



## **BICENTENARY STATEMENT:** **THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE FIRST COUNCIL**

Read in the NSW Legislative Council chamber by President Matthew Mason-Cox, **23 November 2021**

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As we approach the Legislative Council's bicentenary, it is instructive to take stock of the historical context surrounding the commencement of representative government in the colony of New South Wales. It provides a useful perspective on the development of parliamentary democracy in the state we now inhabit.

In January 1788, the total white population of mainland Australia was just over 1000. There were 775 males, 220 females and 40 children. In 1823, when the Legislative Council was created, the population had grown to over 30,000. Males were still heavily preponderant: 18,257 compared to 4232 women and 5844 children.

The Legislative Council as created in 1823 consisted of no more than seven or less than five residents of New South Wales appointed by the Crown. The members were overwhelmingly either government officials or large landowners. The settler community in New South Wales was deeply divided at the time. Dr David Clune has written:

*Political power and social status were monopolised by 'the exclusives', an elite caste of free immigrants who saw themselves as the natural rulers of the colony. Dominated by large landowners such as the Macarthur family, the exclusive faction also included wealthy merchants, leading professionals, senior officials and high ranking military officers. Most exclusives despised the growing number of emancipated convicts because of their criminal past and believed they were permanently disqualified from acting as voters, legislators or jurors...*

According to Dr Clune:

*The pretentious and status-obsessed exclusives refused to have any social contact with*

*emancipists, even those who were prosperous and successful. The emancipists resented their second class social status and the exclusives' determination to exclude them from full civil and legal rights. Many had become honest, hard-working members of society and some extremely wealthy. In 1821, there were 7556 ex-convicts in the colony compared to 1558 free immigrants.*

William Charles Wentworth put himself at the head of the emancipist party and launched a vigorous campaign for increased rights for the emancipists and an elected legislature. Under Wentworth's leadership the emancipist cause broadened into a local equivalent of British liberalism. The pressure for political change in New South Wales became irresistible. The British Government decided that a blended Council represented a safe compromise for a society that was divided and politically inexperienced.

Legislation in 1842 created a Legislative Council of 36 members, 12 nominated and 24 elected by the people of New South Wales. It was a key milestone, followed in 1856 by the granting of full self-government to New South Wales and the creation of the Parliament of New South Wales in the form that we all know it.

Of course, colonial political history does not tell the whole story. Tragically, the Aboriginal population declined from an estimated 750,000 in 1788 to around 200,000 a century later due to introduced diseases, dispossession and conflict with settlers.

The distinguished historian of the early colony Professor Grace Karskens said:

*... the great lesson of early Sydney is that it was not made by those in authority, the wealthy and powerful, alone... Another great lesson of early Sydney is that cities, towns, estates, farms were also shared landscapes. The Aboriginal history of Sydney has revealed the lost geography of Aboriginal places in the early town. Aboriginal heritage significance is not quarantined in prehistory...*

In the conclusion to her book *The Colony*, Professor Karskens says:

*Despite this deep unevenness in the historical landscape, and in our ways of seeing heritage, the histories of places are recoverable...*

It is my hope and intention that the commemoration of the establishment of the first Legislative Council will play a part in that process of recovery and rediscovery.

*Celebrating* 200 *years of democracy*