

Corowa's YES to Federation

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The daughter of a customs officer stands in the background of a picture of the border gate on the new Wahgunyah bridge in 1893 (University of Melbourne archives).

In December 1892, Edmund Barton, a federation enthusiast, visited Corowa for the opening of railway branch line from Culcairn. He sensed the unpopularity of having border customs duties and gates between cross-river neighbours.

Barton argued that the best way to get rid of the gates was for people to make their voices heard. He suggested they form local leagues to agitate for federation with free trade between the states.



The border gates between Wahgunyah and Corowa.
The National Trust classified customs house at right.

In April 1893, Frank B Smith, a zealous customs officer, decided to lock the border gate at Wahgunyah each evening as he had no nightwatchman assistant.

Smith's decision proved a boost to the federation movement for it fuelled border district discontent.

The Berrigan federation league called for a conference in Corowa of all the seventeen newly formed leagues along the border to give expression to popular opinion in favour of federation.

In August 1893, the Corowa Federation Conference did that. It endorsed a plan of having each colonial government elect representatives to a federal convention to shape a

federation bill. The bill would then be put to referenda in each colony. Voters, not politicians, would decide if the colonies would federate.

Corowa was the Birthplace of Federation. It was the starting place of a people's movement that did win the attention of politicians. The conference instigated a process to bring federation about.

A festival to commemorate the 130th anniversary of the conference was held in Corowa on July 29, 2023.

Like all commemorative events, it looked at both then and now. Historians reflect on how the Corowa Federation Conference has been remembered. But 2023's commemoration was held on the eve of a referendum for constitutional change.

Attention was given to the power of grassroots campaigns to bring about political change. It asked how politicians determine the readiness of a community for change.

Historians explain that the anti-change movement, then, was strong and noisy in resisting any alteration to the prevailing conditions. Nay-sayers dwelt on the uncertain outcomes of a YES vote.

Yet, in the quiet of the voting booth, over 80% of voters in Corowa and other electorates along the southern border voted YES for federation in 1898 and again in 1899.