, says Professor Lindell.

"In modern times it seems to have been accepted that the parliament possesses and is expected to exercise ample powers to make laws for the control of the national economy, the exploitation of the nation's resources and the environment. With the help of a generous interpretation accorded by the High Court to the legislative powers possessed by the Australian parliament, the same parliament has met the perceived demands of the welfare state in the 20th century.

"It remains to be seen how the parliament will respond to the more recent contraction of the role of government in the social and economic affairs of our nation."

The new book is the culmination of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library's major Centenary of Federation project, the *Vision in Hindsight*. That project brought together a group of distinguished scholars to tell the story of how parliament has fashioned and reworked the intentions of those who crafted the Constitution.

In total, 15 research papers were produced for the project and 11 of those have been selected for inclusion in the book. Some of the papers were featured in 2001 editions of *About the House*. The full collection is available from the Parliamentary Library's web site at:

www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/vision.htm

Parliament, The Vision in Hindsight is edited by Professor Geoffrey Lindell (Professor of Law at the University of Melbourne) and

Bob Bennett (a researcher in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library). Published by The Federation Press (ISBN 1862874096). Price: \$77 (including GST). ■

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The two most interesting responses, as judged by the editorial team for *About the House*, will each receive a copy of the book donated by The Federation Press and will have their entries published in a future issue of *About the House*.