

Sesquicentenary of Responsible Government New South Wales 1856 – 2006



What is the Sesquicentenary of Responsible Government?

In May 2006 it will be 150 years since the people of New South Wales elected their first Parliament under a system of responsible government.

It was not the first government, or even the first parliament for New South Wales, but the opening of the new Parliament on 22 May 1856, marked one of the most significant moments in the development of the democratic form of government in the state.



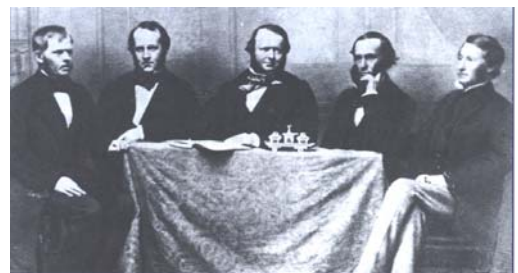
The Legislative Assembly Chamber

Responsible Government

is the term for the system of government adopted throughout Australia, where the Executive – the Premier and Ministers – are also Members of Parliament and therefore ‘responsible’ to Parliament. Under such a system, the Executive can only govern if they have the majority support of the lower house of parliament. This contrasts, for example, with the American system of ‘representative’ government where the President (executive) and Congress (parliament or legislature) are each elected separately and the President is not a member of the legislature and need not have majority support in Congress.

The Early Ministries

The first bicameral (two house) Parliament met on 22 May 1856. From that date executive authority passed from the Governor of New South Wales to the Ministers, led by a Premier. The political party system did not develop in New South Wales until the 1890s, so Ministries were formed from factional groups who joined together on issues but almost as easily broke up again. As a result, early Ministries were often short-lived, with Premiers and governments changing, on average, every 18 months.



The first NSW Ministry, 1856

The first Premier of New South Wales was Stuart Donaldson whose Ministry lasted just eleven weeks. Other notable nineteenth century Premiers included Sir Henry Parkes, Premier five times (almost 13 years in total); and Sir John Robertson, also Premier five times. Both were strong advocates of social and democratic reform.

Before Responsible Government

With the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, Australia began as a penal colony under the authority of a military Governor. The early military Governors of the new convict colony had little restraint on their power, with their British Government superiors 20,000 km and six months away by ship. The last of the Governors to have such authority was Lachlan Macquarie (1810-21).



Lachlan Macquarie



*Opening of the first
Legislative Council, 1843*

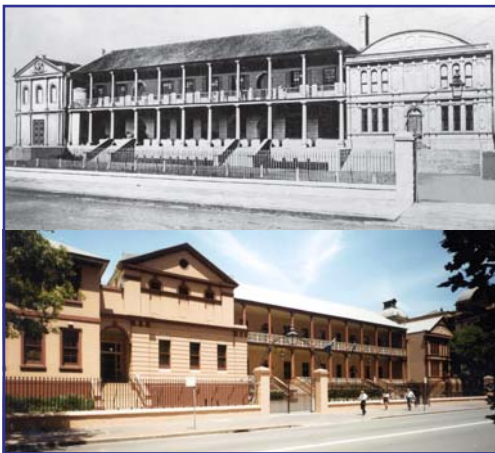
In 1824, a Legislative Council was created to advise the Governor, and in 1829 began meeting in part of the “Rum Hospital” building in Macquarie Street, now part of Parliament House. In 1843 the Council was enlarged and, for the first time, partly elected. The newly elected Council met in a new chamber added to the former hospital building. However, executive authority in government remained with the Governor.

But New South Wales was changing. By the 1840s, transportation of British convicts to Sydney had ceased and free settlers greatly outnumbered the convicts that remained. A free press, elected representatives, a rich agricultural industry, and, from 1851, the Gold Rushes, brought increasing population and prosperity to the colony. These developments contributed to demands for a more democratic and responsible system of representative government.

In the early 1850s, a new constitution was drawn up for a Parliament of two houses (Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council), operating under a system of responsible government similar to that of Britain. This constitution was accepted by the British government, greatly increasing the independence and authority of the elected government in the colony of New South Wales.



Parliament House



*Parliament House, Macquarie Street,
Sydney - 1856 and the 1990s*

Parliament House is a significant heritage site, with part of its buildings actually older than the institution of Parliament in New South Wales. The oldest section was completed in 1816 as part of Sydney’s first permanent hospital - often known as the ‘Rum Hospital’ because its builders were given the right to import and sell rum in place of payment. The hospital had three wings, the northern one being accommodation for the Chief Surgeon. From 1829 the Legislative Council began meeting in part of it.

Today’s Parliament House is a complex of several connected buildings of great heritage significance dating from 1816 through to the 1980s. It includes the oldest building in the Sydney CBD; the 1843 Council chamber now used by the Legislative Assembly (one of the oldest, continuously used legislative chambers in the world); and the Legislative Council chamber added in 1856, which was built in England as a prefabricated iron building.

Changes to the System

The system of responsible government of 1856 has been constantly altered and enhanced over the years. Some important changes were:

- ◆ The secret ballot was introduced in 1858, along with the right to vote for all adult males. These changes alone put the Australian colonies far ahead of democratic development elsewhere in the world.
- ◆ Women won the right to vote in New South Wales in 1902 – again ahead of most of the world - although women could not stand for election to the Legislative Assembly until 1918.
- ◆ Aboriginal people, while never formally denied the right to vote in New South Wales, found it difficult to do so until the 1960s.
- ◆ By the 1890s, Members of Parliament were paid, making it possible for ordinary people to stand for Parliament. Electorates became more equal in size and were



*Millicent Preston-Stanley,
first woman elected to the
NSW Parliament (1925)*

represented by a single member. At the same time, the party system began to emerge and soon dominated parliaments, making government far more stable.

- ◆ The Federation of Australia into a new nation in 1901 was a significant development, with a resulting reduction in the size and powers of the New South Wales Parliament. Another significant twentieth century development was the gradual move to direct election of the Legislative Council, the Upper House.
- ◆ From 1856 to 1934, Members of the Legislative Council were appointed for life by the Governor with no limit on the number of Members. This changed in 1934, when the number of Members was limited to 60, elected by both houses for a period of 12 years.
- ◆ In 1978 the move to a more democratic Upper House was completed when the Council became fully elected by the voters of New South Wales. There are now 42 Members of the Council, elected for a period of 8 years. The Parliament now has a fixed term of four years, with all Members of the Legislative Assembly and one-half the members of the Legislative Council elected at each general election.



The Legislative Council Chamber

The New South Wales Constitution



William Charles Wentworth

The first Constitution for New South Wales was passed by the British Parliament in 1842, but the foundation of the current constitution is the one drawn up in the 1850s by a parliamentary committee chaired by William Charles Wentworth. This constitution came into effect in 1856. In 1902, after Federation, it was completely updated as the **Constitution Act, 1902 (New South Wales)**. The Act sets out the powers and functions of the Governor, both houses of Parliament, the Executive and the Judiciary. It also provides for Local Government and outlines several other matters such as budgetary powers and the establishment of government departments. Unlike the Australian Constitution, most of the New South Wales Constitution can be changed by ordinary Act of Parliament, and has been many times. However certain sections, particularly those relating to changes to the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly, can only be changed by referendum of the people.

Some Significant Dates

- ◆ **16 July 1855:** Imperial Government assents to Responsible Government in New South Wales
- ◆ **November 1855:** New Constitution for New South Wales comes into effect
- ◆ **November 1855 - May 1856:** New chamber for Legislative Council located, purchased, transported, erected and decorated
- ◆ **11 March – 19 April 1856:** First elections held for the new Legislative Assembly
- ◆ **13 May 1856:** Appointment of first Members of the first Legislative Council under responsible government
- ◆ **22 May 1856:** Meeting of the first Parliament under responsible government
- ◆ **6 June 1856:** Swearing-in of the first Ministry under responsible government
- ◆ **21 July 1856:** British Government announces intention to create a new colony (Queensland) which will be separated from New South Wales in 1859.

New South Wales in 1856 - Some Facts and Events

- ◆ **The non-Aboriginal population** of New South Wales was 288,000, one third of the population of the continent (in 2006 it is almost 7 million, still about 33% of Australia's 20,500,000 people).
The area of NSW in 1856 was more than 2.5 million sq km, but after the separation of Queensland in 1859 it dropped to its current 800,642 sq km.
- ◆ **The 'economic drivers'** of New South Wales were gold and wheat. Prices had started to fall after rapid gold-rush-driven inflation and the 'gold rush' which began in NSW in 1851 was slowing down.
In 1856, 184,000 ounces of **gold** were produced but this was only 22% of 1852 production. The Sydney branch of the Royal Mint (established in 1854 in the Parliament's 'twin' building, part of the original 'Rum Hospital') was processing 14,000 ounces of gold each week.
NSW had 6,275,000 **sheep** and **wool** export values reached 1.3 million pounds but agricultural production was dropping because of labour shortages.
- ◆ **Communications:** The only **railway** line in NSW was extended from Granville to Liverpool.
The NSW **post office** introduced its first iron postboxes and a monthly mail service by ship to Britain began.
Although Melbourne and Adelaide had opened **telegraph** services, the first NSW service was not completed until 1858.
One of Sydney's leading **newspapers** was *The Empire*, a daily published by future premier and 'father of federation, Henry Parkes.
A **bridge** was opened across the Nepean River at Penrith. It was washed away in a flood the following year.
In December 1856, the first attempt was made to fly a **hot air balloon** in Australia, from the Domain behind Parliament House. The aviator, Pierre Maigre, was almost lynched by frustrated viewers when the attempt failed, and a boy was killed when the balloon's supports were pulled down by the mob.
- ◆ In 1856 NSW appointed its first **Government Astronomer**, whose duties included meteorological monitoring. Construction of Sydney Observatory began the following year.
- ◆ **New towns:** New towns established in NSW in 1856 included Adelong, Ballina, Bodalla, Gunnedah, Lismore, Quirindi and Carroona and Rockhampton (in future Queensland).
- ◆ **Schools:** NSW had 55 public, 202 denominational and about 280 private schools with only 27,500 students - 20% of them in public schools.
The future first Prime Minister of the future nation of Australia, **Edmund Barton**, started school in 1856 at Fort Street in Sydney's Rocks district.
- ◆ **Religion:** In 1856, 51% of NSW's population was Anglican, 30% Roman Catholic, 10% Presbyterian and 2.5% other Christians. Non-Christian religions accounted for only 1% while a mere 0.4% considered themselves to have no religion.
- ◆ **Cricket:** On March 30, in the first intercolonial cricket match at Richmond in Victoria, NSW soundly defeated the Victorian team.



The 1950s: after the first century of responsible government in New South Wales Parliament House (above) is little changed but Macquarie Street - seen here (left) during the Royal Visit of 1954 - is barely recognisable when compared to 2006