

# Did you know?

## Federal Parliament is moving back to Melbourne

Federal Parliament has decided to move back to Melbourne, where it first met 100 years ago. But unlike the first time, when it stayed for 26 years, this time Members and Senators will only be visiting for two days.

On 9 and 10 May this year, the House of Representatives and the Senate will mark the centenary of the Australian Parliament with a ceremonial sitting in their first home – Victoria's Parliament House on Spring Street. The sitting will be the main focus in a week of activities celebrating 100 years of federal parliamentary history.

### *An impressive new home for the Federal Parliament.*

Victoria's Parliament House was considered an impressive new home for the Federal Parliament when it first met there in May 1901. Situated on the largest hill of central Melbourne and surrounded by churches, the building boasted a sumptuously decorated interior and an excellent library. It constituted one of Australia's finest examples of classical architecture. Prime Minister Barton evidently appreciated these qualities. He happily accepted the Governor of Victoria's offer of a temporary tenure in the Spring Street building, after which the Federal Parliament was to move to a new home in a new national capital.

The Victorian Parliament was dispatched to the more remote and less comfortable Exhibition Building. It is unlikely they would have suspected that their temporary relocation would last more than a quarter of a century.

The 75 Members who gathered for the first sitting of the House of Representatives constituted, in the words of *The Age*, "battalions

of silk hats . . . which most members kept upon their heads during the sitting". All the Members were men and, with two exceptions, either Australian or British born. Many of them had sat previously in the colonial Legislative Assemblies and at least 25 were active Protestant churchmen. The oldest, William Groom, had first arrived in Australia as a transported convict, and the youngest was a lawyer and citizen soldier of 32 years called Richard Crouch. Following Westminster practice, the House appointed a Clerk, George Jenkins, formerly Clerk of the Victorian Legislative Council, and a Serjeant-at-Arms, Thomas Woollard, formerly Usher of the Black Rod in the Victorian Parliament. To make up for his disappointment in not finding a place in the Cabinet, Frederick Holder, the Member for Wakefield and the former Premier of South Australia, was elected Speaker.

It took a while for the 'silk battalions' to settle into their new company. In the first 10 years at Spring Street, executive power changed hands seven times as successive governments were defeated on the floor of the House and then, a few months later, regained the required numbers. Most Members only loosely grouped themselves into political affiliations depending on their individual position on certain issues, and particularly on how they felt about a nation-wide tariff and a national system of industrial arbitration. Only the Labor Party, headed first by John Christian Watson and later by Andrew Fisher, formed a somewhat disciplined party. Indeed, it was not until the end of the first decade that the House began to assume its now familiar bilateral face. In 1909, Alfred Deakin drew together Protectionist and Free Trade Members opposed to Labor's socialist platform to form a fusion Liberal Party and a coherent Opposition.

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*The Victorian Parliament Building, where the Federal Parliament first met in 1901 and where the Centenary sitting will take place on 10 May 2001. Photo: Reproduced with the permission of the Library Committee of the Parliament of Victoria*

