

Henry A. Tardent: A story perhaps more relevant today than ever before?

Did Henry Tardent's obituary get it right? Concluding sections to “*Henry A. Tardent: How a Swiss migrant influenced the emergence of ‘Australian democracy’* (2026)

Along with his younger dependent children, Henry and his wife Hortense had in 1908 moved to live in Brisbane. Soon they built a house (named ‘Ormont Cottage’) at Wynnum with a view to later retiring there. As he continued to also build a later career of sorts in journalism (mainly), in 1914 Henry Tardent wrote some fascinating journal entries reflecting on his life in Australia. He did so thinking that he might not live much longer (he rather thought he may well be following the family tradition of Tardent men often dying by the age of 60). One such reflection bemoaned his awareness that a lack of ‘financial resources’ linked also to his ‘family responsibilities’ had (after ‘Biggenden’) generally derailed his earlier aspirations for a brilliant parliamentary career as an ALP politician. In another, he reflected on how his polymathic tendencies and ‘multiple contributions’ had likewise served to prevent his development rather of the kind of ‘specialisation’ that modern society tends to look for and better reward. But he then went on to demonstrate that he had at least achieved a certain equanimity about his life (*“I may be far from wealthy, however I’m far from feeling unfortunate. I have known love, friendship, the joy of work, and of tasks accomplished; and also the great joy of learning and understanding”*).

Of course, this was all before the very productive last stages of Tardent’s life (described above) - his influential mentoring of many writers and other artists as well as further significant contributions to founding and/or supporting local cultural and art associations, ‘multicultural’ migrant groups, and the grand Muses project that ‘harmonised’ Brisbane in the 1920s especially. This all came after his re-discovered passion for ‘freedom and democratic independence’ during WW1 - his journalism and letter-writing focused on his new-found enthusiasm for Australia’s ‘Anzac tradition. Like many other countries (but perhaps especially so), the confident ‘youthful Australia’ really had had ‘the wind taken out of its sails’ by the substantial human and financial costs of its participation in WW1 (including the ‘traumatising’ of many of those soldiers who had escaped injury or death) – that would take generations to really recover from. But a key further reason for writing his book *‘In Freedom’s Cause’* in 1923 was it seems to help Australians better understand that its ‘development to maturity’ as a new democratic country was a ‘long game’ over generations requiring not just resilience but also patience and steady progress – that its participation in ‘the great war’ had been an important (even critical) early stage in that process.

And likewise, perhaps the answer to some of the questions Henry Tardent posed to himself in 1914 (i.e. about the possible ‘legacy’ of his life as a new migrant in Australia) lay in the response of many to news of his passing. Indeed, as we have suggested above, there has perhaps been no

greater or finer exemplifier of modern Australia's pivotal historical challenge to overcome its inherited 'colonial cultural cringe' than Henry A. Tardent. In any case, the following obituary perhaps got it right about the enduring significance of Henry Tardent's life (even if 'not yet rightly understood') in Australia since arriving in Queensland in 1887:

*The funeral, which was largely attended, took place on Saturday at the Bulimba cemetery, those present including, besides the chief mourners and many intimate personal friends, the consuls of Switzerland and France, and representatives of the Authors' and Artists' Association, Royal Geographical Society, Alliance Francaise of Brisbane, various Labor organisations, different departments of the civil service, and other bodies. Numerous pressmen were also present to pay their last respects to their old colleague, the papers represented on the sad occasion including The Worker, Daily Standard, Daily Mail, Telegraph, Truth, Queensland Agricultural Journal, and Sugar Journal. **Among those gathered around the graveside were many — men of culture from our universities, men of science, men of letters, and men of affairs— who knew that the sad ceremony in which they were taking part was no ordinary one, but that the casket being committed to the earth in their presence contained the remains of one of Australia's truly great men... For Australian culture, still in its formative stage, owes a debt to Henry Tardent— its sponsor and champion, its guide, philosopher, and friend in countless ways—the extent of which is not yet rightly understood.** (our emphasis)¹ — The Worker, Sept 11, 1929, p.11 (<https://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/tardent-henry-alexis-8746>)*

2.7 Postscript: Did the Swiss-influenced safeguards in Australian democracy 'fail' on the occasion of the 1999 Australian Republic referendum (or how might this be interpreted)?

Our central focus in this book (as was requested of us by a representative for the Swiss Alliance Australia) has generally uncovered some particularly relevant details and contexts of how Tardent's initial and further ongoing advice to Sir Samuel Griffith and his concerned 'Qld group' (particularly concerning the referendum and 'double majority rule' safeguards for 'Australian democracy' into the future) was generally yet only initially embraced by the *1891 Constitutional Convention*. As indicated above, this influential advice was then developed and refined in further drafts

¹ As the editor of the *Queensland Agricultural Journal* Jack Reid also wrote in a related 'in memorium tribute' that same month: "When it is rightly understood, when Australian art, letters, science, music, and all the various forms national self-expression in their highest come into their own, Henri Tardent will be accorded a place in the history of [Australia's] development that his pioneering labours on its behalf and his unbounded faith in its future have earned for him".

Henry A. Tardent: A story perhaps more relevant today than ever before?

(especially the draft presented to the 1897 Convention), before being the focus of successful 1890s State referendums prior to the 1901 Federation enactment. On this basis Henry Tardent deserves to be recognised as one of ‘the founding fathers’ of the Australian democracy model that emerged out of all of this.

Hopefully this can be appreciated in terms of how it might be further reasonably argued that Tardent was perhaps effectively a significant ‘founding father’ also of some important related imperatives up to the end of his life potentially able to help Australia overcome the ‘colonial cultural cringe of its dominating conservative forces’ – Australian cultural nationalism, Australian multiculturalism, and even the foundational emergence of the Australian Labor Party. For Tardent was a significant pivotal contributor himself (as well as adviser to the influential early ALP leading figures of Andrew Fisher and Ted Theodore especially) in the emerging development of the ALP as a political party representing not just the ‘early labour unions’, but also the emerging Australian ‘middle-class mainstream’, the historical interplay of cultural nationalism and multiculturalism, and a reform-minded ‘intelligentsia’ with also a ‘post-colonial’ mindset to overcome Australia’s enduring ‘colonial/conservative cultural cringe’.

However, his forgotten legacy might also be further approached in terms of likewise revisiting the complex issue of how (on his advice) ‘Swiss-influenced democratic safeguards’ (also including the related Australian referendum model) were both generally and particularly embraced also in the final 1900 version of the Australian Constitution. Following the fate of the 1999 Australian Republic referendum especially, most Australians would perhaps not really know what to make of or how to interpret the significance of those ‘Swiss-influenced safeguards for Australian democracy’ into the 21st Century.

The Australian ‘nationalist party government’ of Stanley Bruce in the 1920s had already forgotten the original purposes of ‘those safeguards’ (especially the referendum requirement regarding possible amendments to the Constitution). So, they had needed to call a Royal Inquiry in 1927 to clarify this (an inquiry which Henry Tardent assisted with).² So it should be no surprise then that the ‘Australian public’ had little idea in the 1970s (and still today) why ‘those safeguards’ (and the early advice of Tardent to adapt this to assist the future independence of ‘Australian democracy’) ‘mattered’.

2 This related to how Bruce’s government had planned a 1928 referendum to ratify an agreement the previous year between the federal government and all state governments (a successful amendment of the Constitution known at the additional ‘Section 105A’). But soon after this Bruce and his government floundered on efforts to overhaul Australia’s industrial relations system (and abolish the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration) – going on to lose the 1929 election.

So it was that the 1975 Constitutional Crisis (caused by the then Governor-General acting for a foreign monarch 'deciding to sack the elected ALP government' of the then Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam) was a great shock not just to most Australians – but also to most politicians and others who thought they understood 'Australian democracy' and believed it be truly independent of 'foreign influence'. Whilst some were aware that there were 'hidden clauses' in the Constitution that made this hypothetically possible (one linked to how after the 1901 Federation Australia had 'remained part of the British empire'), this had been understood in both the UK and Australia to be generally ceremonial, mainly symbolic, and ultimately an 'unwritten convention' of the Australian Constitution enacted in 1901.

In the excitement of Australia becoming 'an independent new nation' in 1901, even Samuel Griffith and his original 'Qld group' (in addition to the various others involved in and supporting the final draft of the Constitution) had perhaps simply underestimated rather than just ignored the potential later significance and impact of a few 'contradictory hidden clauses' included in the final draft of the Constitution - or effectively added afterwards (like the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act*). The central clause that they accepted (because of the still strong 'colonial cultural cringe' at the time) was that Australia would become an independent new nation 'under the wider auspices of a foreign monarchy' located in London, the UK. It appears in retrospect that many politicians and civic leaders at the time in Australia wanted the 'reassurance' of at least symbolically remaining 'part of the British empire'. So the Constitution included the model of a 'local representative' (the governor-general) with 'emergency discretionary powers' (known as 'the reserve powers') that were never explicitly defined in 1901 because they remained 'unwritten conventions' that should never be used – and certainly not (it was generally understood) in relation to the dismissal by the Governor-General acting for a foreign power of a democratically elected Australian government.

Supposedly 'everyone' (in the UK as well as in Australia) understood that these 'unwritten conventions' were meant to be mainly symbolic and ceremonial 'discretionary powers' (and yet a potential safeguard if absolutely necessary against authoritarian, foreign-influenced or some other 'illegitimate' interference or subversion of the Australian national governance). Another more compelling reason was that if these 'powers' were ever actually enacted then this would still effectively be an 'authoritarian' act contrary to other basic democratic tenets of the Australian Constitution - and its model of 'a local independent democracy' that was adapted (using 'Swiss-influenced safeguards') to help protect the future. In any case, the events of 1975 at least helped to reveal also to 'ordinary Australians' the in-built contradictions, hidden clauses, and risks in (as well as the long under-estimated fragility of) the Constitutional model of

Henry A. Tardent: A story perhaps more relevant today than ever before?

‘Australian democracy’. The ‘average American’ today is perhaps becoming similarly aware of the related dangers of the American republican model when a dominant group works to overwhelm and disrupt the needs and interests of any or all ‘minorities’ and ‘marginal voices’.

And so, a genuine, reasonable, and widespread ‘outrage’ (also in the wider community) was unleashed by the Constitutional Crisis of 1975. Yet the larger implications of what transpired were generally misunderstood and successfully ‘distorted and misrepresented’ by the very conservative political forces that had long been accused of enduring or ongoing UK-focused ‘complicit colonialism’. This was the backdrop for how the 1975 Constitutional Crisis was just one of many factors that arguably produced a more mature and independently-inclined ‘Australia’ into the late 1980s and early 1990s. For some a significant historical ‘turning point’ was linked to the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations. Whilst for others the ‘Mabo’ High court decision in 1992 legally recognizing Indigenous land rights (giving rise also to the 1993 *Native Title Act* was an even more significant landmark.

In any case, many Australians around c1990 recognized (as Paul Keating and others did) that a further emerging ‘mainly middle-class social mainstream’ (perhaps inadvertently ‘opened up’ by the growing ‘diversity’ of various social, cultural and economic changes) had reached a critical point of ‘emerging historical maturity’ (as it might be put). This was such that the referendum for Australia to become an ‘independent republic’ (i.e. instead of continuing to maintain a dominant allegiance to both a foreign monarchy and enduring ‘colonial cultural cringe’) could have, would have, and should have (at this stage) been successfully approved.

Yet, the 1999 Australian Republic referendum ‘failed’ (i.e. the proposal to replace a constitutional allegiance to a foreign monarchy and ‘power’ with a locally independent republican framework was ‘rejected’ and ‘defeated’). So, what went wrong? And was this a failure of the ‘Swiss-influenced safeguards’ adapted for a genuinely democratic and independent model for the ‘1901 birth of the nation’ embraced long ago prior to this by Samuel Griffith on the advice of Henry Tardent?

We can now appreciate much more clearly almost thirty years later, that the 1999 Republic referendum was subsequently ‘defeated’ for a range of reasons associated with the traditional Australian public’s ‘distrust of politicians’ and its typically negative response to government-sponsored referendums (unless framed very simply, given sufficient ‘bipartisan support’, and where typical political tactics of ‘fear-mongering’ and ‘polarization’ were avoided). In this case having a self-confessed monarchist Prime Minister oversee and effectively design the process (in terms of not just the ‘complex wording’ of the referendum, but other aspects designed to apparently confuse, polarize, and stir up their ‘general distrust of politicians’) was by itself evidently sufficient to generally ensure from an early stage that the referendum was going to ‘fail’.

So, even a society mostly sympathetic to the aim of discontinuing what both locally and also in the UK was seen as a humiliating out-of-date 'relic of the past' was effectively provoked into its 'traditional resistance' to any referendums – and thus was response to a poorly-worded referendum proposal (by design) that was not simple, did not have bipartisan support, and could be 'disrupted' or undermined by undisguised polarizing and fear-mongering tactics (as has been regularly the case with Australian referendums since 1901).

There may be some truth in the claim that still today a minority group, the 'Australian monarchists' (linked to a related conservative coalition of 'anti-ALP' as well as 'anti-republican' forces) has been able to manipulate the traditional resistance of the 'mainstream Australian public' to approve referendum proposals. Yet, even so, this does not have to be (and should not be) interpreted as necessarily a 'failure' of those who fought and planned to achieve national independence in the 1890s (or ever since).

On the contrary, we would propose two related points. One is that arguably the Australian Republic Referendum result in 1999 does not really matter in the grand scheme of things – cannot by itself ultimately prevent the inevitable severing of ties one day with a British monarchy that might well be on 'its last legs' at home in the UK anyway. This is despite how it was no doubt annoying and frustrating for many Australians that the republic referendum was defeated – and likewise that this situation has had (and still does) some enduring symbolic importance for many as well.

Second, we might also be able to recognize that the '*enduring (ironic) skepticism*' held by a general Australian public and society still today 'towards politicians (and politics) in Australia' might have likewise been misinterpreted by many critics.³ That is, it might actually be an effective sign that (despite some of the other contradictions and 'hidden clauses' of the Constitution) nonetheless some of the original 'safeguards' built into the 1901 enactment of this are perhaps continuing to help protect Australian society from forces of dramatic changes within an increasingly uncertain and unstable world (even if we don't always get some of the results that we would like).⁴ Alexis De Tocqueville's concerns in the early 19th Century that

3 I am especially referring to the earlier suggestion above (in Kaufman's '*A piece of Swiss democracy down under*' article) that '*the Australian constitutional adaptation of Swiss democracy*' might be blamed for Australian rejecting more (needed) reforms over the last 'forty years'.

4 As I have elsewhere suggested in relation to Sydney Baker's study of 'Australian language-use' (which he especially compared with that of the similar 'new world' emergence of 'American English'), Australian society and culture is typically informed by a characteristic 'self-deprecatory irony' (derived from a very different experience of a European settler society in a foreign land) which is generally lacking in the American context – and more typically condescending in European modernist models of society as well as culture.

American democracy suffered major future risks of ‘the tyranny of the majority’ were not directly due to any ‘American lack of irony’ – but this is a ‘condition’ that perhaps significantly reinforces the risks (and still today also perhaps).⁵

So for related reasons, I think it is the case that it was the very ‘aspirations’ and ‘principles’ of those early selective and perhaps inadequate adaptations of ‘Swiss double majority safeguards’ (i.e. those original aims to try and protect the rights of smaller states, regions or groups against a possible future ‘tyranny of the majority’ organized by Sydney and Melbourne-based interests) that are still nonetheless ‘culturally valued’ by the local ‘civil society’ whatever Australia’s ‘formal political status’ (i.e. as a constitutional monarchy vs. a republic) – and arguably are perhaps still guiding that ‘slow but sure’ development of Australian society (and its dialogic as well as ironic ‘cultural fabric’) over a hundred years later. Perhaps the major related concern is a converse growth also in rigid, non-ironic ‘bureaucratic tendencies’ (including a related ‘political correctness’) within local, state, and federal governance (and related organizational) contexts that often frustrate the gains within civil society from any significant social and cultural ‘progress’.

I know from his various writings that Henry Tardent recognized how ‘being in the nature’ of the Swiss Alps can help to inspire the kind of patience and better appreciation of ‘the grand scheme of things’ that many similarly derive from also being in the nature of ‘the Australian bush’. Even if Australia has not yet been able to achieve greater nominal ‘democratic independence’ in and from ‘the past’ (in particular, by severing past ties to the British monarchy, and likewise developing ‘a foreign policy that is less apparently dependent on the USA’), I think that people in other countries as well as foreign governments generally are increasingly appreciating (that comparatively speaking at least) Australia is a significant, constructive and reasonably independent ‘middle power’ champion of an international ‘rules-based order’ (and related multi-lateral agreements and networks) aspiring to help prevent larger nations from dominating smaller ones. That is, it is a stable civil society (within the Asia-Pacific region especially) which likewise really does prioritize universal values and practices of peace, cooperation, and constructive engagement with other countries in an increasingly fragile and conflict-ridden uncertain world.

5 As Alexis de Tocqueville further presciently observed about ‘the rights of both the individual and minority groups’ within American democracy (and ‘democracy’ anywhere else), it is never enough that this remains or just becomes ‘an idea on paper’. Ongoing vigilance is needed to ensure also a continuing delicate balance between policy ‘checks and balances’ and a ‘reasonably healthy civil society’. The cultural as well as political challenge for all ‘democracies’ (including that of Australia) is to try and retain ‘a robust civil society’ (assuming that this has already been initially if somewhat fragilely established in the first place).

The untold story of how a Swiss migrant influenced 'Australian democracy'

And hence the importance and relevance of the 2013 *Declaration of Intent on a Strategic Dialogue* signed off by the Swiss and Australian governments that raised questions in the first place which have been addressed here (i.e. concerning Henry Tardent's possible further contribution in assisting with 'international bridges' – on top of his related significant political and also perhaps even more substantial cultural contributions to his adopted homeland whilst remaining a 'great patriot' also of his original homeland).



The Ormont Valley – the ancestral homeland of the Tardent family [photo care of the Tardent family website (<https://tardent-history.info>)]
