

CHAPTER 4

The Recognition Issue at Adelaide

As a result of pressure from the smaller colonies – Western Australia, Tasmania and South Australia – the first session of the Federal Convention was held in Adelaide. This displeased the governments of the two larger colonies. '[G]reat was the wrath in the [Victorian] Turner Cabinet', wrote Alfred Deakin, 'and indeed among the New South Wales representatives also. A stay in Melbourne was looked forward to with pleasurable anticipation but in Adelaide, the City of Churches, it was quite another matter.'¹ There is perhaps an echo of this irritation in the diary of Robert Randolph Garran, the young Sydney lawyer who came to Adelaide as assistant to George Reid, the New South Wales premier: 'Adelaide at nine fifteen a.m. on Sunday, where we disappointed the press by preferring cleanliness to godliness, and not going to church.'²

The city's sober and decorous tone was perhaps of some assistance to the recognitionists, and early in the piece they received encouragement from a possibly unexpected source. On 25 March the Convention received a telegram from Chamberlain, the British secretary of state for colonies, advising that Her Majesty desired him 'to acquaint the Federal Convention that she takes special interest in their proceedings and hopes that under Divine Guidance their labours will result in practical benefit to Australia.'³

In order to expedite the construction of a working draft, the Convention initially formed itself into three committees: a constitutional, a finance and a judiciary committee. It was during a meeting of the constitutional committee on 8 April that the 'recognition' issue was first raised. Quick, one of the supporters of Gosman's resolution at Bathurst, moved that the preamble be amended to declare that the people of the colony, in agreeing to form an indissoluble Commonwealth, were 'invoking Divine Providence'. The minutes, the only official record, simply recorded the words of Quick's amendment and stated that it was negatived.⁴

However, some months later, one of the New South Wales members of this committee, J. H. Carruthers, speaking to a Christian Endeavour delegation, offered an account of the viewpoints expressed in the debate on Quick's amendment. The credibility of this account is subject to some doubt, not simply because Carruthers may have been tempted to tell the delegation what it wanted to hear, but more substantially because he seriously misdescribed the words of Quick's amendment. Carruthers told the Endeavourers that the words were 'by the Grace of God'.

According to Carruthers, 'the question was exhaustively dealt with' by the constitutional committee. Some members had wondered whether the recognition of deity would yield any practical benefit. Some were worried that if they associated the name of God with the Constitution, and the Constitution broke down, they would be guilty of irreverence. Some doubted whether they should load the deity with their necessarily imperfect Constitution. Finally, some considered that inserting a religious clause in the preamble meant putting a religious affirmation into the mouth of the British parliament, and that this might lead to irreverence and make the name of God empty.⁵

So perhaps partly for these pious reasons, but almost certainly for other more secular ones, Quick's proposal was rejected. The other items in the recognitionist petitions, those relating to prayers by the Commonwealth parliament and to the setting aside of special national days for religious purposes, were not formally raised or discussed in either this or subsequent sessions of the Convention. The evidence does not indicate why, but probably the main reason was that such proposals could not meaningfully be canvassed in the Convention until 'recognition' itself was accepted.

The constitutional committee's rejection of Quick's amendment was briefly reported in the press,⁶ and provoked an immediate response. Some expressed satisfaction. 'Better a Christian atmosphere', declared the *Argus*, than any formal clause carried by strife.⁷ A

Bulletin columnist jeered, 'If some arrangement could be made for God recognizing the Convention, it would be a great deal more to the point.'⁸

However, the strongest reaction naturally came from the losers. The Victorian recognitionists moved first. On 17 April the Victorian Council of Churches forwarded a petition to the Convention asking, 'before finally disposing of the matter, to grant that at least the first and chief prayer... as to the national recognition of God... should be granted, so that God's name might be glorified and the conscientious conventions of thousands of Christian people Australia may not be wounded.'⁹ Additionally, personal representations were made by the Council to some – perhaps all – members of the Victorian delegation.¹⁰

From about this time, one may note, the initiative in organizing the 'recognition' campaign shifted from New South Wales to Victoria. Such a shift hardly was surprising. Protestant-Catholic-secularist tensions mostly were sharper in Victoria than in New South Wales and, as a rule, Victorian Protestants were more militant than their New South Wales counterparts. Probably only the unusual circumstance of Moran's candidature, and his initial enthusiasm for the 'recognition' cause, had placed the New South Wales Council of Churches for a time at the head of the campaign.

This renewed Victorian Protestant agitation achieved one result almost immediately. On 22 April the 'recognition' question was raised once more, this time in full Convention. However, the matter was no longer in Quick's hands. With a view to making 'recognition' appear ecumenical rather than simply Protestant, the Victorian Protestant Simon Fraser had invited the South Australian Roman Catholic, Patrick McMahon Glynn, to raise the issue.¹¹ Glynn was agreeable, and on 22 April in a carefully prepared and literary speech reintroduced Quick's 'recognition' proposal.

There was, Glynn said, a widespread desire in the community that God be recognized. Such a consensus had force because it *was* a consensus; and it also strengthened rather than weakened the security of 'liberty of thought'. He referred to the

spirit of reverence for the Unseen [which] pervades all the relations of our civil life. It is felt in the forms of our courts of justice, in the language of our Statutes, in the oath that binds the Sovereign to the observance of our liberties, in the recognition of the Sabbaths, in the rubrics of our guilds and social orders...

Then, after citing evidence as to the antiquity of the idea of a 'Divine Mind' guiding the destiny of States, he concluded by asking the Convention

to grant the prayer of [the 'recognition'] petitions; to grant it in a hope, that the justice we wish to execute may be rendered certain our work, and our union abiding and fruitful by the blessing of the Supreme Being.¹²

The short debate that followed encapsulated most viewpoints on the 'recognition' issue. The next speaker was the octogenarian Tasmanian, Adye Douglas, who caustically chided Glynn for giving the Convention 'a sermon' that would have been interesting if 'given in another place'. Invoking the divine blessing, Douglas suggested, was 'not the proper way of carrying out the religious idea at all'. It had not been done in the constitutions of the United States or Canada. 'Nothing can make religion more ridiculous than to have the form without the substance.'¹³

Barton then spoke. To the accompaniment of cheers from some members of the Convention,¹⁴ he expressed the hope that Glynn would withdraw his amendment. The invocation of God, he suggested, offering a theological pendant to Glynn's partially libertarian argument for 'recognition', was 'more reverently left out than made'. Moving from reverence to ridicule, he stressed the difficulty of either predicting in advance, or discovering after the event, whether or not, when citizens came to vote on the Federation Bill, they actually were 'invoking Divine Providence'. He carefully sketched his own view of the relationship of the sacred to the secular:

The whole mode of government, the whole province of the State, is secular. The whole business that is transacted by any community – however deeply Christian, unless it has an established church, unless religion is interwoven expressly and professedly with all its actions – is secular business as distinguished from religious

business. The whole duty is to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.

He concluded:

The best plan which can be adopted as to a proposal of this kind, which is so likely to create dissension foreign to the objects of any church, or any Christian community, is that secular expressions should be left to secular matters while prayer should be left to its proper place.¹⁵

Barton was followed by the devout New South Wales Presbyterian, J. T. Walker, who supported Glynn. He in effect suggested that since the churches were aiding the federation movement, the Convention might properly by way of return agree to Glynn's amendment. He also reminded the Convention of the reference to deity in the telegram from Chamberlain, and of the 'unanimous' acceptance at the Bathurst Convention of the Rev. J. Fielding's 'recognition' motion.¹⁶

At this point, judging that he did not have the numbers, Glynn sought to withdraw his amendment. But Sir George Turner and Sir William Zeal, for reasons that do not clearly emerge but which probably reflected pressure from clerical constituents, strongly urged Glynn nevertheless to persevere.¹⁷ He did so, but his amendment was negated by 17 votes to 11.¹⁸