

CRAFTING THE NATION: THE STORY OF A BANNER, A BICENTENARY AND A BERTH IN THE BIG HOUSE OF AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY

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Thank you so much for inviting me to speak here tonight, Anne and Gerard.

I would first like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to elders past and present, and to any Indigenous people here tonight. I also acknowledge that we are gathering on stolen land and that sovereignty was never ceded.

Tonight I want to tell you a story. An Australian story.

The story begins in a land far, far away — on the other side of the planet, in London. It takes place at a time in our history that gets easily overlooked when we tell ourselves stories about ourselves: that extraordinary decade or so between Federation and World War 1, between the real birth of our nation and the oft-touted but empirically bogus one, Gallipoli.

The main protagonist in this story is not a person, but an object. Like many leading ladies in our history, this object is beautiful, valiant and overwhelmingly forgotten.

I want to tell you this story because I think it is both inherently interesting and also a cautionary tale.

PART 1

So let me take you to London in the sweltering summer of 1911.

Australian expat artist Dora Meeson Coates could not remember an English summer that had been so hot.

Fortunately, the major piece that Dora would exhibit that year was already complete. Three summers earlier, Dora later recalled, *I had designed and painted a very large banner for the Commonwealth* – a banner that, in just a few days, she would hold aloft in the event that was setting London hearts aflutter with pride and anticipation. George V would be crowned King on 22 June.

But his Coronation would not be the only pageantry to capture the British imagination that sticky northern summer of 1911.

*Saturday, June 17, 1911 will be a historic date in the annals of England, predicted the **Adelaide Register**, the procession of women ... will be the greatest ever witnessed in the history of the world.¹*

The Australian press watched eagerly. The **Geelong Advertiser** set the scene:

From the Embankment, the historic starting place of arguments — by mass, there is to wend to-day what suffragists have for months described as The Women's Great Procession, intended to be specially representative in its character of the entire womanhood of the British Empire.²

So why were Britain's women taking to the streets in their tens of thousands? Three little words sum up their motivation: Votes for Women.

One of the suffrage organisations to take part, the one Dora Meeson Coates belonged to, the Women's Freedom League, riffed on the theme: *it will be given to the people in London to witness the greatest procession every known in the world's history.³*

And this at a time when women's suffrage was, as one contemporary commentator put it, *the great world movement ... the most insistent political problem of the day ... the most significant revolution that has come over society in the first years of the 20th century.*

(Indeed Womanhood Suffrage was, at the turn of the 20th Century, what Kevin Rudd might have called ‘the great moral challenge’ of the generation.)

*The significance of the procession will be world-wide, reported the London correspondent for the ADELAIDE REGISTER, for the procession will not only be national in its character, but also Imperial and international.*⁴ Noting that Australian women were enfranchised in the coronation year of Edward VII, the journalist predicted that *the crowning glory of the Coronation year of King George V will be the emancipation of the women at the heart and centre of the Empire.*

The organisers’ prophesies of greatness came true. Forty thousand women, united in their demand for that which the British Parliament, including its current liberal government, consistently failed to grant them — the right to vote — gathered in a show of determination and strength.

The procession was four miles long, stretching from the Houses of Parliament on Westminster Embankment to the Albert Hall, where a monster rally later took place, convened by Emmeline Pankhurst. It took five hours for the full procession to pass any given point. Tens of thousands of women *walking five abreast, with pennants flying, banners held aloft, colours of every hue and shade and gradation blazing in the sun.*⁵ Cheering crowds lined London’s streets, drawn by the sheer spectacle of it all, to watch the women march, shoulder to shoulder.

And it was not only English women, but women from across the globe who marched to demonstrate an esprit de corps in which *distinction of class, creed, party, race [were] be forgotten.*⁶

Australia’s contingent in the procession was headed up by no lesser a luminary than Mrs Margaret Fisher, wife of the Australian Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher. Fisher was in England to take part in the Imperial Conference.

Australia's most famous suffrage campaigner, Vida Goldstein, was also in London, at the invitation of Mrs Pankhurst. Vida had assumed the mantle of organiser of the Australian contingent, reflecting her status as Australia's most internationally renowned suffragist. *Vida is the woman of the moment in [Britain's] Suffragette circles*, announced the Sydney **Truth**.

Australia marched at the top of the procession, along with New Zealand, in recognition of Australasia's world-leading status as democratic exemplar. In 1893, New Zealand had become the first self-governing dominion in the world to extend its franchise to women. In 1894, South Australia became the second dominion to confer the status, and went one better, giving its women, including indigenous women, both the right to vote and to stand for Parliament. In 1902, the newly federated nation of Australia made this the gold standard for the federal franchise – though all indigenous people lost their voting rights, a fact that drew scant criticism at the time.

On Saturday 17 June 1911, Vida Goldstein now proclaimed in London, *every Australasian woman, who is enfranchised in spirit, as well as in the letter of the law, will consider it her solemn duty to show her sympathy with the women of this country, who have laboured for over 50 years for the franchise.*⁷

Having won their domestic struggle to be counted, Australian women paraded their victory on the world stage in a audacious mixture of national patriotism and empire loyalty, of colonial self-assertion and imperial interdependence.

Australia's world leading status was no secret. Everybody lining the streets from the Embankment to Albert Hall knew that Australia was the first nation to give white women perfect political equality with white men: full adult suffrage, with no property qualification. *The purest type of democracy the human race has ever known*, wrote one journalist in 1903, *flourishes to-day beneath Australian skies*.

It was in recognition of this remarkable fact – that the daughters of Empire had outpaced the Mother Country - that Dora Meeson Coates had fashioned her suffrage

banner. Her banner's message, painted in shouty all caps: *Trust the Women Mother As I Have Done.*

The imagery Dora employed to convey this instruction was fashionably classical in imagery but electrifyingly impertinent in intent: Mother Britannia, draped in white, holding her sceptre, hip and head cocked, staring into the middle distance; Daughter Minerva, bearing the heraldry of the Australian Commonwealth, leaning forward, reaching out, offering guidance. It was a banner replete with allegorical effrontery, signifying that which all the world knew: that Australia was the nation which had "pioneered [women] into citizenship".⁸

No more striking method could have been devised for bringing Australasia into prominence, wrote one newspaper of Dora's banner.

The banner articulated what a proud Australian woman living in London described as *the fact of our having proved to the world our political fitness ... a fine object lesson.*

So what was the effect of this material message, this bold piece of *Commonwealth Advice* (as one newspaper called Dora's artwork)?

Well, in terms of British politics, it had little influence. Prime Minister Asquith was not moved by the roaring success of the Women's Coronation Procession and British women were no closer to achieving their democratic citizenship rights. These, we know in hindsight, would not be won until 1918, and then only in part, to propertied women over the age of thirty.

Ultimately, Dora's banner has more to say about Australia's national life than Britain's.

Part of the power of Dora's banner — why it fulfilled the function of a diplomatic missive — was the fact that it spoke not on behalf of Australia's women alone, but indeed provided the backdrop to a wider push for Australia to be taken more seriously as a sovereign nation, for Australia's voice to be heard more keenly, for her ideas to be followed more respectfully, than Mother England presently tolerated.

At the Imperial Conference, Andrew Fisher made a plea for closer consultation with the dominions on matters of defence and the wisdom and justice of social legislation pioneered in Australia. Fisher's fellow delegate, William Lyne, reminded the host nation that were she to open her mind to the Empire's common interests, the Mother of Parliaments *could derive some advantage from the experiments in legislation* made by the Australasian parliaments. Fisher and Lyne had in mind the Harvester Judgment, with its creation of a living wage, and other progressive levers of arbitration and conciliation.

Such urging — reverse colonising the landscape of political ideas — did not come out of the blue. Prior to the Imperial Conference, the Australian Parliament had already sent a message, loud and clear, that it was in the interests of imperial democracy that Britain follow Australia's lead in progressive reform measures.

On 17 November 1910, NSW Senator Arthur Rae introduced to parliament an idea that Vida Goldstein and fellow Australian suffragist Muriel Matters had been advocating for some time, given the obstinacy of Prime Minister Asquith in ceding to the demands of the British suffragettes. Why not put into official words what Dora's banner communicated in popular art? Why not pass a Senate Resolution. This is what that resolution, drafted by Vida, said:

1. That this Senate is of the opinion that the extension of the suffrage to the women of Australia for States and Commonwealth Parliaments, on the same terms as to men, has had the most beneficial results ... Because the reform has brought nothing but good, though disaster was freely prophesied, we respectfully urge that all nations enjoying representative government would be well advised in granting votes to women.

2.

The Resolution was passed by the Senate, and a similarly worded resolution was also assented by the House of Representatives, despite the squeamishness of some parliamentarians about teaching the Mother Country how to suck eggs. Brazenly bypassing the Colonial Office, the resolution was sent directly to Asquith.

In this context, Dora's banner, paraded just 7 months after the Senate Resolution, didn't simply represent Australian women. It represented Australia itself—a message from the demonstrably confident and democratically superior daughter nation.

The new wave of Australasian progressivism had come crashing on to the old world's crumbling shores.

Now whether or not Australians, individually or collectively, had built up enough moral and political momentum to turn the tide of British affairs, the effort had at the very least confirmed the young nation's self-belief in its own power and efficacy.

Remarkably, PUNCH—never one to blow the trumpet of suffragists—agreed. *There has never been a time when Australia wanted to bulk larger in the eyes of the world, it wrote in advance of Fisher's departure for London. All the partners of the Empire are to be in London, and Australia should take her place as the most advanced, the most important, the ablest of them all.*⁹

Dora's highly conspicuous banner had done a great deal to help Australia bulk large.

PART 2

But that's not the end of our story.

Walk with me now, through the corridors of Parliament House in Canberra, and I'll tell you what happens next.

Let's walk past the Great Hall, with its stunningly beautiful weaving, conceived by artist Arthur Boyd, executed by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop and designed to bring *the essence of the Australian landscape* into the heart of Australia's political life.¹⁰

Let's walk into the Members' Hall, the centre of Parliament House, under the flag pole, where the portraits of our succession of Prime Ministers line the walls. Until late last year, there were only two women represented in this Gallery: Dame Quentin Bryce and

Queen Elizabeth. Now Julia Gillard flanks the Queen, peering out, a cheeky rascal look in her eye.

If we proceed now down the narrow corridor splitting Gillard from John Howard, here the wall is adorned with Tom Roberts' 'Big Picture', officially known as *The Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cornwall and York, 9 May 1901*. Hence the shorthand — the Big Picture. The famous painting, which depicts the first sitting of the new federal parliament (in the Exhibition Buildings in Melbourne, not Canberra, which in 1901 was a sheep run, not a city) is on permanent loan from the Royal Collection. It's not easy to own your own history.¹¹

As you rounded the corner into the narrow corridor, veering left at Howard (or right at Gillard), you might have noticed a framed glass display case mounted to the wall. This item is 2.5 metres high and 1.4 metres wide. Despite its size, the tucked away positioning, not visible from the main Hall, suggests that you needn't dally in the passageway en route to the Big Picture.

Stop here, however, and you'll find a national treasure: Dora Meeson Coates' banner.

Unlike the Big Picture, it is owned by the Australian people. Representing achievements of the Australian people. And almost completely unknown to the vast majority of Australian people.

I wonder how many of you here tonight have seen it?

The story of how Meeson Coates's banner travelled from her studio in Chelsea to a corridor in Canberra is both delightful and pathetic.

As we have seen, the world's press lauded Meeson Coates's banner. It was singled out as a highlight of a singular event.

But then it disappeared. It's what happened next that forms the 'cautionary' part of this tale.

In an extensive research journey, I have found no mention or sighting of the banner for another 75 years after that hot June day in 1911.

Then, in May 1987, Australian historian, Dale Spender, then living in London, accidentally happened across it in the Fawcett Library, a specialist collection relating to British women's history, including suffrage memorabilia.

The Fawcett Library was clearing out its storerooms for renovations and unearthed Meeson Coates's artwork. Spender showed the find to curators at the Museum of London. *It is such a beautifully painted and well designed banner, a curator confirmed, unique to the Commonwealth ... a unique banner in a uniquely good condition.*¹²

Spender was thrilled.

Librarians had found the uncatalogued banner folded up, gathering dust, on top of a cupboard. Not knowing its provenance but registering the historical and commercial value of suffragette banners, they sent it to be restored.

But the banner was distinctive. Banners made for the great pre-war suffragette processions were generally embroidered. This one was painted, oil on hessian. The conservators botched the restoration, rendering *the canvas banner solid*.¹³ It could no longer be folded or rolled up, and the Library had neither room to store it nor facility to exhibit it. *We think it most appropriate that this banner should be 'going home'*, the head librarian resolved.

Spender wrote to the Commonwealth Government, making a case for the banner's 'return' to Australia. (The documentation is infused with the language of repatriation, though the object was clearly made in London and wasn't boomeranging back.)

The timing was good. Australia would be celebrating its bicentenary the following year and, as a bureaucrat in the Office for the Status of Women pointedly observed, the

Commonwealth possessed *no other item for display in Parliament House related to women's suffrage or the women's movement in Australia.*¹⁴

Indeed, subsequent *protracted negotiations* over the 'buy-back' of the banner revealed that the problem of a lack of objects or artworks relating to women was not contained to Parliament House.

The Banner Project, as it became known, *highlighted the lack of items of significance to the women's movement in Australia in national collections.* But it was not simply women's history that required documentation. Susan Ryan, then Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, noted *there are very few items available for display which record women's part in the early political process of this country. The Banner would, I believe, go some way towards filling this obvious gap.*¹⁵

So, in the second half of 1987, Spender facilitated discussions between the Fawcett Library and the Office of the Status of Women. *It is rare (unheard of!) for the library to part with such material,* Spender wrote.¹⁶

She sent a photo of the banner to the Australian Bicentennial Authority. The ABA was delighted by its design and *very excited by the prospect of bringing it to Australia.*¹⁷ Spender suggested the Commonwealth should purchase the banner, but the Office for the Status of Women thought it more appropriate for the British Government to donate the banner to Australia *as a Bicentennial gift.* A formal request was made – and denied.

If Australia wanted the banner, it would have to find the Σ 10,000 purchase price itself.¹⁸

Six months later, a convoluted deal was struck. The Women's Suffrage Banner, as it was now referred to, was purchased from the Fawcett Library by the National Women's Consultative Committee, with funds from the Australian Bicentennial Authority, brokered and managed by the Office for the Status of Women, as a bicentennial gift to the *women of Australia.*¹⁹

James Mollison, Director of the National Gallery of Australia, was particularly excited that the banner was 'coming home'. *It had been thought until now in artistic circles that the banner had been lost or destroyed, Mollison wrote.*²⁰ Meeson Coates's talent as an oil painter and portraitist was well established, but no one in the art world had viewed her most ambitious work.

But not everyone was excited by the coup. *Dear Sisters*, wrote Di Lucas of the ACT to the NWCC, *I wish to express my outrage.*

*Collusion with the ABA is collusion with invasion and genocide. I support the sovereignty of the Aboriginal people and regard the 1988 'celebrations' as an exercise in crass commercialisation and nationalism, colonialism and racism.*²¹

Sue Hird, writing for the Women Against Racism Collective, was similarly incensed. *We would like to draw your attention to the fact that by celebrating 200 years of white invasion of Australia you fail to acknowledge the aboriginal people.*²²

None of the angry sisters pointed out, however, that it was only white Australian women whose victories the banner celebrated. The Franchise Act of 1902 that give Australian women their historic democratic rights also stripped *all* indigenous Australians of their citizenship rights.

Nationalism, colonialism and racism had always been integral to the banner's history.

The banner arrived in Canberra on 12 February 1988, eighty years after it had been created in a light-filled Chelsea studio. On 8 March 1988, International Women's Day, Prime Minister Bob Hawke officiated at a *historic handover* ceremony at the Lodge.

In front of a crowd that included politicians, journalists and members of the Meeson family, Hawke unveiled the banner. In his speech, Hawke referred to Australian women's role *in the forefront of the achievement of franchise rights.*²³

The official rationale for the \$25,000 public spend was broad: the banner would *remind and inform women of their political and social history and the need for continued and renewed involvement in the political process.*

Note here that the *object lesson* that Dora's banner was reminding the **world** had now been transformed into a history lesson that only **Australian women** must heed. (Silly sheilas, forgetting how important they once were.)

After the fuss of the handover on 8 March 1988 (there was also a mob of angry female protestors outside the Lodge, raising their own anti-bicentennial placards) the banner was whisked off for conservation work at the National Gallery of Australia.

The banner was still there over a year later, when Senator Margaret Reynolds, who had been instrumental in its purchase, began to make enquiries as to the banner's whereabouts. In October 1989, the banner was located in a storage unit. No conservation work had yet been carried out.

In February 1990, the National Museum of Australia agreed to conserve the banner, but only if they could keep it for its own collection. *The banner could not be expected to survive a decade if permanently displayed at Parliament House, argued the Museum's Director. Besides, there is a risk that the importance of the banner could be easily overlooked if hung among the diverse art collections of the new Parliament House.*²⁴

More protracted negotiations. A loan agreement was finally reached. The NMA would restore the work; Parliament House would pay for the services rendered.

But the final resting place of the restored banner was always contentious. Would it be subsumed in other examples of women's craft: the tapestries and weavings? Or would it be located along side the portraits of Andrew Fisher, Deakin and Barton, Dora and Vida's contemporaries?

The architects for the new Parliament House proposed it be permanently exhibited in the Foyer to the Main Committee Room, *where it would have a close conceptual*

*relationship with the historical period of the Opening of Parliament paintings located there.*²⁵ Later advice recommended it be placed next to Tom Roberts' painting.

In the end, the final say went to the Textile Conservators who recommended that, due to lighting concerns it should be displayed on left-hand wall of the *public pause space* — that is, the corridor. The banner had finally found its home.

How to officially interpret the banner's message was always problematic.

Dale Spender's role in the banner's return to Australia was not limited to brokering its sale. In 1988, Spender was commissioned by the Office of the Status of Women to prepare an Educational Kit that could be sent to schools, women's organisations and the media. Her brief was to *explain the connections between the British and Australian [suffrage] campaigns* taking care that *the Australian campaign is presented as a direct response by the Australian women to their own circumstances and not simply as derivative upon the British movement*. In other words, the message was to nationalist.

Spender fulfilled her commission but there is no evidence that the kit Spender was contracted to write was ever printed or distributed. The story of Australian women's leadership in an international movement of radical political consequence was left to rest in a yellowing folder in the archives, abandoned like the banner itself.

When, in mid-2017, I asked the keepers of the banner at Parliament House for information on the object's provenance, they knew nothing beyond its title, creator and dimensions.²⁶

In the thirty years since it 'came home', the banner had become untethered from its remarkable story.

PART 3

So why should we be concerned about this now? It's a miracle the banner survived and is now safely ensconced at Parliament House. Isn't this enough?

Well, I don't think it is.

The story of the Trust the Women banner is not just about provenance. It's about politics.

For — as I hope I have demonstrated tonight — the story that the banner tells is the story of our nation, not just our nation's women.

And, as the Bicentennial protestors suggested in their own blinkered way, the narrative is not trouble-free.

This is the story of how the world's newest nation became a global exemplar, exporting to the world a model of democracy that was, at once, ahead of its time and perfectly of the moment.

In federation Australia, it was no longer gender, but race, which would test the limits of citizenship.

So how do we tell this story today, 117 years after Australia's women threw their indigenous sisters under the bus while they sailed off to help their 'less fortunate British sisters' in their struggle for equality?

How do we both shout — as feminists still need to do to be heard — and listen — as Indigenous Australians are so patiently, so patently, asking us all to do?

I think founding documents and defining objects are important in answering such questions.

Americans have their Constitution, Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights — known collectively as the Charters of Freedom and on public display in Washington DC.

While Australia has a written constitution, it is not fetishized in the same way.

We don't have a treaty with our first people, as New Zealand does.

We don't have a national flag free of colonial symbolism, as Canada does.

Founding documents say something about our values, our principles and what we represent, and hold to be self-evident but no one piece of paper or object can carry this weight.

Complex, multifaceted, multiracial, multicultural democracies require a trousseau of heirlooms, not the Crown Jewels.

I am convinced that the story of the banner has a patriotic, as well as a gendered, dimension. Patriotism is about finding a way to feel and express love for your country. To love your country, you must understand that you belong to it, that you are woven into its fabric, that it holds you in mind.

Indigenous educator Hayley McQuire has written recently about how she felt when she sat in her grade four history class and heard her teacher tell the students that Captain Cook discovered Australia and that the country were founded as a nation of convicts. "As an Aboriginal child sitting in that classroom", [McQuire recalls](#), "I felt erased". She felt expunged from her country's story not by a bad teacher, "but by design".

Just as educational syllabi have been used as a tool of colonisation, so the architects of memorialisation and commemoration reaffirm the values and objectives of the society of the day.

Dora Meeson's banner tells the story of the nation, not just the nation's women. The history of women's political activism is more than just the decorative ornamentation on the real story of national generation and regeneration.

In this context, the Bicentenary can be seen as an intellectual stock take of the nation's principles and aspirations. The fact that Bob Hawke made a Bicentennial gift of Dora

Meeson's Coates banner to the *women of Australia* reflects the misguided notion that women are peripheral to the past successes (and failures) of Australian democracy, rather than intrinsic to its composition and constitution.

CONCLUSION

Lest you think me a latter-day member of the shrieking sisterhood — that charming name by which Australia's suffragists were known — let me leave you with a concrete example of the effect of such marginalisation.

In 2002, the centenary of Australia's white women achieving their world-leading citizenship rights, Senator Amanda Vanstone launched a design competition to build a fitting memorial. The winning design was selected by a jury comprising former National Gallery Director Betty Churcher, director of the South Australian Art Gallery Ron Radford and Anna Waldman, head of the Australia Council's Visual Arts Board. It was appropriately massive and spectacular, reflecting the enormity of the feat that had been achieved: an 18-metre tall red steel structure, shaped as a fan with 10 rotating blades.

Vanstone had earmarked the place for the memorial: on the lawn behind Old Parliament House, in line with the steps of New Parliament House and the War Memorial. A year later, amidst controversy and secrecy, Vanstone's office — the Office for the Status of Women — announced that the contract with the artists had been cancelled. The primary objection appears to be that the chosen position was too prominent and "might possibly obscure views of the War Memorial".²⁷

One of the artists, Jennifer Turpin, lamented it was "very important as a statement about our democracy that it should be on that site – we are talking about half the population of Australia here".

I challenge you to tell me now where the subsequent memorial fountain (more like a fish pond) celebrating the centenary of women's suffrage in Australia is hidden.

We need monuments to the women who not only won monumental democratic rights for our citizens, but also fought for these liberties on the world stage, in the heat of other nations' battles, because they were aware of their profile and potency as leaders in a global movement for justice.

We need monuments to their courage, vision and tenacity — obstinacy and resolve that has without doubt benefited our nation.

We need a tangible, concrete, permanent and prominent reminder of what our nation once was — a leader, not a follower; punching above its weight in politics, not just sport — and what it could be again.

There's a lot of talk these days about tearing down statues. I don't want to tear statues down. I want to build more of them. I want our cities and our suburbs and our federal capital to build new statues to new heroes, those who have been previously discounted from our nation's story and those who can provide role models, inspiration and understanding for generations to come.

In an age of Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter, with their implied transience and superficiality, in the era of the amorphous Cloud and digital disruption that may or may not last longer than the next news cycle, I want to fill our city streets with bronze and marble and stone and wood.

I want to see our high streets transformed into new avenues of honour, venerating the women and men who pioneered our brave new democracy, the women and men who challenged the limits of that half-cocked citizenship, the women and men who are still fighting to expand the definition of what it means to belong, to count, and to have a voice in our nation today,.

Our nation is blessed with artists and craftspeople who have the creativity and the skill to render in material form the ideas, the hopes and the ambitions of our forefathers and mothers, our elders, black and white, male and female, gay and straight, past, present and emerging.

Such monuments would tell stories and start conversations about the ideas and forces that have made modern Australia, stories of colonialism and postcolonialism, of imperialism and republicanism, of genocide and assimilation, of war and of peace, of exclusion and inclusion, of alienation and belonging.

Why don't we have statues to our suffrage leaders, like the one of Emmeline Pankhurst that stands in St Peter's Square, Manchester?

Or a National Women's History Museum, as will open in the National Mall Washington DC in 2020 to celebrate the centennial of the 19th Amendment—the most significant milestone toward women's equality in American history. (It is currently a cyber museum, with over a million website visits annually.)

For my money, the first of these new monuments – the first cab off the rank in a capital investment in the intellectual rigour and cultural maturity of our nation — will be a statue to Vida Goldstein. It should sit out the front of Victoria's Parliament, the place of our first federal parliament, a place where she was both at home and in the wilderness, knocking at the door, as Tony Abbott once referred to the women who were not included in his famous one-woman cabinet.

To begin the process of raising the profile of women's representation activism in our participatory democracy, we could do worse than re-position Dora Meeson Coates' remarkable banner to a more prominent position within Parliament House, a location befitting its historical significance, a location that invites viewers to stop and look at it and digest its message, not walk on by en route to the top end of town.

The question I think is most pertinent, and with which I would like to conclude tonight, is this: how will we, as a nation, value our founding documents — the material legacy of our complicated and still contested democracy?

Will we continue to largely represent the progenitors of our nation as fallen soldiers, via our nation's most handsomely funded mausoleum of past virtues — the War Memorial

— or will we find a place in our hearts, and our federal budget, to elevate and amplify the story of the civic road to a complicated and contested nationhood?

Is it in our national benefit to continue to peddle the empirically fallacious notion that Gallipoli was the birth of the nation, or would we be better off admitting a few new heroes — and heroines — to the pantheon of nation-builders?

Might our parliamentary democracy and our civic institutions be more respected, more participatory, more representative, more reflective of the demographic composition of modern Australia, if our historic landmarks and aides de memoir more accurately represented the story of us?

And might we craft a more robust, courageous, independent nation in the future if we commit to unravelling the threads of the past?

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- ¹ *Adelaide Register*, 12 June 1911 p7
- ² Geelong Advertiser, 17 June 1911 p3
- ³ The Vote, 13 May 1911, 27.
- ⁴ *Adelaide Register*, 12 June 1911, 7.
- ⁵ The Vote 24 June 1911 110
- ⁶ The Vote 10 June 1911, 83
- ⁷ Votes for Women, 12 May 1911
- ⁸ Ackerman, 1913 vii
- ⁹ *Punch*, 27 April 1911 4. *Punch* always needed a butt for its retrograde humour, and in this case it was not the suffragists, but Fisher himself, who *Punch* regarded as a joke...a primeval, practical joke played at the expense of the whole nation.
- ¹⁰ http://www.aph.gov.au/Visit_Parliament/Art/Top_5_Treasures/Great_Hall_Tapestry
- ¹¹ Jenny Hocking, "The palace treats Australia as the colonial child not to be trusted with knowledge of its own history", *The Guardian*, 6 September 2017.
- ¹² Diane Atkinson to Dale Spender, 1 July 1987 NAA: A463 1987/2824
- ¹³ 'Women's Banner is Coming Home', *National Times*, 11 October 1987 NAA A463 1987/3770
- ¹⁴ Helen L'Orange, first Asst Sec, OSW, 3 May 1990, NAA: A463 1987/2824
- ¹⁵ Susan Ryan, 24 December 1987, NAA: A463 1987/2824
- ¹⁶ Dale Spender to Gillian Bonham, 30 June 1987 Women's Suffrage Banner Historical Research Report NAA A463 1987/3770
- ¹⁷ Gillian Bonham to Dale Spender, 8 July 1987 NAA: A463 1987/2824
- ¹⁸ Sue Brooks to Sir Peter Gaddsen, 7 July 1987 NAA: A463 1987/2824
- ¹⁹ The NWCC was an umbrella organisation representing sixteen women's associations, *more traditional women's organisations and feminists alike*. Briefing to the Prime Minister by Sue Brooks, January 1988. NAA A463 1987/3770
- ²⁰ James Mollison to Edith Hall, Appendix, Women's Suffrage Banner Historical Research Report NAA A463 1987/3770
- ²¹ Di Lucas to NWCC Banner Task Force, 5 January 1988 NAA: A463 1987/2824
- ²² Sue Heard to Edith Hall, 7 January 1988 NAA: A463 1987/2824
- ²³ Andrea Coelli, 'Historic Banner Returns', *Canberra Times*, 9 March 1988 p18
- ²⁴ Kay Dal Bon to Eileen Duhs, 13 February 1990 NAA A463 1988/3222 part 1
- ²⁵ Conservation of Australian Women's Suffrage Banner, NAA A463 1988/3222 part 1
- ²⁶ Correspondence with ??, ??, ??
- ²⁷ Geraldine O'Brien, "Huge blue over Canberra's Big Red", SMH 30 Aug 2003