

Commemorating the Bicentenary of the New South Wales Legislative Council

Office of the Black Rod

Legislative Council, Parliament of New South Wales.

The Bicentenary of the NSW Legislative Council fell in 2024, marking 200 years since the Council sat for the first time in 1824 and the birth of the country's very first legislature. This significant milestone was celebrated with a range of events - including conferences, exhibitions, concerts and regional roadshows – all of which provided a chance to reflect on the past, celebrate process and imagine the future.

A PIECE OF HISTORY

John Thomas Bigge, an English judge and royal commissioner, delivered three important reports on the state of New South Wales in 1822-23 – one looking at the state of the colony, another on the judicial establishments and the third on agriculture and trade. After these reports, work started on drafting legislation to improve administration of the colony of New South Wales. This ultimately led to the New South Wales Act of 1823 being passed, effectively establishing the Legislative Council and Supreme Court of New South Wales.¹

In January 1824, the Council's first five members were appointed, with the inaugural meeting occurring at what was then Government House (now the site of the Sydney Museum), presided over by Governor Thomas Brisbane. In 1825, the Legislative Council was restructured to consist of seven members – four from the colony's newly created Executive Council and three non-Executive members.² The powers of the Council then continued to grow as membership increased, while the Governor's involvement began to diminish. By 1829 the Council had started to meet in a room of the Surgeon's Wing of the Rum Hospital, today's Parliament House. Once these deep democratic roots had been established, other historic changes

¹ D. Clune, 'The Development of Legislative Institutions in NSW 1823-1843', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 25 No. 2 Spring 2010, pp 80-89.

² Clune, *The Development of Legislative Institutions*.

followed – including the erection of a new Council Chamber in 1843, passing of the NSW Constitution Act in 1854 and development of a system of a responsible government in NSW from 1855, with a bicameral Parliament including a Legislative Assembly.³

SIGNIFICANT SEMINARS AND CONFERENCES

To mark the Bicentenary of the Legislative Council, the Parliament of NSW held a number of events, including a range of seminars and conferences that focused on the powerful stories, history and reforms that transpired the Legislative Council from its humble beginnings to its strong presence and role today.

The seminars and conferences delivered in 2023-2024 included:

- The State of the Colony: People, Place and Politics in 1823 – a two day history conference that explored key figures and events in the history of the Legislative council, early colony and Aboriginal community, with sessions delivered by various academics and engaging authors
- The Spark – a two day conference that delved into intriguing stories and fascinating figures surrounding the New South Wales Act of 1823. This event focused on the constitutional significance of the Act, the Chief Justices of the Supreme Court of NSW, the beginnings of Treasury and the development of the Audit Office’s role
- Then & Now: People, Power and Representation – a seminar chaired by the President of the NSW Legislative Council, the Hon Ben Franklin MLC, with current and former members sharing incredible stories, achievements and reflections on contributions to the Legislative Council and institution of parliamentary democracy
- Pride & Precedent: Law, Representation, Reform – a seminar focused on exploring the four decades of ground-breaking legal and social reform in the NSW Supreme Court and the Legislative Council which has transformed the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people
- Representation Matters: Culture & Identity - a seminar that explored the fascinating stories that transformed the Legislative Council to reflect the changing cultural diversity of the community in New South Wales
- Gudyarra – an important seminar, delivered in partnership with the History Council of NSW, which brought Elders of the Wiradyuri community and others together to explore

³ See Department of Legislative Council, Parliament of New South Wales, ‘Bicentenary Resources’, 2024. Accessed at <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/about/Pages/Bicentenary-Resources.aspx>.

the bicentenary of the first use of martial law against Aboriginal Peoples in New South Wales

- Through the Hourglass: Parliamentary democracy yesterday, today and tomorrow – a two day conference that retraced the past 200 years of parliamentary history and explored the vision of future democracy.

The Parliament of NSW also opened its doors to the public on the 25 August 2024, the anniversary of the Legislative Council's first ever meeting, enabling thousands of people to join celebrations in the precinct which marked the special occasion. The day commenced with a Welcome to Country and Smoking Ceremony, with a range of activities then offered throughout the day – including music performances, exhibitions, historian-led talks and chamber tours. One highlight was a re-enactment of the first sittings of the Legislative Council.

CELEBRATING WITH MUSIC AND ARTWORK

To commemorate the Bicentenary, the NSW Legislative Council also commissioned a unique music composition by the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, with the piece honouring two centuries of parliamentary governance in New South Wales, encapsulating the theme of the Bicentenary: *Reflect, Celebrate, Imagine*.

The piece of music composed consisted of three distinct and evocative moments – *The Striving Spirit, In G and Acknowledgment of Country, Gadigal*. The President, the Hon Ben Franklin MLC stated:

This composition is a testament to the creativity and talent of our young musicians, and it beautifully reflects the themes of our Bicentenary – Reflect, Celebrate, Imagine. It is a fitting tribute to our past and an inspiring vision for our future.

In addition to this, a large scale painting by Gumbaynggir/Bundjalung artist Kim Healey was commissioned, officially unveiled in the Parliament of NSW in September 2024. The Aboriginal artwork 'Ngurra Jagun' honours the connection of First Nations people with the land, waters and sky on which we all live and where Parliament meets. 'Ngurra' is a Gumbaynggir word for 'Home' or 'Shelter' and 'Jagun' is a Bundjalung word that means 'Country'. The intricate and impactful artwork has taken up permanent resident in the Parliament's Fountain Court, inspiring deep reflection on our collective past, present and future.

Separate to these important initiatives, there were Bicentenary Concerts held in the NSW Parliament's Fountain Court, attracting large crowds. These concerts enabled musicians to play a selection of pieces ranging from classical through to contemporary movements. Performances were held by the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Sydney Youth Orchestra and

Musica Viva Australia. While the Bicentenary celebrations officially ended in December 2024, concerts continued during 2025.

DEMOCRACY IN THE REGIONS

Recognising the need to involve regional communities of New South Wales in Bicentenary celebrations, the President of the Legislative Council and supporting staff also held regional roadshows, visiting Lismore, Port Macquarie, Bathurst, Batemans Bay, Armidale and Wagga Wagga to hold a public speaking competition for high school students, a youth forum and community workshops. These roadshows have continued throughout 2025, inspiring students to be part of the state's democratic future and to use their voice to make a community impact.

A ROYAL VISIT

His Majesty King Charles III visited the Parliament of NSW on Sunday, 20 October 2024, to celebrate the Bicentenary of the Legislative Council. He addressed officials, members of Parliament and distinguished guests at a celebratory luncheon, showcasing highlights from the program of events and activities commemorating the Council's Bicentenary. Addressing the gathering, His Majesty congratulated the Council on its Bicentenary and its contributions to the state's progress. His Majesty remarked:

Having been with you for your 150th anniversary, I am delighted and proud to be able to return to the Parliament of New South Wales to celebrate the occasion of your Bicentenary. This place and the people within it, have continued to uphold strong representative traditions.

The King presented the President of the Legislative Council, the Hon Ben Franklin MLC, with a gift of an hourglass, engraved with the Royal Coat of Arms and an inscription memorialising his visit.

CPA CONFERENCE

In November 2024, to finish the celebrations of the Bicentenary year, the NSW Parliament hosted the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)'s annual general conference using the excellent facilities of Sydney's International Convention Centre. The conference was attended by over 600 MPs and Clerks throughout the Commonwealth. One of the highlights was the speech by Prime Minister the Hon Anthony Albanese at the conference dinner which

reflected on the Bicentenary and its place in the Westminster system.⁴

Coda: Farewell to David Blunt AM, Former Clerk of the NSW Legislative Council

After an esteemed 35 year career in the Parliament of NSW, including nearly 14 years as Clerk of the Parliaments and Clerk of the Legislative Council, David Blunt retired in March 2025, marking the end of an era in parliamentary service. Aside from his role as Clerk and being a leading authority in parliamentary law and procedure, David was a key figure in planning and delivering the Bicentenary celebrations. He was also a significant contributor to parliamentary scholarship – being the editor of Annotated Standing Orders in New South Wales, the second edition of Legislative Council Practice and recently publishing a collection of essays on the work of the NSW Legislative Council entitled *Democracy at Work*.

In David's last week, during a parliamentary sitting, a motion was moved to acknowledge and thank the Clerk for his professionalism, hard work and commitment. Many members reflected fondly on David's career, recognising his achievements as Clerk and wishing him well in retirement. The contributions were heart felt and emotional, a fitting tribute to the legacy David has left. With David retiring, Steven Reynolds has now taken the reigns as the Clerk of the Parliaments and Clerk of the Legislative Council. Steven was previously the Deputy Clerk in the Legislative Council, bringing to the role a wealth of experience in parliamentary law and practice as well as strong leadership.

⁴ Most of the conference papers and other resources referred to in this article can be accessed via the Parliament's website - www.parliament.nsw.gov.au