



# BARRABA COMMUNITY NEWS

FREE LOCAL NEWSPAPER

COMMUNITY OWNED AND EDITED

Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2025



This week marks 5 years since *Barraba Community News* was launched. Thanks to the support of the community, the Community College and the small volunteer team who make it happen each week what started as "well let's have a go" is still going.

## Barraba Medical Centre. Surgery Closure

The Medical Centre will be closed from Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> May until Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> May inclusive and will reopen Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> May at 9.00am.  
Sorry for the inconvenience  
Barraba Medical Centre Staff



Join us for Devonshire Tea from 10am,  
\$8/person and homemade soup and roll from  
12md, \$15/person on Saturday and Sunday.



## BARRABA RSL & RECREATIONAL CLUB LTD

Phone 67821379  
For the information of  
members and guests.

### THIS WEEK

#### THURSDAY 15th May

BINGO from 6pm

#### FRIDAY 16th May

##### MEAT RAFFLES

MEMBERSHIP DRAW \$2000 (2 draws)

#### SUNDAY 18th May

##### ANGLER CLUB RAFFLES

Raffles on sale from 12pm, drawn 1.30pm

MEMBERSHIP DRAW \$1100

### BISTRO HOURS

Phone 0427330808

DINE IN OR TAKEAWAY

DAILY BLACKBOARD SPECIALS AVAILABLE

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MONDAY/TUESDAY/WEDNESDAY: CLOSED

THURS/FRI/SAT: Lunch 12-2pm. Dinner from 6pm

SUNDAY: 12-2pm



## BARRABA CANCER PATIENTS FUND RAISING GROUP Inc.

Biggest Morning Tea Street Stall.  
THURSDAY 22ND MAY from 9am  
at the Queen Street Mall

Service NSW Business Bureau

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## BUSINESS NSW CALLS FOR WORKERS' COMPENSATION REFORM TO SUPPORT NEW ENGLAND NORTH WEST BUSINESSES AND WORKERS

Business NSW is urging swift action to reform the state's workers' compensation scheme, highlighting its unsustainable trajectory and the urgent need to protect businesses and workers in the New England North West (NENW) region.

The call comes as psychological injury claims have surged by 65% since 2021-22, with over 11,000 claims recorded annually, according to the State Insurance Regulatory Authority (SIRA). The scheme's deficit grew by \$1.8 billion last year, equivalent to \$5 million daily, driving up premiums and straining regional businesses.

"New England North West businesses, from hospitality to agriculture, are being hit hard by a workers' compensation system that's no longer fit for purpose," said Ms Diane Gray, Business NSW Regional Director for New England North West.

"Local employers are seeing premiums skyrocket, even with strong safety records, because of a system that's being misused to escalate workplace disputes. This hurts our workers, our businesses, and our regional economy."

The NSW Government's proposed reforms, announced by Treasurer Daniel Mookhey on March 18, include establishing a bullying and harassment jurisdiction within the NSW Industrial Relations Commission, defining 'psychological injury' and 'reasonable management action' for clarity, and adopting anti-fraud measures. Business NSW supports these changes and is advocating for tighter oversight, including reinstating Section 11A of the Workers' Compensation Act 1987 to exclude provisional payments for claims tied to reasonable performance management.

"Take a café in Tamworth or a retail store in Inverell, these businesses are grappling with claims that drag on for months, sometimes years, tying up resources and leaving workers disconnected from their jobs," Ms Gray said. "We need a system that supports genuine recovery, not one that escalates grievances or leaves businesses footing the bill for unsustainable claims."

Local stories underscore the issue. One NENW business faced a psychological injury claim after a worker, undergoing performance management, claimed distress from routine feedback. The claim was upheld on appeal based on the worker's perception, costing the business thousands in premiums and lost productivity. Another regional employer reported a worker claiming compensation for a support animal, with ongoing costs now exceeding \$4,000 annually.

"These reforms are about fairness, protecting workers who need support while ensuring businesses aren't penalised for doing the right thing," Ms Gray added. "In New England North West, where small businesses are the backbone of our communities, we can't afford to let this scheme collapse under its own weight."

Business NSW is committed to working with the NSW Government to ensure the workers' compensation scheme is sustainable, fair, and affordable for the region's employers and employees.

### Burindi Rural Fire Service

#### Notice of meeting

**AGM to be held on 30<sup>th</sup> May at 10am at Burindi.**

**All welcome**

### Ecological Burn Notice

Please be advised that Whitehaven Coal will be undertaking burn preparation and cool season Ecological Burns on the following Biodiversity Properties "Neranghi North", "Bimbooria", "Long Gully", "Greenwood" and "Nindethana" between 7<sup>th</sup> April and 13<sup>th</sup> June 2025. For further information, please contact Whitehaven Biodiversity on 0488 407 000.

## Barraba Hospital Auxiliary Happenings

The Auxiliary held their street stall on the 8th of May from 9am. The table was laden with books, plants, home cooked cakes and biscuits.



Thank you to everyone who donated items for sale. Auxiliary member Julie Willams drew the Mother's Day raffle, with the winner being Toni Wauch. Thank you to everyone who supported our stall and to our volunteers who helped.



## Marketing Support Program Returns

Tamworth Regional Council's popular Regional Events Marketing Support Program is back for another year, with applications now open for 2025-2026. The program is a platform for Council to provide both financial and/or in-kind marketing support to local events and festivals held 1 July 2025 and 30 June 2026.

Coordinator Visitor Experiences, Linda Bridges says the program is a practical way Tamworth Regional Council can help promote events, to bring more visitation to the region. "The Regional Events Marketing Support Program aims to build awareness and drive participation for locally run events in the region." Linda says.

In order to qualify for funding, events must be able to report on three key focus areas;

1. the economic benefit of the event to the Tamworth region
2. an increase in overnight visitation to the Tamworth region; and
3. demonstrate how the event will grow from its current state

Each event and festival applicant are assessed individually to make sure they meet the criteria. Local event organisers can receive a range of marketing support ranging from media coverage, distribution of promotional material, social media promotion and the creation of promotional content. Over the last 12 months, Tamworth Regional Council has supported 13 events through the program including the Barraba Show, Bendemeer's Grey Fergie Muster and most recently, the Great Nundle Dog Race. Event organisers are encouraged to apply for the program that offers support from \$100 up to \$5000. Applications are now open and close Thursday 22 May 2025. Find out more here: [2025 - 2026 Regional Events Marketing Support Program | Tamworth Regional Council](#)

**Habitat Augmentation Workshop**

Barraba Golf Club,  
Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2025,  
10.00am - 4.00pm (approx.)  
For further details contact Susan  
susan@trla.org.au  
Bookings essential for catering

Learn how innovative habitat augmentation techniques can transform your farm, backyard, or community into a thriving ecosystem. Practical demonstrations including installation of a raptor platform and more

Mick Callan, Habitat Innovation & Management  
BSc (Honours), Grad Cert (Ornithology),

NSW GOVERNMENT

PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION MATTERS  
Landcare NSW and the Nature Conservation Trust are working together to raise awareness and support private land conservation efforts across the state.

Tamworth Regional Council

Habitat

QR code

**Results of Westpac Mother's Day Raffle**

1st prize Doug Hatch

2nd prize Cheryl Spence

3rd prize Pam King

Thank you to everyone who supported us



## History Notes

Another successful market held on what turned out to be a lovely Saturday morning. There were a nice number of visitors as well as some former residents returning for the weekend. Cakes and biscuits were easily the most popular purchase followed by plants, honey and books.

There are a few improvements going on at the Museum including a waste pipe to take the overflow from the tank out into the street and a new fence to replace the wooden fence which was falling down. Hopefully our renovations out the back will be ready for visitors before too long.

To continue with Uncle Archibald Crowley from Cobbadah station. He turned his thoughts to the Ministry as he approached his 30th Birthday. He matriculated at the University of Sydney and won a B.A. He then went on to the Theological Hall in 1907. He was Licensed by the Presbytery of Sydney in 1911.

He was ordained and inducted to Taralga on 30th April, 1912, but after three years there, the state of his health compelled him to resign. He was able to accept a call to Borowa in 1927, and demitted that charge in 1929. He was inducted to Urana in 1937, to close a long vacancy in the parish, and his pastorate of eleven years there was useful and quietly successful. It ended with his demission in 1948, when the Assembly gave him status as Minister Emeritus.

He continued to supply work, mainly in the country, towards which his interest naturally turned, and where he was able to increase his already considerable knowledge of Australian flora and fauna. He also devoted much time to the scout movement.

When he felt unable to continue parish work, he returned to the city. Eventually he secured a bachelor flat at Dee Why, but he had barely settled into it when he died peacefully while asleep, on August 31st, 1961, in his 85th year.

Archibald's letter to his sister in 1933 included the following:-  
*In 1864, the year of the great floods, father {William} and party, I think while he was still in partnership with his brother, John, undertook a station forming partnership to a place in the Warrego, a tributary of the Barwon. They took 800 head of cattle and carried supplies of flour etc on the dray, which we knew so well at Cobbadah Station. The dray had to be floated with barrels fastened under it. An aboriginal, unable to swim, was pushed across lying on a bark canoe. On arrival at the place at Warrego they found they were too late. Father's party offered to sell flour, but the former would not buy, choosing to exist on beef only. Father and party returned with their 800 head of cattle.*



### YOUR VOICE ON THE PHONE

I'd like to stroll with you my dear  
Oh, wouldn't it be nice  
Just you and I together again  
In a world of paradise  
You were heaven-sent my lady  
To guide me through this life  
And only God in this old world  
Knows how much I miss my wife

When night time turns to darkness  
And I am all alone  
You brighten up my lonesome mind  
When your voice is on the phone  
I know while ever you're alive  
I'll always be wanting you  
There's not a thing in this old world  
For you I would not do

It was not my intention  
For us to separate  
But my internal sickness  
Was something that would not wait  
I would not have had the courage  
And the faith to live alone  
If I had not heard your lovely voice  
Night time on the telephone

I wait for night to come my darling  
And for your voice on the phone  
I know you have done a great job  
Looking after things at home  
And Christmas time is drawing near  
The best Christmas gift it's true  
For me to spend my Christmas time  
At home my dear with you

Stumpy 'Vic' Turner

## Bendigo Bank Agribusiness: Australian farmland values hit record high

Transactions rebound with moderate growth tipped to continue in 2025

Australian farmland values have now recorded eleven years of unbroken growth with the national median price rising to a record level in 2024 and growth observed in median prices across five of the six states during 2024. The national median price per hectare increased by 6.9 per cent to a record \$10,231/ha with a total of 4.7 million hectares of land traded, representing an area larger in size than Denmark.

The number of farmland sales in Australia rose 5.8 per cent to 7,154 with the combined value of transactions totalling \$14.9 billion. The rebound followed an 18.2 per cent decline in sales in 2023 driven almost exclusively by the eastern states yet was still the third lowest number of national farmland sales in the past three decades.

Seven of the top 10 growth regions in 2024 were in Queensland or Western Australia with pace of growth remaining constrained, having plateaued since 2023, with many sellers maintaining high price expectations and consequently, properties sitting on the market for extended periods.

Bendigo Bank Agribusiness Senior Manager Industry Affairs, Neil Burgess said: "Australian farmland values steadied during 2024, following a slowdown in growth observed throughout 2023, and while this was the 11th consecutive year of growth, it represents a notable cooling in the rate of annual increases compared to 2018-2022 when the median price growth more than doubled.

"The past decade has seen the national median price for Australian farmland triple, rising by 201 per cent at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.6 per cent with a 20-year CAGR of 8.6 per cent.

"The underlying drivers of the Australian farmland market were more varied in 2024 with elevated interest rates a constant and with a greater mix of seasonal conditions. Favourable weather in NSW and Queensland has been in stark contrast to the significant lack of rain experienced in southern regions, which has been reflected in farmland prices.

"The sharp rebound in livestock prices across late 2023 and into 2024 drove a substantial improvement in buyer sentiment, particularly across New South Wales and Queensland, with demand for farmland in grazing regions surging after an underwhelming performance throughout 2023.

"Looking to the remainder of the year, anticipated interest rate cuts while supportive, are unlikely to drive widespread resurgence in demand. Farmland availability remains tight and mixed seasonal conditions across the country, combined with ongoing uncertainty in global trade and commodity markets are expected to limit the prospect of substantial growth in 2025, so our outlook is for continuing moderate growth in farmland values across 2025," Mr Burgess concluded.



## COMMUNITY DEMANDS CHANGE TO TACKLE CRIME

Communities across the region, concerned about ongoing serious incidents of crime will soon have their voice heard as the Time for Change e-petition hits the NSW Parliament.

Member for Tamworth Kevin Anderson said 22,015 people across New South Wales had signed the petition, sending a strong message to the Labor Government.

"Communities across our region have been deeply disturbed by an escalation in serious and brazen incidents of crime," Mr Anderson said. "We have a right to feel safe in our homes which is why residents have been calling for tougher laws and consequences for actions. Tamworth's Phebe Furneaux recently started the Time for Change e-petition which had an incredible response from the local community, quickly passing the 20,000 signatures required to be debated in the NSW Parliament. Today, the petition was tabled in the parliament, and I can update the community that it will now be debated on the 29th of May."

The Time for Change! Petition calls on the government to:

1. Strengthen bail laws to prevent violent young offenders from re-offending.
2. Provide increased resources and support for police officers to effectively apprehend and prosecute offenders.
3. Review the judicial system to prioritise community safety.

"This is an opportunity for our community to have our voice heard, and I will be taking the community's strong voice to the parliament to call for change," Mr Anderson added. "I will be calling for tougher laws and consequences for actions, as well as greater resources for our local police, and for a division of PolAir to be based in Tamworth to support police across the Northwest. I thank Phebe and the Tamworth community for their support in calling for safer communities across our region."



## Keep Warm and Be Entertained at Hats Off!

Tamworth's popular mid-year 'Hats Off To Country' music festival will return this winter from July 11-13 with a number of Australia's best country artists set to perform.

The festival offers music lovers, locals and visitors a chance to enjoy country music outside of the large-scale festival held in January.

More than 60 events will be held at venues right across the Tamworth region over three days. Golden Guitar winner Travis Collins will bring his new acoustic show 'Boots, Beer & Barstools' to Wests' League Club, while newly inducted Galaxy of Stars recipient Luke O'Shea and Lyn Bowtell will perform 'Love & Laughter' at the North Tamworth Bowling Club.

Other artists set to perform include The Bushwackers, Ross Wilson & The Peaceniks, Y.O.G.A, Viper Creek Band, Lawrie & Shelley Minson, Lindsay Butler & Shaza Leigh and many more!

Festival Coordinator Cheryl Brown says "Hats Off complements the annual Tamworth Country Music Festival on a much smaller scale offering cooler temperatures, a hub for singer-songwriters, and a haven for good times."

The Festival began as a concert in 2000, to salute Australia's king of country music Slim Dusty and has grown into a mid-year celebration of all thing's country music right around the Tamworth Region.

During the three day celebration of country music, a number of events will be hosted by the Tamworth Songwriters' Association and the Australian Bush Balladeer Association will host the annual ABBA Bush Ballad Concert.

The CMAA Junior Academy will run from 5-12 July, with the graduation concert aligning with the festival. The Academy is an intensive residential music course held in Tamworth, led by music professionals, mentors and industry leaders including Lyn Bowtell and Roger Corbett. For the first time, Tamworth Regional Council will also host the Inaugural Tamworth Bush Ballad Awards.

Manager Events, Barry Harley says the Tamworth Bush Ballad Awards will celebrate traditional Australian country music. "This event will bring some of the best bush balladeers in Australia to Tamworth in July to celebrate the genre's storytelling tradition and honour those keeping the spirit of the bush alive in song." As Australia's Country Music

Capital, it was a no-brainer to host the inaugural event in Tamworth, in line with the popular mid-year country music festival." For a full program, visit <https://www.tamworthregion.com.au/events-festivals/hats-off-to-country/>

*From Brendan Moylan Weekly Newsletter –*



## Inquiry into illegal tobacco trade

The NSW Government has finally answered calls to launch a parliamentary inquiry into the fast-growing illegal tobacco trade. It is something I have been pushing the government for. A parliamentary inquiry into illegal tobacco trade has been established and referred to the Legislative Council Committee on Justice and Communities.

Data from NSW Health shows a huge rise in the number of tobacco addicts across NSW; from 14,500 four years ago to 19,500 today (nearly 35 per cent). These illegal operations particularly affect regional and rural areas, like the Northern Tablelands, where there are limited resources to conduct compliance checks and they are being sold to young people. Illegal tobacco trade has also been linked with an increase in crime across NSW. The inquiry will force the government to look at the impact of the tobacco trade on small businesses and communities and the failures to address the sale of illegal and counterfeit cigarettes.



Save the Time and Date everybody! THURSDAY MAY 22 from 9am. The annual STREET STALL hosted by Barraba Cancer Patients Fund Raising Group Inc. is

being held to in the Queen Street Mall to raise funds for the NSW Cancer Council's **BIGGEST MORNING TEA** and other Australian Cancer related organisations.

There will be music to entertain, whilst having your morning teas under the shade of the Plane Tree; morning tea plates delivered to local Businesses; loads of home baked/grown goods to fill your shopping bags at the Stall; along with a Guessing Competition and a 100 Club there.

We all look forward to seeing you, the Barraba Community and beyond, for a friendly chat and Street Stall on 22nd Thursday.



## Historic partnership celebrated

Representatives from Tamworth Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (TACCO) and Tamworth Regional Council have today come together, for an historic ceremony celebrating the Mara Ngali Partnership Agreement.

Mara Ngali, which means our two hands in Gomerioi language, will be the first time in Australian history that a local council has signed a formal partnership with an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation to work together on Closing the Gap. The agreement relies on the ongoing commitments of both parties to work together to deliver Closing the Gap initiatives on a local level.

Closing the Gap is a national commitment to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people in health, education, employment, economic participation, incarceration, housing, land rights and language.

The new agreement follows the formal establishment of TACCO in July 2024, a coalition formed to provide a strong, united voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the Tamworth LGA. TACCO's goal is to strengthen collaboration and partnership to achieve better social, economic and cultural outcomes.

The ceremony at Tamworth Regional Botanic Gardens began with an Acknowledgement to Country and a traditional Smoking undertaken by Brad Flanders on behalf of Uncle Neville Sampson. Dancers from Birrelee MACS, Hillvue Public School and Peel High School then took centre stage before TACCO and Council representatives each signed a commemorative document which will serve as an important reminder of each organisation's commitment to working together to Close the Gap.

Addressing the gathering of local and state representatives, community members and staff of each organisation, Tamworth Regional Councillor and proud Gomerioi man, Marc Sutherland, told those in attendance that it had been a journey of about four years to get to this point, with many other local governments now looking at Tamworth Regional Council as leaders in this space.

"As no other Council has moved into this, we're setting the path moving forward and I believe that this approach of working in partnership with our local Aboriginal community is the approach that all local governments will take moving forward and it's such a proud moment to be a part of," he said.

The partnership will be an opportunity to take the 17 national Closing the Gaps Strategy targets, and build them into a local reality with the Aboriginal community and for the Aboriginal community.

TACCO Board Member and Chairperson of Tamworth Aboriginal Medical Services (TAMS-AC), Cathy Trindall, told those in attendance that having this formal agreement acknowledges that to close the gap, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must determine, drive and own the desired outcomes, alongside all governments, in particular here locally.

"This new way of working requires governments to build on the strong foundation of the members of TACCO, and our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, through our deep connection to family, community and culture.

By working together to transform Government to do things differently and not 'business as usual'," she said.

Tamworth Region Mayor, Russell Webb, echoed these sentiments by discussing what's next for the partnership.

"Council will now sit down with TACCO to work through submissions from their recent community engagement as part of the Community Development Plan. We will then work in partnership to create a local-level Closing the Gap Implementation Plan, which will include a list of actions which will then go through the process to be adopted into Council's Framework going forward," he said.

Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Treaty, David Harris, congratulated the new partnership. "This is the first time that a local council has signed a formal agreement with a local Aboriginal community-controlled organisation to work together on Closing the Gap. It is a model for how local communities can bring the National Agreement on Closing the Gap into effect at a local level, where it can have a huge impact on the ground."

"Closing the Gap initiatives are most effective when they are designed, led and implemented by Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal people know what works best for their communities to Close the Gap and the success of the TACCO partnership demonstrates this," said Minister Harris.

"The NSW Government is proud to support the work of TACCO as the first Closing the Gap Place Based Partnership in NSW. The partnership provides a framework for self-determination and shared decision making for Aboriginal communities and organisations in Tamworth."

"It is wonderful to see the strengthening of this partnership with the signing of the agreement between TACCO and Tamworth Regional Council."

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**PHIL DENYER  
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(02) 6782 1107**



**Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 5:00 pm**  
**Barraba Inland Petroleum**  
**Sausage sizzle for clients**  
**and the Barraba**  
**community**

## BARRABA UNITING CHURCH NOTICES

Service Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May 10.45am

Please note change of time for next four months.

All welcome

## ANGLICAN CHURCH TIMES

**St Laurence's Barraba**

Sunday service at 10.00am

Woodsreef service 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in each month 11.30

## CATHOLIC CHURCH TIMES

Barraba 1st Sunday of the month, Saturday evening

Mass 5pm

All other Sundays 9am



Informing the Barraba community of some changes at the Barraba SES Unit.

Greg Forder has been appointed as Acting Unit Commander.

The Unit has training every Wednesday evening at 6pm.

The Unit is still looking for new recruits to build a stronger Unit and all people over 16 years old are welcome to come.

The Unit is located in Maude Street, opposite the Medical Centre, in the same building as the RFS.

Contact Greg Forder on 0421 919 789 if you have any questions.

## BARRABA COMMUNITY NEWS

COMMUNITY OWNED AND EDITED

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## **Barraba Rams Take on Gunnedah in Tough Weekend Hit-Out**

The Barraba Rams made the trip to Gunnedah over the weekend, with both the women's and men's teams taking the field.

The women's side played a close, hard-fought match, narrowly going down 14–10. Barraba were first to get points on the board in both the first and second quarters, thanks to some sharp running from Brooke McKinnon, who crossed for two tries. The team started a little unsteady in the scrums but improved as the match went on. Despite strong defence and a determined effort right to the final whistle, the Rams couldn't hold off a late push from Gunnedah.

### **Women's Points:**

3 – Brooke McKinnon

2 – Kirra Jordan

1 – Zahlie Cabot

**Players' Player:** Brooke McKinnon

The men's team came away with a strong 40–10 win, following the game plan well and playing some entertaining rugby. They moved the ball wide, making the most of their opportunities on the wings, which led to a flurry of tries. Liam Mack led the charge with four tries, while Jack Ward and Cody Townsend also got over the line. Cody's try came from a moment of individual brilliance, weaving through the defence to score.

Oisín McKenna had a standout game, not only converting five of the six tries but also providing solid support to his backline throughout the match. The backs were able to gain valuable field position thanks to strong carries and tough defence from forwards like Toby Mzisa and Harrison Davies. The bench also made a big impact, with Brandon Tevaga making strong runs and Michael "The Axe" Walker delivering the hit of the day.

Gunnedah managed a penalty kick, but it didn't shake the Rams, who stuck to their game and showed how far their fitness and structure have come. It was a true team effort, with everyone playing their role.

### **Men's Points:**

3 – Oisín McKenna

2 – Toby Mzisa

1 – Brandon Tevaga

**Players' Player:** Toby Mzisa

Both teams will now shift their focus to the next round, where the Barraba Rams will take on Narrabri at home on **Friday, 24 May**. It's shaping up to be another exciting matchday, so come down and support the Rams on home turf!

## The best of both worlds? How Australia's unique democracy evolved.

*James Walter, Emeritus Professor of Political Science,  
Monash University*

We are social beings. So, within every group, decisions must be made about how to live together, preserving wellbeing and relations with others. Historically, those decisions were made by tribal leaders, or monarchs and their courts. Yet the ancient states of Greece, needing collective commitment to the battles in which they engaged, realised it would be generated by giving the people, the demos, a voice in what had to be done. From this issued the idea of "democracy": a particular form of social organisation in which citizens participate in the decisions that affect them.

Small communities can practise direct democracy: people meet and decide, or vote, on decisions concerning them all. In large modern societies, it operates instead as representative democracy within nation-states: citizens elect representatives to act for them in a forum where collective policies are determined.

Every state has its own history. As a result, each has unique features that differentiate it from all the others. But what is common to liberal democracies, of which Australia is one, is that the idea of self-government has, since the 17th century, been linked with a commitment to the freedom of individuals within the state. Yet ideas of freedom differ, as closer attention to arguments within any state, and how states differ, reveals.

### **Australia: a settler society**

Australia is a settler society, created by immigrants from Europe from 1788 onwards. They settled on a continent inhabited by one of the oldest civilisations on earth: 131 distinct language groups, girdling the entire continent, with means of land management, harbouring resources, and investment in ways of living and spiritual connection with their own country over millennia.

European settlers knew nothing of this. They saw First Nations people as primitive tribes, could not understand how they operated collectively, and failed to recognise the Indigenous economy.

It seemed incomprehensible to European settlers that relationships in Indigenous communities were governed by knowledge linked with ancestors, kinship obligations and country, passed down by elders from generation to generation and disseminated through shared stories, ritual and practical action. With ideas of farming, resource exploitation, and development alien to the light touch of Indigenous people, settlers took over this large

"undeveloped" continent, unaware of how it had been shaped by Indigenous practices and possession.

The result, inevitably, was conflict. Attempts on each side to come to terms were confounded by incommensurate ways of understanding the world. Frontier wars ensued. It was an uneven battle, propelled by increasing numbers of settlers. Dispossession and massacres of Indigenous peoples stretched right through to the 20th century.



*Australia is  
a settler  
society.  
National  
Library of  
Australia*

### **Settler democracy**

The settler state was established at the high point of "the age of revolution", when battles against monarchical control (the American Revolution) and hereditary elites (the French revolution) spurred the adoption of this new form of democracy: government "of the people, by the people and for the people" on one hand, and "liberty, equality and fraternity" on the other.

Yet the first European settlements were convict colonies, repositories for the criminal, marginal and unwanted from Britain. Among them were convicts who had been transported because of their advocacy of the new politics, readers of Thomas Paine's Rights of Man. In conjunction, as the source of essential labour in the new colonies, convicts had leverage to assume roles and demand rights never granted to their ilk in Britain. Their persistent demands seeded colonial democracy.

Since liberal precepts carried here by successive waves of settlers faced none of the barriers of an established ruling class, such ideas flourished in Australia. As more radical exponents of social liberalism arrived, such as the Chartists who had fought for working class political and civil rights, they played a leading role in events such as the Eureka rebellion, the emergence of mass union movements, and the foundation of the Australian Labor Party (ALP).

By the late 19th century, "new liberals" were arguing that freedom could not be assured unless the state intervened to solve problems – poverty, unemployment, lack of education – that disadvantaged individuals could not solve for themselves.

In Australia, some among the emerging middle class (small businessmen, entrepreneurs, journalists and professionals),

seized on such views in forming loose reformist alliances with the labour movement to forestall the conservative inclinations of the big landholders who dominated colonial upper houses. The result: Australian colonies took the lead in developing progressive democratic measures: allowing all men to vote, payment of parliamentarians, the secret ballot and in South Australia and Western Australia votes for women.

#### **A 'talent for bureaucracy'**

Australia was a striking incarnation of modern social organisation. It was historically perhaps the most developed instance of the harnessing of democracy with bureaucracy, for two reasons.

First, its settlement and development were documented in detail. Instructions to and reports from colonial governors, the manifests of convict ships, the documentation of immigrant arrivals — all were resources for those managing colonial development.

Second, as population increased, colonial governments needed to raise loans from the mother country to develop the infrastructure necessary for private enterprise to flourish. Public officials became the essential intermediaries in what Noel Butlin called "colonial socialism". Alan Davies saw these historical contingencies as the origin of an Australian "talent for bureaucracy".

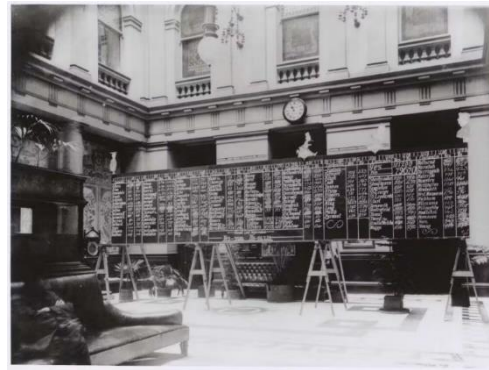
The influence of these progressive ideas and a "colonial socialism" encouraged in Australia a particular form of liberal polity, one less fervently individualistic than the United States. The dark side of settler liberalism was that its commitment to individualistic liberal freedom rendered it blind to collective forms of social relations, and to the consequences of colonisation for First Nations.

#### **The federal experiment**

Negotiation between the colonies in the late 19th century aimed to unify the disparate colonial settlements. It was driven both by lofty ambitions — to create a nation with a common purpose — and by a series of anxieties. A capacity for defence against the other imperial powers making claims in the Pacific; concern to maintain racial purity and protect British civilisation in the antipodes; and worries about promoting economic recovery given class fragmentation following a depression and strikes in the 1890s.

It was brought about through a series of conventions largely comprising colonial politicians. Together they hammered out a constitutional contract to satisfy their interests, driven by lawyers, carefully designating which powers were to be transferred to the Commonwealth, and which were retained by the states. It was, despite the absence of a formal bureaucracy, a profoundly bureaucratic process.

The compact at which they arrived retained British parliamentarianism. It mandated the formation of majority government with fiscal power in the House of Representatives, but borrowed from the United States in establishing a states house of review — the Senate.



*The results of the 1899 referendum show it was successful, meaning Australia could become a federation.*

The American adoption of a Bill of Rights was proposed but not accepted: British parliamentarism was thought sufficient to ensure the rights of "freeborn Britons". Liberal preoccupation with checks and balances on government was evident in the constitution of the Senate, in which all states (formerly colonies) have equal representation regardless of population size. More restrictive still was the stipulation that referendums to change the constitution required the support of a majority of people in a majority of states to succeed.

The new federal parliament moved quickly to safeguard "White Australia" with the Immigration Restriction Act 1901. This set a dictation test (in European languages) for immigrants designed to exclude those of non-European origin. There was contention over women's suffrage, but women had the vote in South Australia and a constitutional clause stipulated that rights already granted in any colony should be accepted federally. Women's voting rights were recognised in the Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902. Not so the rights of Indigenous peoples, however, who were deemed not to meet the standard of "civilisation" necessary to vote.

#### **Bureaucracy and democracy**

The major battles in the first decade of federation were between developing anti-Labor parties representing two faces of liberalism: those convinced freedom was sustained by state intervention when necessary (Protectionists) and those believing freedom was secured by limiting the ability of others to interfere in individual choice (the Free Trade Party).

Initially the baton passed rapidly to and fro between Protectionist and Free-Trade governments. But adroit management by the Protectionist leader, Alfred Deakin, facilitated the election (with Protectionist support) of the first (albeit short-lived) national Labor government in the

world. It also ensured that Protectionists' ambitions governed "the Australian settlement": tariff protection, White Australia, wage arbitration and targeted welfare overseen by an educated governing class.



*Compulsory voting for federal elections means polling places are set up far and wide. National Archives of Australia*

The social liberalism of the Australian settlement encouraged further electoral innovation. Preferential voting was introduced in 1918. Compulsory voting was enacted federally in 1924, having been introduced in Queensland in 1915. Other states soon followed. This was foundational to the citizens' bargain: the state as responsible for collective wellbeing, with citizens obliged to engage seriously with democratic government. It necessitated voter registration, and electoral rolls, administered under state and federal franchise acts. Eventually national electoral rolls were developed, administered within Commonwealth departments, then in an Australian Electoral Office (1973) and ultimately by an independent statutory authority, the Australian Electoral Commission (1984).

It was not politicians or political agencies but Commonwealth public servants charged with achieving voting equivalence who initially determined electoral boundaries. Later the AEC took that role, along with the supervision of elections from the 1980s. This forestalled the gerrymandering that cruelled equality of representation in other jurisdictions.

Many of these measures were unique to Australia. And the heroes in their achievement? Bureaucrats. The interaction of progressive politicians, committed public servants and community activists was also integral to the transition from "White Australia" race-based "homogeneity" to civic identity and multiculturalism in the 1960s and 1970s; the introduction of voting rights for First Nations at state and then federal level and the 1967 referendum that recognised them as citizens; Indigenous land rights; and the incremental elaboration of health insurance, educational accessibility and civic entitlements. It was not perfect, and much remains to be done, especially in addressing the damage, trauma and continuing marginalisation inflicted on Indigenous communities by settler liberalism.

#### **Democracy in question?**

In the 1980s, governments of both stripes adopted an international current of thought driven by economists and

technocrats — neoliberal economics — as a counter to "stagflation": high inflation, low growth and high unemployment. What now was needed was more efficiency, to be achieved by opening markets to competition and rolling back state action: social democracy had failed. The state's role should be limited to oversight, "steering, not rowing", with provision of infrastructure and services to be outsourced to private enterprise.

For 30 years, it produced the prosperity reformers had promised. But the rewards were distributed unevenly, with riches accruing to an ever-smaller proportion of the population. Individual precarity was by imputation a failure of effort rather than of market failure, structural disadvantage or the "creative destruction" expected of unbridled capitalism. As one prime minister argued, "if you have a go, you'll get a go". It took no account of the communities destroyed as their jobs vanished and new enterprise failed to arrive.

Surveys suggest the public was never persuaded, and the democratic impact was apparent. Party disengagement ensued. The major parties of the 20th century, in which the need to reach agreement among many voices ensured that extreme positions were rare, were reduced to rumps of committed partisans whose views were typically not representative of the people they served.

Partisan polarisation made achieving policy consensus increasingly difficult. The public service was hollowed out as functions were outsourced, consultants were brought in, organisational knowledge was lost, and governments repeatedly legislated to induce compliance rather than frank and fearless advice. The result was policy stasis and startling national scandals when the damage of ingenious schemes by consultants to reduce entitlements and shift risk from service providers to their clients was revealed.

High levels of trust in politicians and public officials plummeted, and with this belief in liberal democracy itself was eroded. When a COVID pandemic induced governments to act, invest and cooperate in public provision, and in 2022 a Labor government was elected promising to be responsible, consultative and collaborative, polls bounced back. Was the Australian tradition of social democracy resurgent? Support for change was soon shown to be tenuous. The bitter campaign against the Albanese government's initiation of a referendum giving First Nations a constitutional "Voice" on policies affecting them showed how easily the politics of partisan division, race, resentment and negative campaigning can be mobilised to defeat democracy's promise of fair life chances.