

A Symbol of Imperial Unity? The Australian Colonies and the 1897 Imperial Conference

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The 1897 colonial conference coincided with Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and an outpouring of late-Victorian imperial sentiment. Against this backdrop of imperial celebration, colonial leaders met with Secretary of State for the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, whose own views as to the importance of imperial reform were taking shape. For the most part, while grateful for Chamberlain's interests, Australian leaders feared significant imperial reform might undermine rather than reinforce imperial unity. As a result, the conference struggled to translate pro-imperial sentiment into tangible commitments. This article argues that the meetings between Chamberlain and colonial leaders in 1897 are worthy of examination not only because they shed light on Anglo-Australian relations but also because they provide insight into a significant period in the history of late-Victorian British imperialism and the development of Australian federation. Drawing on the confidential proceedings of the conference, this article offers a close reading of the key imperial issues under discussion and their resonance in contemporary Australian and imperial political discourse. Moreover, it contends that the conference debates reflected not only important issues in Anglo-Australian affairs, but also a series of broader ambitions and limitations when it came to the campaign for imperial unity in the late-Victorian era.

On 18 June 1897, at the Imperial Institute in London, colonial premiers from across the British Empire gathered for a banquet in their honour. Each had travelled to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.¹ "We do not know precisely what future is before us," British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury reflected in his opening address, but Britons at home and abroad were "aware that we are instruments of a great experiment [...] of trying to sustain such an empire entirely upon the basis of mutual goodwill, sympathy, and affection."² Eager to capitalise on this self-awareness, six months earlier Joseph Chamberlain, Secretary of State for the Colonies, had invited colonial premiers to take

¹ "Banquet to the Colonial Premiers," *Times*, 19 June 1897, p. 13.

² "Banquet to the Colonial Premiers," p. 13.

part in the Jubilee celebrations and, while in London, to avail themselves of a “valuable opportunity for informal discussion of many questions of greatest Imperial interest.”³

Chamberlain’s invitation was met with varying degrees of enthusiasm in the colonies. Australian leaders received his message amid a premiers’ conference in Hobart and held off responding until they each could consider the logistics and the implications of their absence from public business.⁴ George Reid, Premier of New South Wales, initially declined. Although Reid (with encouragement from the New South Wales’ Governor, Lord Hampden) eventually changed his mind, his “weathercock” behaviour evoked a backlash in the local press.⁵ Criticised for his “wriggling” and for going overseas at a crucial moment for the Australian federation movement, other commentators agreed that “the colony should in some way be represented,” and that “to curtly decline [...] would exhibit the colony in a false light and unnecessarily flout the Imperial Government in its desire to preserve the goodwill of Australia and enable it to take part in the national rejoicings.”⁶ The division over Reid’s attendance in the press was indicative of the ambiguity regarding the Empire that permeated colonial politics. However, whatever reservations were expressed in the press and the colonial parliaments, the conference presented an important opportunity for colonial premiers to engage directly with Chamberlain and with leaders from across the Empire. Indeed, when he did eventually arrive in Britain, Reid spent much of his time in confidential consultation with Chamberlain over the finer aspects of a draft Australian constitution.⁷

In his official report on the 1894 Ottawa imperial economic conference, the British government’s representative Lord Jersey noted that: “On more than one occasion an indication of united Australasian opinion was lacking.”⁸ Despite the progress of the Australian federation movement by 1897, colonial leaders arrived in London with a range of priorities and aspirations. Federation, trade negotiations, the renewal of the Australian naval squadron agreement, and improvements in imperial communication were all high on the list of topics to be discussed at the conference. Reid arrived in London eager to express New South Wales’ free-trade credentials and wary of any sacrifices that the colony might be asked to make for the Empire. Attending alongside Reid was the Premier of Victoria, George Turner, who was equally anxious to defend his colony’s protectionist system against free traders in both London and Sydney. Joining them was the Premier of South Australia, Charles Kingston, another critical figure involved in developing a draft

³ Telegram from Joseph Chamberlain to the Earl of Aberdeen, 25 January 1897. Located in Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Celebrations, Parliament of Tasmania Papers, Session II, 1897, No. 33, p. 3.

⁴ Telegram from Governor Viscount Gormanston to Joseph Chamberlain, 5 February 1897. Located in Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Celebrations, Parliament of Tasmania Papers, Session II, 1897, No. 33, p. 6; Sir Fowell-Buxton to the Colonial Office, 16 February 1897, Series CO 13. South Australia: Original Correspondence, 1831–1900, AJCP; Randal Mathews Burdon, *King Dick: A Biography of Richard John Seddon* (Christchurch: Whitcomb & Tombs, 1955), pp. 195–96.

⁵ “The Jubilee Jaunt,” *Freeman’s Journal*, 27 March 1897, p. 13; Correspondence Relating to New South Wales, 1897. MS, Papers of Joseph Chamberlain: Chamberlain Papers, Series Three: The Papers of Joseph Chamberlain. University of Birmingham Library, p. 32; “Mr Chamberlain’s Invitation: Refusal by Mr Reid,” *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 10 February 1897, p. 3.

⁶ “The Jubilee Jaunt,” p. 13; “That London Invitation,” *Sunday Times*, 14 February 1897, p. 4.

⁷ W. G. McMinn, *George Reid* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1989), p. 137.

⁸ Report by the Right Hon the Earl of Jersey, on the Colonial Conference at Ottawa, Command Paper, August 1894, p. 2.

Australian constitution. Kingston's relations with the Colonial Office, and with South Australian Governor the Earl of Kintore had been strained during the 1890s, one Colonial Office staffer privately referring to him as "perhaps the most quarrelsome man alive."⁹ Rounding out the Australian contingent was Tasmania's Edward Braddon, probably the most enthusiastic for imperial reform; Queensland's recently knighted Sir Hugh Nelson, a strong believer in the need for greater consultation with the colonies on imperial questions; and John Forrest, Premier of the newly self-governing colony of Western Australia. While participating in the major federation meetings, Forrest was anxious to ensure Western Australia's interests (so notably distinct from the larger eastern colonies) were protected — particularly when it came to questions of intercolonial trade and federal representation.¹⁰ As such, the Australian delegates hardly spoke with a unified voice. They were joined by the irrepressible champion of imperial interests, New Zealand's Richard Seddon. Each of these representatives arrived in London with particular views about the future of their region, Australian federation, and imperial unity. They entered the conference aware of the binding nature of colonial parliamentary processes and of their inability to make commitments in London without securing confirmation and approval at home.

For the most part, historians have paid relatively little attention to the 1897 colonial conference. This is no doubt understandable, given Chamberlain himself only placed private meetings eighth on his list of Jubilee priorities in his invitation to colonial leaders.¹¹ The difficulty for historians accessing the full text of the proceedings, which were only printed for the Colonial Office and delegates, and their reliance on an abbreviated publication of Chamberlain's opening speech, has no doubt played a role.¹² Although a feature of several older works on the evolution of the machinery of the Commonwealth, the conference has only been touched on briefly in the most recent studies of Anglo-Dominion relations. Even then, historians often view it as little more than a precursor to the more substantive intra-imperial discussions which took place in 1902 and 1907.¹³

⁹ John Playford, "Kingston, Charles Cameron (1850–1908)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kingston-charles-cameron-6966> [1983].

¹⁰ F. K. Crowley, "Forrest, Sir John (1847–1918)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/forrest-sir-john-6211> [1981].

¹¹ Despatch from Joseph Chamberlain to the Earl of Aberdeen, 28 January 1897. Located in Queen's Diamond Jubilee Celebrations, Parliament of Tasmania Papers, Session II, 1897, No. 33, p. 4.

¹² At the 1887 Conference, Australian delegates had leaked confidential proceedings to the British press. Editing the supposedly confidential proceedings had also proved a major headache for Salisbury and his then Colonial Secretary, Lord Knutsford. Benjamin Mountford, "Colonial Australia, the 1887 Colonial Conference, and the Struggle for Imperial Unity," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol 45, 5 (2019), pp. 912–42.

¹³ Duncan Bell briefly mentions the conference as part of Chamberlain's desire for economic reform, see Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 53. For other examples of how the 1897 Colonial Conference has been treated in federation studies, see Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation: A Cultural History of Australia's Constitution* (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1997), pp. 49–50; J. B. Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth* (Vic.: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 226–28. For examples on how the 1897 Colonial Conference has been treated in defence studies of the period, see Craig Stockings, *Britannia's Shield: Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Hutton and Late-Victorian Imperial Defence* (Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 124–26.

The exception might be Australian, imperial, and transnational histories of race and migration control, which have considered the conference in the context of late-nineteenth century national, imperial, and transnational discourse on race and immigration restriction.¹⁴ The conference has also received some coverage in biographical studies of Chamberlain, as a marker of the Colonial Secretary's ambitious, but still developing, vision for imperial reform — though notably it makes no impression in Travis Crosby's engaging recent study of Britain's most influential radical imperialist.¹⁵

A little over 125 years since colonial delegates travelled to London for Chamberlain's 1897 conference, this article sets out to reconsider its significance within Australian and British imperial history. Writing in the 1930s, J.E. Tyler argued that although Chamberlain's conferences (1897 and 1902) had failed to initiate political or economic federation, they nonetheless confirmed the conference system as the main institutional expression of imperial and then Commonwealth consultation and unity.¹⁶ Three decades later, K.J. Melhuish, in her unpublished doctoral thesis on Australia and British imperial policy, argued that the 1897 conference could not be separated from the increase in imperial sentiment that followed it, such as seen during the South African War (1899–1902), the colonial conference of 1902, and Chamberlain's Tariff Reform campaign from 1903.¹⁷

By closely focussing on the discussions that took place in London in 1897, this article seeks to shed fresh light on the imperial dimensions of the political, social, and economic considerations confronting Australian colonial leaders in the years before federation. Drawing on a range of British and Australian archival records, it examines the participation of the Australian delegates, whose interests dominated proceedings; their deliberations with Chamberlain, with other leaders from across the Empire, and with each other; and their wider engagement with the British press

¹⁴ See for instance: Jeremy Martens, "A Transnational History of Immigration Restriction: Natal and New South Wales, 1896–97," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 34, 3 (2006), pp. 323–44; Jeremy Martens, *Empire and Asian Migration: Sovereignty, Immigration Restriction and Protest in the British Settler Colonies, 1888–1907* (Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Press, 2018); Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). On the Natal formula and the wider imperial context to the Alien Migration question at the turn of the century, see "The Immigration Question — A Solution Found" in Robert A. Huttenback, *Racism and Empire: White Settlers and Colored Immigrants in the British Self-Governing Colonies, 1830–1910* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 139–95. And "The Natal Formula and the Decline of the Imperial Subject, 1888–1913" in Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 185–214.

¹⁵ John Kettle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences, 1887–1911: A Study in Imperial Organization* (London: Longmans, 1967); Richard Jebb, *The Imperial Conference: A History and Study*, Vol I (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), pp. 289–336; J. E. Tyler, "Chapter XI: The Development of the Imperial Conference, 1887–1914," in *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, ed. E. A. Benians et al., Vol iii: The Empire-Commonwealth, 1870–1919 (New York: Macmillan Company, 1959), pp. 406–37; Travis Crosby, *Joseph Chamberlain: A Most Radical Imperialist* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018).

¹⁶ Tyler, "Chapter XI: The Development of the Imperial Conference, 1887–1914," p. 413.

¹⁷ K. J. Melhuish, "Australia and British Imperial Policy: Colonial Autonomy and the Imperial Idea, 1886–1902," PhD Thesis (University of Sydney, 1965), p. 584.

and public.¹⁸ In taking such an approach, this article seeks to recover the 1897 conference as a revealing episode in Australian and British imperial history — one which illuminates the divergent positions of the various Australian colonies regarding several imperial issues in the lead up to federation, as well as some of the limitations of Chamberlain's then nascent campaign for imperial reform.

Taking his cues from Chamberlain's welcome address at the conference's opening session, the Canadian Premier, Wilfred Laurier, suggested dividing the key issues facing delegates into: "methods and measures in their character political, methods and measures in their character military, and methods and measures in their character commercial."¹⁹ It was across these three areas that Laurier believed "the bonds of the Empire" might be strengthened.²⁰ Over the days that followed, Chamberlain facilitated discussions around these three themes — which in turn define the analysis which follows. This article argues that the meetings between Chamberlain and colonial leaders in 1897 are worthy of examination not only because they shed light on Anglo-Australian relations but also because they provide insight into a significant period in the history of late-Victorian British imperialism and the development of Australian federation. The 1897 conference raised a series of questions around Australian obligations to Britain (and vice versa), the mutual benefit of the imperial relationship, and the difficulty of achieving integration and standardisation. Taken together, these questions and the discussion they inspired help us to better understand the evolving dynamics of late-Victorian Britain's sprawling world system and the changing place of the Australian colonies within it.

True Conceptions of Empire

Throughout his tenure at the Colonial Office, Chamberlain was always mindful of the importance of public displays of imperial strength and unity.²¹ Having entered Birmingham politics in the late 1860s before rising to national prominence under Gladstone and then as Liberal Unionist leader, Chamberlain became increasingly concerned with international and imperial issues in the 1880s.²² As Secretary of State for the Colonies (a Cabinet post widely thought to be beneath his ability) he raised the profile of the Colonial Office significantly.²³ Chamberlain's passionate advocacy on behalf of imperial interests in Cabinet, his ambitious proposals for reform, and his own accessibility to colonial leaders, were important in fanning imperial sentiment across the Empire.²⁴ Arriving in London in 1897, colonial

¹⁸ There have been varying degrees of coverage of the conference in subsequent biographies of the Premiers who attended. For example, see W. G. McMinn, *George Reid* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1989), pp. 136–38; F. K. Crowley, *Big John Forrest 1847–1918: A Founding Father of the Commonwealth of Australia* (Nedlands, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 2000), pp. 183–87; Burdon, *King Dick*, pp. 194–205. Some biographies have only mentioned it in passing as an interruption to federation debates, see Margaret Elizabeth Glass, *Charles Cameron Kingston: Federation Father* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1997), p. 179.

¹⁹ Report of a Conference between the Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, M.P. and the Premiers of the Self-Governing Colonies of the Empire, Colonial Office Document, Miscellaneous No. 111, 1897, p. 11.

²⁰ Proceedings, p. 11.

²¹ Crosby, *Joseph Chamberlain*, pp. 114–15.

²² Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*, p. 52.

²³ J. L. Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, Vol iii, 1895–1900: Empire and World Policy (London: Macmillan and Co., 1934), pp. 8–9.

²⁴ Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, pp. 15, 19–20.

leaders and troops were feted as returning members of the imperial family. Both took part in Queen Victoria's enormous Jubilee procession; the premiers taking their place alongside members of the British Cabinet, before an estimated audience of 1,500,000, more than the entire population of either New South Wales or Victoria, the two largest Australian colonies at the time.

Such displays of imperial unity were particularly important in the latter-1890s, given the need to redefine the relationship between Britain and the settler colonies in light of a more challenging international scene. The Venezuelan Crisis and the Jameson Raid (both 1895) had done much to humiliate London, the latter famously emboldening the German Emperor, William II, to congratulate Transvaal President Paul Kruger by telegram for standing up to the British.²⁵ At home, the "notably imperialist" general election of 1895 had demonstrated the resonance of imperial sentiment.²⁶ A few months before the conference, at the annual dinner of the Royal Colonial Institute, Chamberlain articulated his vision for a renewed imperial relationship. He began by arguing that imperial history had entered a "Third Age". If colonies had at first been viewed as "possessions," and then "burdens," the "True Conception of Empire" that had now emerged was characterised on one hand by a sense of "obligation" and "national mission" when it came to the dependencies, and by the "sentiment of kinship [...] deep in the heart of every Briton" when it came to the white settler colonies. Britain's "chief duty" was to promote "a closer and firmer union between all members of the great British race." While acknowledging the impetus for closer union would need to come from the colonies themselves, the Colonial Secretary argued that imperial reorganisation was essential to maintaining Britain's global pre-eminence in an age of mounting inter-imperial competition. Britons everywhere, Chamberlain continued, should "have confidence in the future."²⁷

Yet for all the pomp of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, Chamberlain's efforts to channel imperial sentiment into meaningful reform proved more challenging.²⁸ A decade earlier, the first colonial conference had emerged largely in response to the lobbying of the Imperial Federation League, though by 1897 the "great dream," as Chamberlain put it, of unifying the Empire seemed increasingly complicated.²⁹ Much of the impetus had been robbed from the imperial federation movement in 1893, after the League's proposals for reform were rejected by a sceptical Gladstone and the organisation itself subsequently collapsed.³⁰ On Chamberlain's arrival at the Colonial Office there was little agreement as to what imperial reform might look like, how it should be initiated and managed, or whether it could produce something preferable to the status quo. Clouding the issue was

²⁵ Jebb, *The Imperial Conference*, pp. 302.

²⁶ The 1895 general election, when coupled with the 1900 Khaki election, John Mackenzie has reflected, seemed to confirm "the idea that the politician ignored imperialism only at his peril." John M. MacKenzie, "Introduction" in John M. MacKenzie, ed. *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 5.

²⁷ Foreign and Colonial Speeches. 1897, p. 248. MS Papers of Joseph Chamberlain: Chamberlain Papers, Series Three: The Papers of Joseph Chamberlain. University of Birmingham Library. p. 240; Foreign and Colonial Speeches. 1897, p. 248.

²⁸ Julia Baird, *Victoria: The Queen* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2016), p. 467.

²⁹ Robert Shields, "The Quest for Empire Unity: The Imperial Federationists and Their Cause, 1869–1893." PhD Thesis (University of Pennsylvania, 1961), p. 88; Tyler, "Chapter XI: The Development of the Imperial Conference, 1887–1914," p. 406; Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, p. 177.

³⁰ Michael David Burgess, "The Imperial Federation Movement in Great Britain," PhD Thesis (Leicester University, 1976), pp. 302–307.

the potential cost to the British taxpayer (always more than to their colonial relations), the shadow of the Irish question, the local and regional preoccupations of the various colonies, and their resulting expectations when it came to the Empire.³¹

The Australian colonies were particularly reticent to relinquish any political autonomy or to commit to agreements which might affect, or be rendered irrelevant, by the likelihood of Australian federation. Australian leaders had already engaged in rigorous discussions over a draft constitution in Adelaide during April; it was a debate that *The Age* described as closing “in an atmosphere of petty provincial suspicion and lapse of democratic ideals.”³² The Queen’s Jubilee celebrations made it difficult to organise the procedure of the Australasian Federal Convention, which had to extend its consideration of the draft bill into August as a result of the Jubilee meetings.³³ While agreeing to travel to London, Australian colonial leaders were required to keep one eye on domestic politics and the forthcoming constitutional debates scheduled to be held in Sydney. Divided on a range of issues, their one common position was perhaps a reluctance to commit to long-term proposals for imperial reform; it was a situation that presented significant challenges for Chamberlain and his efforts to revitalise the Empire and its commercial, military, and political organisation.³⁴

Empire and Commerce

While Lord Salisbury had welcomed colonial delegates at the Imperial Institute dinner in June, it was Chamberlain who presided over the conference itself. The Colonial Secretary’s role as chair followed the precedent established by Lord Knutsford at the 1887 conference and accorded with Chamberlain’s desire (and Salisbury’s reticence) to engage in open discussion with colonial leaders.³⁵ By 1897, Chamberlain had become enthusiastic about the potential benefits of a conference, though he preferred that the gathering be characterised as a series of informal private meetings.³⁶ At a speech in Birmingham on 30 January, he expressed his hopes for “an interchange of ideas about matters of common and material interest, about closer commercial union [...] about the representation of the colonies, about common defence, about legislation, about other questions of equal importance, which cannot but be productive of the best results.”³⁷ Notably, unlike in 1887, the invitation was extended only to the premiers, thus excluding the ensemble cast of metropolitan politicians, business people, and others with imperial interests who had gathered a decade earlier. Although the conference adhered to a set of pre-determined topics with the purpose of coming to unanimous resolutions, Chamberlain wanted the conference to take place as an informal conversation between the premiers and himself.³⁸

At their own meeting in Hobart in February, the Australian premiers had passed a resolution calling for a Committee of Inquiry into closer commercial arrangements between the different branches of the Empire.³⁹ In his opening address in London,

³¹ Shields, “The Quest for Empire Unity,” pp. 113 and 81–82.

³² *The Age*, 19 April 1897, p. 4.

³³ The 1897 Australasian Federal Conference, First Session, Debates, 12 April 1897, p. 429.

³⁴ Shields, “The Quest for Empire Unity,” p. 52.

³⁵ On Salisbury’s experience of the 1887 conference and his response to the proposed 1891 conference, see Mountford, “Colonial Australia”; Burgess, “The Imperial Federation Movement in Great Britain”, pp. 283–84.

³⁶ Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*, pp. 52–53; Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, p. 185.

³⁷ Chamberlain, *Foreign and Colonial Speeches*, 1897, p. 240.

³⁸ Kendle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences*, p. 23.

³⁹ See for instance, “The Premier’s Conference,” *South Australian Register*, 5 February 1897, p. 6.

Chamberlain dealt with “Commercial Relations” third — following political union and defence — but deferred when Turner, and other delegates suggested “the ventilation of the commercial aspect” should be the first order of business.⁴⁰ Over the sessions that followed, two questions took precedence when it came to imperial commerce. First, the potential for adopting preferential tariff arrangements to support intra-imperial trade; and second, the impact of foreign treaties (and most favoured nation clauses) on the ability of Britain and the colonies to adopt imperial preference. Nelson, who no doubt had Queensland’s developing industries in mind, strongly supported denouncing such treaties, arguing that: “the moral effect of it would be taken as an intimation to the world that Great Britain was going to commence to do something for the Colonies, and to consolidate trade of the Empire.”⁴¹ At the same time, commercial discussions were naturally central to a series of supplementary questions before the conference, including the fate of the Pacific cable, schemes for imperial penny postage, a commercial code for the Empire, and the always thorny question of alien migration.⁴²

Commercial integration carried with it a dual promise for enthusiasts of imperial union. First, it offered a potential balm for persistent anxieties over economic decline.⁴³ Although Britain remained by far the world’s largest and most prosperous economy, by the 1890s its dependence on foreign imports of food and other primary materials, a declining balance of trade (albeit with strong export growth), and increasing foreign competition in commerce and shipping had begun to raise concerns in some circles about how best to preserve British pre-eminence and to fund much needed social reform at home.⁴⁴ It was on this ground that Tariff Reformers sought to challenge the sacred cow of free trade. The most important and influential figure to consider these questions was of course Chamberlain himself. On coming to office in 1895, the Colonial Secretary was only in the nascent stages of his journey from free trade orthodoxy to champion of Tariff Reform.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, he was already keenly alert to the potential benefits of closer economic relations with the settler Empire and eager to speed the economic development of the dependencies. But the tight fiscal environment during the 1890s, as Andrew Thompson has noted, frustrated “a politician like Chamberlain whose reputation rested upon his achievements as a social reformer [...] No wonder, then, that Chamberlain’s mind turned to tariffs.”⁴⁶

Of further concern were the continuing inroads being made by foreign merchants into (British dominated) colonial markets. In November 1895, Chamberlain sent a circular to all Colonial Governors, calling for comprehensive returns of commercial statistics and expressing his belief in the “importance of securing as large a share as possible of the mutual trade of the United Kingdom and the Colonies for

⁴⁰ Proceedings, pp. 12–13.

⁴¹ Proceedings, p. 26.

⁴² For a list of topics covered in the various sessions and the final text of the resolutions passed, see Proceedings, pp. 1–2.

⁴³ On the idea of Greater Britain and the historiography of the British World, see Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*; Tamson Pietsch, “Rethinking the British World,” *Journal of British Studies*, Vol 52, 2 (April 2013), pp. 441–63; Rachel Bright and Andrew Dilley, “After the British World,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol 60, 2 (2017), pp. 547–68.

⁴⁴ On fears of imperial decline see John Darwin, “The Fear of Falling: British Politics and Imperial Decline Since 1900,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (1986), pp. 36, 27–43.

⁴⁵ Detailed in Crosby, *Joseph Chamberlain*, pp. 157–183.

⁴⁶ Andrew Thompson, *Imperial Britain: The Empire in British Politics* (Harlow: Pearson, 2000), pp. 84–85.

British producers and manufacturers, whether located in the Colonies or in the United Kingdom.”⁴⁷ The result was a survey of the extent of the displacement of British with foreign goods in colonial markets. While the report concluded that most high-quality British manufacturers were holding their own (except in some specialist areas, such as agricultural machinery), when it came to cheaper products foreign manufacturers were gaining ground. Notably, however, this was less the case in Australia than elsewhere.

In June 1896, some twelve months before the colonial conference commenced, Chamberlain had famously floated a potential remedy to the situation in his landmark speech at the opening of the Third Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire: an imperial *Zollverein*. “The establishment of commercial union throughout the Empire,” he reasoned, would bring improved economic fortunes to both Britain and the Colonies, and “would not only be the first step, [but] the decisive step towards the realisation of the most inspiring idea that has ever entered into the minds of British statesmen.”⁴⁸ If closer commercial alignment suggested new economic opportunities, it also presented a route towards something that transcended material interests — the prospect of a wider imperial union.

A year later, at the conference, Chamberlain acknowledged the difficulty of arriving “at any conclusion which would unite us commercially in which the *Zollverein* united the Empire of Germany.” But the German experience was still the “most interesting and most instructive.”⁴⁹ For Chamberlain, an imperial *Zollverein* involving free (or at least freer) trade *within* the Empire offered a potential bridge between British free trade orthodoxy and the spirit of colonial protectionism that had predominated at the 1894 Ottawa conference, where colonial representatives had passed resolutions calling for tariff reciprocity within the Empire. The 1894 conference had resolved that Britain should take measures to ensure the colonies’ power to grant tariff concessions to each other and the mother country, as against foreign trade, by removing any statutory limitations or treaty provisions (particularly in the treaties with Belgium and the German *Zollverein*) which prevented them from doing so.⁵⁰ Chamberlain considered the Ottawa resolutions as “too one-sided and could not be entertained,” as they would involve a drastic shift in regard to Britain’s commitment to free trade, but he had also noted that “they might be so amended as to become tempting.” In floating the *Zollverein*, the Colonial Secretary was testing the mood for a potential compromise between British and colonial positions.⁵¹

Both Canada and the Australasian colonies desired an expansion of trade with Britain and the Empire — though with different levels of enthusiasm. In light of the Dominion’s failure to secure a reciprocal treaty with the United States and the impact of the McKinley tariff, Canadian leaders had moved to offer Britain a preferential tariff of 12.5 per cent. For the Australian colonies, emerging from the economic recession of

⁴⁷ Quoted in Julian Amery, *Joseph Chamberlain and the Tariff Reform Campaign* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 212.

⁴⁸ “Commercial Union of the Empire: Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire, London, June 9, 1896,” in Charles W. Boyd, ed. *Mr Chamberlain’s Speeches* (London: Constable & Company, 1914), p. 368.

⁴⁹ Proceedings, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Report by the Right Hon the Earl of Jersey, on the Colonial Conference at Ottawa, Command Paper, August 1894, p. 23. In the Australian case, this involved the removal of a statutory disability when it came to granting tariff concessions to other colonies.

⁵¹ Quoted in Melhuish, “Australia and British Imperial Policy,” p. 531.

the 1890s, the focus had been on consolidating imperial markets, while also finding new outlets for colonial trade — a feature marked by the first despatch of colonial commercial agents to Asia during the 1890s.⁵² Politicians in Australia had reacted favourably to the spirit of Chamberlain's *Zollverein* proposals, but they confronted two essential difficulties: first, that a *Zollverein* would deny colonial governments (there was a notable exception in free trade New South Wales) their chief source of revenue and second, that it would open the colonies to the free import of British manufactures — a development which particularly threatened Victoria's protectionist model.⁵³ The question in June 1897 was the extent to which colonial governments were willing to come together to make a more meaningful offer regarding tariff preference to their fellow colonies and to Britain.

It was not long before fissures resembling 1887 reappeared in London in 1897. At the first session on commercial interests Chamberlain was keen to gauge opinion as to whether the colonies might offer tariff concessions in favour of imperial trade, were Britain to denounce its existing treaties with Germany and Belgium.⁵⁴ Turner responded first, suggesting that Victoria, with its protectionist model, could not countenance freer trade. Alternatively, however, he suggested the colony might be willing to raise tariffs solely on foreign goods (thereby offering a preference to British goods) in the name of imperial unity. On the other side, Reid expressed the practical difficulty of offering substantial tariff relief given New South Wales' commitment to free trade. It was a question of course, he acknowledged, which Britain would also have to resolve. The collegial atmosphere was then challenged somewhat by the New Zealand Premier Richard Seddon, who derided New South Wales as “the dumping ground of all the foreign made rubbish throughout the world” and the means by which “part of that rubbish is distributed to the other [Australasian] colonies.” While Seddon acceded to the principle of offering concessions to imperial trade, he was particularly animated by the need for Britain to denounce the foreign treaties. These, he argued, prevented the colonies from acting independently regarding their fiscal affairs, and so challenged the very principle of colonial self-government.⁵⁵

Across three sessions devoted to commercial affairs, the delegates eventually reached two unanimous resolutions. First, that colonial leaders sought the denunciation of the foreign treaties impacting on British-colonial trade and second, that colonial leaders would engage with their respective governments to determine what concessions might be granted to Britain. Unsurprisingly, these resolutions masked important internal divisions, grounded in competing perspectives on domestic and imperial economics. On the one hand delegates looked to the “moral effect” and “moral point of view” of Britain and the colonies making economic concessions in the name of closer imperial ties. As Stuart Ward notes in his assessment of Anglo-Australian views on trade in the twentieth century: “It was widely understood that Australia and the mother country were mutually bound by blood and sentiment to treat each other's interests as part of a wider, organic whole.”⁵⁶ Reid, after having admitted his free trade principles might be sidelined in a federated Australia, declared that it was not entirely a question of trade:

⁵² David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850–1939*, 2nd ed (Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing, 2012), p. 71.

⁵³ Melhuish, “Australia and British Imperial Policy,” pp. 537–38.

⁵⁴ Proceedings, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Proceedings, p. 22.

⁵⁶ Stuart Ward, “Sentiment and Self-Interest: The Imperial Ideal in Anglo-Australian Commercial Culture,” *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol 32, 116 (2001), p. 92.

You must survey the whole relations between us and the British Empire, and whilst we are not able to share the partnership in the imperial navy, there are some slight ways in which we can, without injuring our own people at all, show some recognition of the enormous benefits which we derive from our connection with the British Empire.⁵⁷

Turner was perhaps the most sceptical about the force of imperial affection in commercial and financial affairs. The City of London, the Victorian Premier argued, did “not lend to us for sentiment,” while tariff reform would primarily benefit Britain rather than Victoria; “Are you going to get anything in return? Our colleagues are sure to ask.”⁵⁸ It was this exchange that prompted one of the few terse responses from Chamberlain during proceedings:

I do not make the least complaint. You are perfectly justified in treating all relations between the Colonies and this country on that footing, but all I say is that if we treated our relations with you on the same footing there would be a very marked change tomorrow.⁵⁹

Some of the most important studies of British imperial economics have highlighted the significance of the “cultural economy,” which underpinned patterns of investment and commerce linking the metropole and the settler colonies. A key insight emerging from this work has been the extent to which “cultural reproduction and economic integration across the British world were mutually reinforcing.”⁶⁰ Discussions over commercial questions at the 1897 colonial conference, however, revealed the tension between colonial and metropolitan interests and the difficulty of inducing popularly elected governments (and even more so their delegates to the conference) to make concessions for imperial unity. In the end, Chamberlain concluded the time was not ripe for a further examination of a *Zollverein*, and rebuffed Seddon’s efforts to secure a Commission into imperial trade as simply replicating what good work had already been done through the recent Colonial Office circular and Sir Robert Giffen’s study of imperial commerce. His immediate hope, he conceded, was rather more modest: to secure “an expression of friendship to the mother country, more a sentimental expression [...] than a practical material consideration.”⁶¹ As was so often the case, further discussion of the more difficult practicalities of imperial reform were deferred, lest it do more harm than good.

Imperial Defence

Proposals for enhancing imperial defence were also laid before the conference delegates, with Chamberlain seeking greater colonial involvement. Chief among the points of discussion was the renewal of the 1887 Naval Defence Agreement with the Australasian colonies, which was due to expire that year. The arrangement was strategically important and generally considered to be one of the major achievements of the 1887 conference, seen by many statesmen as “the first recognition which had ever

⁵⁷ Proceedings, p. 82.

⁵⁸ Proceedings, pp. 39, 82.

⁵⁹ Proceedings, p. 82.

⁶⁰ The best is Andrew Thompson and Gary Magee, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c.1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 15. On the relationship between the Empire Chambers of Commerce, the Colonial Conferences and Tariff Reform see D. Thackeray, “The Importance of Being British: Networks and the Politics of Imperial Trade, c.1880–1914,” in *Forging a British World of Trade: Culture, Ethnicity, and Market in the Empire-Commonwealth, 1880–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 16–47.

⁶¹ Proceedings, p. 84.

been made by any of the colonies of the duty and interest of the colonies to contribute to the imperial Navy.”⁶² The British government was anxious to have the agreement renewed, and the conference provided an opportunity to revisit its terms.⁶³ As early as January, the Duke of Devonshire had given a speech to the British Empire Legion touching on the importance of renewing the agreement;

not only on the account of the pecuniary considerations which are involved, not only on account of the actual addition to our naval forces which it provides, but also as a step towards a practical measure of federation for the purpose of defence.⁶⁴

The Australasian colonies were interested in renewing the agreement, although they were reluctant to change the terms — indicative of the premiers’ desire to avoid a higher degree of centralised control from London.⁶⁵ Under the existing arrangements the Admiralty provided an “auxiliary squadron of five fast third-class cruisers and two of the latest torpedo-boats” for the Australian Station. Of these “three of the cruisers and one gunboat were to be kept ready for active duty and the remaining cruisers and gunboat placed in reserve.”⁶⁶ In return, the Australian colonies, and New Zealand, agreed to pay £91,000 for the maintenance of the ships and 5 per cent of the capital cost.⁶⁷ Overall, the colonies devoted £126,000 to imperial defence — the Australian colonies paying £106,000 and New Zealand £20,000.⁶⁸

Discussions in 1897 around the Naval Defence Agreement highlighted the issue of reciprocity between British and colonial interests. The debate centred on questions of contribution and control; how much did, and should, the colonies contribute to imperial defence? And who should have control over where the Australian squadron was deployed? While the size of the colonies’ contribution to the Royal Navy was discussed, it was the restrictions placed on the use of the ships in peacetime that most frustrated the Admiralty.⁶⁹ Little moved by the pleas of Captain Beaumont on behalf of the Colonial Defence Committee (CDC), the premiers held firm on their desire to maintain the current arrangement. Chamberlain’s speech at the outset of the conference, which he hoped would inspire support for imperial federation, had raised the spectre of conflict with Japan and even China — a scenario with which the premiers were already concerned. Indeed, as Braddon pointed out, the colonies were “constantly asking the Imperial Government to protect more our interests in the Pacific, and it is by this fleet that that protection could best be effected.”⁷⁰ Turner added that: “We do not want the vessels taken away altogether from Australia at the time they might be required to protect our Colonial trade.”⁷¹ Reid agreed and declared that any change to the agreement would be impossible to sell to Australians, who were focussed on local

⁶² Duke of Devonshire cited in “Colonial Defence,” *Evening News*, 23 January 1897, p. 4.

⁶³ Proceedings, pp. 55–64.

⁶⁴ Duke of Devonshire cited in “Colonial Defence”, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Peter Dennis, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶⁶ Neville Kingsley Meaney, *The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901–14* (Sydney University Press, 2009), pp. 26–27.

⁶⁷ Meaney, *The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901–14*, p. 27.

⁶⁸ Meaney, *The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901–14*, p. 27.

⁶⁹ It was later reported in the Australian broadsheets that any dissatisfaction expressed at the conference had been a “misapprehension, see “The Colonial Premiers, The Imperial Conference: The Naval Agreement,” *Chronicle*, 17 July 1897, p. 24; Proceedings, p. 55.

⁷⁰ Proceedings, p. 58.

⁷¹ Proceedings, p. 58.

defence concerns. However, taking it upon himself to speak on behalf of the other premiers, he assured Chamberlain that “in an emergency you would find they would cast all those narrower ideas to the winds; they would be ready to do anything, go anywhere.”⁷²

Historians have cast such debates around colonial defence in the light of an emerging nationalism and the evolving political federation movement, paving the way for colonial union and strengthening opposition to imperial federation in the Australian colonies.⁷³ Others, meanwhile, have put forward an argument of imperial defence manipulation, where every objection over imperial defence from the Australian colonies in this era is seen as a “growing pain” of becoming a nation.⁷⁴ Yet, as Craig Stockings points out, debates over defence did not necessarily spell a rejection of imperial identity for an exclusively colonial one, but rather reflected “clashes of localised interests.”⁷⁵ Australian political and military figures viewed the Auxiliary Squadron as providing defence in Australian waters. At the conference Reid pointed out that the idea from the colonies’ point of view was that the ships provided a “sort of outer line of local defence” and that the restriction the colonies insisted on within the agreement was to ensure “we were giving to the Imperial navy as a whole, but giving so as to add another line to what I might call our inner defence, as compared with the defence of the Empire.”⁷⁶ He was adamant that pressing for a revision of the agreement to afford the Admiralty more control over the ships in peacetime and further away from the Australian Station — a special case given how large an area it covered — would make it difficult to renew it at all. When it came to matters of naval defence, the colonies, as Reid claimed, “have not advanced to a stage at which they would say, well, we are part of the Empire, and we must bear some share of the defence of the Empire as a whole.”⁷⁷ It seemed that the other premiers agreed with Reid’s assessment as they were immovable when it came to local defence interests. Subsequently, the agreement was renewed without alteration, much to the satisfaction of the Australasian premiers.

In many ways, Chamberlain saw the Naval Defence Agreement as an example of the how colonies could contribute to imperial security. Sensitive to the tenor of the conference discussions, and wary of how they might affect the colonies’ willingness to contribute more to the Royal Navy, George Goschen, First Lord of the Admiralty, went to great lengths to assuage any misunderstandings that may have arisen from the debates between Beaumont and the premiers and to praise “the patriotism shown by the colonies.”⁷⁸ The conference discussions about how to strengthen the Empire’s military took place within an atmosphere of increasing international strategic competition in the

⁷² Proceedings, p. 55.

⁷³ Craig Stockings, “A ‘Trojan Horse’ in the Colony?: Federal and Imperial Defence in the Australian Colonies, 1893–96,” *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, 17 (2015), pp. 160–63; Meaney, *The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901–14*, pp. 6–7.

⁷⁴ John Leonard Mordike, *An Army for a Nation: A History of Australian Military Developments, 1880–1914* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin in association with the Directorate of Army Studies, Department of Defence, 1992); Luke Trainor, *British Imperialism and Australian Nationalism: Manipulation, Conflict and Compromise in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); Stockings, “A ‘Trojan Horse’ in the Colony?”

⁷⁵ Stockings, “A ‘Trojan Horse’ in the Colony?,” p. 163.

⁷⁶ Proceedings, p. 55.

⁷⁷ Proceedings, pp. 55–56.

⁷⁸ “The Colonial Premiers, The Imperial Conference: The Naval Agreement,” *Chronicle*, 17 July 1897, p. 24.

late 1890s. At the conference Chamberlain attempted to discuss ways in which to unify and bolster imperial defence, proposing an exchange of troops and the standardisation of military weapons and other equipment across the colonies. He suggested not only the continued exchange of several groups of military personnel, but also the “interchangeability between the whole forces of the Empire, between the forces which you have in the several colonies and the forces of which you have seen some examples at Home since you came to these shores.”⁷⁹ His idea drew on an arrangement that was already in place with the Canadians and he argued that a larger scheme could easily be arranged along the lines of Canada’s military college at Kingston.⁸⁰

While the Australian premiers were supportive of this idea, it was more in theory than practice. Reid stated that he believed “we should all be very favourable” and Seddon declared that “we should be all in favour of an interchange.”⁸¹ However, other premiers were concerned by the practicalities of such a scheme, including its legal and financial aspects. Nelson, for instance, queried its financial implications, double checking that the only expense to the colonies would be passage of the servicemen. Although he was reassured by Captain Matthew Nathan, secretary to the CDC (1896–98), that this was indeed the case, Nelson’s question inadvertently raised the issue of the different pay rates awarded to soldiers from across the Empire, which stymied Chamberlain’s proposal more than anything else. A lengthy discussion about the various wages for soldiers throughout the Empire ensued. As colonial soldiers were paid more than British servicemen, delegates expressed concern that ill feeling might emerge among those on military exchange. No consensus was reached on this issue. Although the Canadians were happy to expand the scheme, especially given they already had the blueprint for it at Kingston, the Australian premiers gave no commitment. Turner politely suggested that it be raised at the next premiers’ conference so that if such an arrangement were to be established it would “come as a united offer from the colonies” — another example of the Australian premiers controlling the conversation on imperial defence at the conference.⁸²

Yet Chamberlain’s ambition went further than military exchange for training purposes, and he proposed a “greater organisation” of colonial defence.⁸³ His idea was driven in part by the fact that in 1896 defence had cost the British government 38 per cent of the annual budget and was steadily rising.⁸⁴ One of the areas of concern was the low pay for recruits but also the fact that, according to Major-General Sir John Maurice, only two out of every five men willing to enlist in the military were fit for service.⁸⁵ Chamberlain hoped to rectify this issue by unifying the Empire’s forces, proposing that colonial troops might fight as part of an imperial force under the authority of the British. He suggested at the conference that “if it were their wish to share in the dangers and the glories of the British army, and take their part in expeditions in which the British army may be engaged, I see no reason why these colonial troops should not, from time to time, fight side by side with their British colleagues.”⁸⁶ When asked by Reid to elaborate on what he meant by “greater

⁷⁹ Proceedings, p. 4.

⁸⁰ Proceedings, p. 4.

⁸¹ Proceedings, p. 65.

⁸² Proceedings, p. 65.

⁸³ Proceedings, p. 70.

⁸⁴ Mordike, *An Army for a Nation*, p. 44.

⁸⁵ Mordike, *An Army for a Nation*, p. 45.

⁸⁶ Proceedings, p. 4.

organisation,” Chamberlain replied — perhaps influenced by the earlier conversation about naval defence — that the premiers were “all acting as though war was impossible.” He argued that “war comes very suddenly [...] you are not prepared for war, [...] and this is a proposal which does not go very far, but it is a proposal which would take into account the possibility of war.”⁸⁷ Here, however, issues of military legislation, which differed in various colonies, thwarted Chamberlain’s plans — indeed, as Neil Preston explains, the amalgamation of the colonies’ forces was near impossible given they were, constitutionally, separate political entities.⁸⁸ This challenge was compounded by the fact that looming over the entire conference was the issue of the Australian colonies’ potential federation. As discussions on local land defence progressed, it became clear that it would be easier for Chamberlain to wait for the colonies to federate rather than negotiate new schemes with each individually. For instance, Victoria and New South Wales were considering issues of military law “with a view to greater uniformity,” and the CDC suggested that it might be easier to adopt one military law for all of Australia. As it stood, there were divergences between the Acts of various Australian colonies, particularly Queensland and South Australia, and Captain Nathan was adamant that it was “desirable to have a uniform military legislation as much as possible throughout the Empire.”⁸⁹

Chamberlain’s proposal of a military exchange scheme at the 1897 conference revealed the difficulty of transforming his vision for the Empire into workable defence policy. In this regard, the conference discussions mirrored the wider tensions at play between the Colonial Office and the colonial delegates. It was a situation further underscored by the Colonial Secretary’s idea of standardising imperial military equipment. Chamberlain was clear on the fact that uniformity in military arms was of extreme importance because “it gives us interchangeability of weapon [...] some central provision for stores, and for the military instruction of the local forces,” which he believed would “be very much to their [colonies’] advantage.”⁹⁰ This was an issue he had been working on over the past year, but it was not until the 1897 conference that it was discussed with the colonial leaders in any depth. The concern was that, as Lord Selborne put it, “there would be nothing more serious in war than to have two different kinds of ammunition.”⁹¹ In response, the War Office intended to make an offer of rifles to those colonies that needed them, “using the same ammunition as is used by the Imperial small arm.”⁹² However, while the British favoured the Lee-Metford rifle, the colonies had different arms; Canada, for instance, had just spent a considerable amount on the Lee-Enfield rifle; in Western Australia, the Martini-Henry was in use. Selborne proposed that these be sent to England to be converted to Lee-Metfords so that all the colonies had a magazine rifle.⁹³ That even this issue proved intractable, and had to be held over, shows the degree of Chamberlain’s dilemma when it came to promoting unity and cohesion in imperial defence.

⁸⁷ Proceedings, p. 70.

⁸⁸ For a study of military law in the Australian colonies, see Neil Preston, *Military Law in Colonial Australia* (Sydney, Federation Press: 2016), pp. 200–38.

⁸⁹ Proceedings, p. 71.

⁹⁰ Proceedings, p. 4.

⁹¹ Proceedings, pp. 71–72.

⁹² Proceedings, p. 71.

⁹³ Proceedings, p. 72; “Converting Rifles,” *The Inquirer and Commercial News*, 24 December 1897, p. 6.

Political Reform

The postponing of political relations until the fourth day of the conference had not made progress any easier for Chamberlain. If anything, behind the scenes discussions had only made clearer the colonies' reluctance to commit to any meaningful changes. During this time, Chamberlain had further confirmed that Australian federation was an essential precursor to imperial reform: "I rather gather from what has fallen from several who have spoken, that they feel nothing beyond the interchange of views which has taken place can profitably be undertaken now, or until, at all events, the federation of Australia has taken place."⁹⁴ In response to proposals for an Imperial Council, Turner echoed this view: "I think it is useless attempting to do anything in connexion with the matter until the Australian Colonies are federated," with Premier of Western Australia, John Forrest, chiming in to suggest: "Even then it would be difficult."⁹⁵

Throughout discussions, Chamberlain floated schemes to improve political relations between the colonies and Britain. For the most part, the Australian premiers, led by Reid, remained cautious about imperial political reform. "I am prepared to consider any project involving a change in those relations," Reid stated characteristically, "but I have not yet seen any project which seems to me within the range of practical discussion at the present board." Reid took this line again when Chamberlain suggested as an interim measure, that Agents-General be appointed to an advisory council and given larger consultative powers. This, Reid declared, would "involve a number of serious questions, collaterally, which would perhaps be more serious than the project itself." Kingston was also wary of such changes: "The suggested tightening of the bonds," he reflected, "means the creation of fresh political bonds."⁹⁶ In Reid's mind, the strength of the political bonds between the colonies and Britain lay in Australia being left to its own devices.⁹⁷

There were, however, some delegates eager to see further advances towards closer political union. Laurier, though happy with the present state of relations, believed that "to imagine that will last for ever is a delusion."⁹⁸ Certainly, the strongest advocate was Seddon, who was adamant a consultative council was an idea worth pursuing.⁹⁹ Seddon was convinced that the imperial federation movement had taken great strides in New Zealand and failure to act would see "a reaction set in," setting the movement "as far off as ever."¹⁰⁰ According to Seddon, the question of federation had already been answered: "as far as New Zealand is concerned, and New Zealand wants something more than they do at the present time."¹⁰¹ Braddon was alone amongst the Australians in pushing for closer imperial relations. At a meeting of the British Empire League, he declared: "He would leave this country — that was, if he lived to do so — bitterly disappointed if some steps were not taken to forward that which would bring the mother country and the colonies closer together."¹⁰² At the conference itself, the Tasmanian premier explained: "I am not by any means in accord with my colleagues in

⁹⁴ Proceedings, p. 99.

⁹⁵ Proceedings, p. 100.

⁹⁶ Proceedings, p. 100.

⁹⁷ Kendle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences*, p. 25.

⁹⁸ Proceedings, p. 107.

⁹⁹ Proceedings, p. 105.

¹⁰⁰ Proceedings, p. 105.

¹⁰¹ Proceedings, p. 110.

¹⁰² Edwin James Milliken, "Premier Punch to Colonial Premiers," *Punch*, 17 July 1897, p. 13. *Punch Historical Archive, 1841–1992*.

Australia. I should like, with Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Mr. Seddon, to see some actual move made in the direction of those closer relations that we are told by Mr. Reid we are unanimous in desiring to see secured.”¹⁰³

Though the matter of federation prevented any great leaps forward from occurring, the premiers still entertained the question of how such an imperial council would be structured. The first consideration related to the powers that would be granted such a council, as well as the representation and liability of each colony relative to their population sizes. “We are ready to manage the Empire for you at any time,” Reid reflected, “so long as you pay the piper.”¹⁰⁴ Eager to discuss more achievable ends, the colonial leaders sought to move the conversation towards the state of communication between the colonies and the Colonial Office, and the roles of the Agent-Generals and Governors.¹⁰⁵ Reid believed: “The great test of our relations, I submit, will be the next war in which England is engaged. She is not likely ever to be engaged in an unrighteous war or in an aggressive war. If engaged in a defensive war you would find that sentiment would determine everything.”¹⁰⁶

Reid emphasised the role of sentimentality in imperial unity in lieu of binding arrangements. When it came to discussing the proposed Pacific cable through British territories, most premiers were willing to place a price upon Chamberlain’s ideals. The colony of South Australia, for instance, felt that the existing cable through Port Darwin rendered any Pacific cable too heavy a financial burden to bear. Upon considering the figures being submitted for the cable, Turner argued: “I should not be justified in pledging the Colony to an annual liability”; it was a view shared by his fellow leaders who were wary to make any commitment without in-depth consultation back home.¹⁰⁷

The subject of “alien migration,” meanwhile, served to highlight metropolitan and colonial divisions on the question of race. The potential to secure progress on New South Wales’ recently reserved Coloured Races Restriction and Regulation Bill (1896) in law was used as justification by Reid to Parliament as a key reason to go to London.¹⁰⁸ Seddon, who reflected on previous discussions of the issue in Hobart, reassured Chamberlain;

that every word will have great weight indeed. We claim to have the right to speak for our race, and to express the feelings of our race, and we take the action we have taken with no desire to be offensive to the people of any other country.¹⁰⁹

Kingston followed on from Seddon’s comments by stating;

that although [...] England makes herself an asylum for all nations, I am pleased to hear, sir, from your remarks that you sympathise with the Australian wishes that Australia should not be made a destitute asylum for any nation, and that you are prepared to give effect to those wishes in the mode which is most agreeable to the Imperial views.¹¹⁰

Despite Reid’s best efforts, discussions unravelled when it came to the status of British subjects within any Bill. Chamberlain reiterated his determination regarding “Australian immigration,” that “nothing is done unnecessarily offensive or injurious to

¹⁰³ Proceedings, p. 110.

¹⁰⁴ Proceedings, p. 107.

¹⁰⁵ Proceedings, p. 103.

¹⁰⁶ Proceedings, p. 107.

¹⁰⁷ Proceedings, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ New South Wales, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Assembly, 21 October 1897, p. 4098.

¹⁰⁹ Proceedings, 13.

¹¹⁰ Proceedings, 15–16.

our Indian fellow-subjects.”¹¹¹ However, upon approaches such as the Natal Bill, where a language test served as the primary means of exclusion, the colonies remained divided upon whether this would be enough.

Such differences were also expressed when Chamberlain raised the subject of the Anglo-Japanese treaty. On this issue, none of his assurances could convince most of the colonial premiers.¹¹² In the end, Natal and Queensland joined the treaty (the latter eventually rejecting it), only further highlighting the difficulties of determining foreign policy agreements within a conference setting.

Chamberlain’s proposed resolutions did little to halt the disagreement between the premiers, instead leading to further debates about their wording, and overall purpose. Turner pointed out: “What is the use of passing abstract resolutions unless we have some definite scheme?”¹¹³ When Chamberlain proposed the resolution, that: “The Prime Ministers here assembled are of opinion that the present political relations between the United Kingdom and the self-governing Colonies are generally satisfactory under the existing condition of things,” both Seddon and Braddon dissented, the latter stating: “not entirely to the matter but to the form, to the absence of any declaration in favour of that closer union,” showing that he was willing to back up his public comments in front of the Colonial Secretary and representatives of the larger colonies.¹¹⁴

One of the last matters to be dealt with was how regularly future conferences should be held. The premiers mostly agreed the conference system was (at least for the moment) the best setting for discussing imperial matters, but there was little consensus as to how often they should be held. Chamberlain’s resolution that: “They are also of opinion that it is desirable, whenever and wherever practicable, to group together under federal union those colonies which are geographically united” was carried unanimously, likely due to its openness to interpretation.¹¹⁵ There were suggestions of fixing the conference to be held triennially, but fears persisted that by fixing the next conference they would be affecting local elections.¹¹⁶ The agreement for “periodical” conferences over “triennial” won by a count of six votes to five, with Turner suggesting that the agreement for the next date be left to the Home Authorities.¹¹⁷ This final disagreement typified the conference debates, which were marked by a reluctance to agree to any proposition binding the colonies to any new imperial obligations.

Conclusion

For Chamberlain, the conference could only have been a disappointment. Little progress had been made towards imperial union, despite the scope for further commitment in the future. It appeared that Chamberlain had a sympathetic ear in Seddon at least, who wrote to the Colonial Secretary personally to thank him for the hospitality he received, as well as to say:

¹¹¹ Proceedings, p. 130.

¹¹² Proceedings, p. 49.

¹¹³ Proceedings, p. 110.

¹¹⁴ Proceedings, p. 113–117.

¹¹⁵ Proceedings, p. 113–117.

¹¹⁶ Proceedings, p. 115–116.

¹¹⁷ Proceedings, p. 116.

I look forward to the consummation at no distant date of long-cherished ideals regarding imperial federation, improved trade relationship, and more perfect means of intercommunication, all leading to bind together indissolubly those in the Colonies and their kindred in the mother-land.¹¹⁸

Though Seddon shared Chamberlain's disappointment at the lack of progress made towards a scheme for imperial federation, he was nevertheless pleased with the chance that the conference had afforded him to represent New Zealand, even achieving an audience with Pope Leo XIII.¹¹⁹ Certainly the conference provided the premiers with opportunities to meet distinguished statesmen and to discuss political and economic relations. At the end of the conference, Reid, Laurier, and Seddon, for instance, took the time to visit Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone and the former New South Wales governor, Lord Carrington.

Seddon was not the only one who reflected on the conference stalemate. A correspondent from *The Daily Telegraph* who described the conference as "practically abortive," stated:

The premiers have said again and again that the sentimental bonds which attach the colonies to the dear mother land are as strong as ties of blood or kindred could make them. But they must remain sentimental. Any attempt to rivet them into cast-iron realities would be fatal.¹²⁰

In Hobart, *The Mercury* believed: "Though no actual progress can be said to have been made, one great thing has been done, which is, that what has been called Imperial Federation has become a recognisable portion of British policy," while deriding the "superior tone" with which most of the premiers declared they did not desire any changes to existing arrangements.¹²¹ Despite this frustration, the conference itself was somewhat overshadowed by the Jubilee celebrations in the public consciousness. Colonial parliaments too tended to be more measured in their expectations. Kingston was reassured by former Premier, Sir John Downer, that he had not been expected to do much while in London beyond having an agreeable trip.¹²² Even Seddon had been warned prior to his departure from New Zealand to keep his mouth shut lest any promises were made that could not be kept.¹²³

Few criticisms stuck with the premiers upon their return. Instead, the colonial response to the conference was rather muted. The trip was viewed by many as a luxury, or a necessary obligation, and there was little interrogation of the premiers' actions in London.¹²⁴ Although Reid's efforts to lobby Chamberlain regarding the Coloured Races Restriction and Regulation Bill did provoke some questions in the Legislative Assembly.¹²⁵ Upon his return to Melbourne, Turner told the St Kilda Tradesmen's Club he was glad to be so well received in London, which he jokingly put down to being a "representative man or that he was not known," but nevertheless, found his conduct in

¹¹⁸ Correspondence with R. J. Seddon, Premier of New Zealand, 1897. MS, Papers of Joseph Chamberlain: Chamberlain Papers, Series Three: The Papers of Joseph Chamberlain. University of Birmingham Library, p. 6.

¹¹⁹ Burdon, *King Dick*, pp. 204–205.

¹²⁰ "The Premiers in England. The Downing-Street Conference," *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 August 1897, p. 3.

¹²¹ "Epitome of News," *The Mercury*, 24 August 1897, p. 2.

¹²² Kendle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences*, p. 31.

¹²³ Burdon, *King Dick*, p. 199.

¹²⁴ Based upon our survey of Victorian and New South Wales Hansards.

¹²⁵ New South Wales, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Assembly, 25 August 1897, p. 3389; New South Wales, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Assembly, 21 October 1897, p. 4098.

London broadly congratulated when he returned to Parliament on 24 August.¹²⁶ Many observers believed that the experience had done much to broaden the mind of Forrest who looked revitalised upon his return to Australia.¹²⁷ Chamberlain wrote to Governor Hampden of New South Wales following the conference to say that “Mr Reid made a great impression upon me while here” and offered his view on Australian federation: “I shall be very sorry if the scheme breaks down now, although I do not think that anything will permanently prevent it. Believe me.”¹²⁸

Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee publicly displayed Britain’s Empire as being bound by imperial sentiment, yet the conversations between the colonial premiers and Chamberlain occurring within the Colonial Office only a few days later painted a different picture. Chamberlain’s dreams of a more united Empire fell apart almost as soon as the conference began, as the premiers repeatedly deferred suggested advances towards any meaningful framework for imperial unity. Each of the topics laid out by Laurier at the beginning of the conference, noted as being of the highest priority, saw little consensus between the delegates, and the resolutions proposed did little to commit those present to immediate change. Many of the subjects raised at the conference would be revisited in the 1902 colonial conference where political relations, commercial relations, and defence were the central and most desirable points of discussion.¹²⁹

A close reading of the proceedings of the 1897 colonial conference provides valuable insights for historians of Australian and British imperial history, revealing the granular disagreements between the colonies, and contrasting levels of support for Chamberlain’s developing imperial vision. Even with Australian federation hanging heavily over the proceedings, the schisms between colonial leaders underlined just how little consensus could be reached regarding Australia’s future role within the Empire. What emerged from the conference instead were the challenges confronting Chamberlain and other imperial reformers. The conference debates reflected the changing state of Anglo-Australian affairs and the imbalance between imperial sentiment and local interests across the various colonies. Colonial leaders left London reminded of the limitations of the campaign for imperial unity, and for the most part, convinced of the need for Australian federation as a precursor to imperial reform.

Acknowledgement

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¹²⁶ “Sir George Turner. Welcome at St Kilda,” *The Argus*, 21 August 1897, p. 10; Victoria, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Assembly, 24 August 1897, p. 1733.

¹²⁷ Crowley, *Big John Forrest*, pp. 186–87.

¹²⁸ Correspondence Relating to New South Wales, 1897. pp. 54–56.

¹²⁹ Tyler, “Chapter XI: The Development of the Imperial Conference, 1887–1914,” p. 418.