

○ WIRELESS POLITICS

MARCONI AND THE PARLIAMENT AT POINT LONSDALE, 12 JULY 1906

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On 12 July 1906, representatives of Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company staged a demonstration of the new medium of wireless telegraphy across Bass Strait, between Point Lonsdale in Victoria and Devonport in Tasmania. A special train was organised from Melbourne for the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, most of the cabinet and members of the young Australian Parliament, who deferred debate that day on important industrial legislation. The event and its aftermath provided a striking illustration of the relationship between politics and communications. Political enthusiasm for the idea of new communications technology ran well ahead of the capacity to make lasting decisions about how it should be deployed.

A little over a hundred years ago, the Australian Parliament took a train from Melbourne to Queenscliff. They were there to see some magic.

It was 1906, a decade after a 22-year-old Italian had been granted a patent for 'wireless telegraphy'. (Baker 1970, 28) Experimenting at his family's home in Bologna, Guglielmo Marconi had worked out how to transmit Morse Code signals across short distances without wires. People had been doing this with wires for half a century. Much of the world was traversed by overhead, underground and submarine telegraph cables. But doing it without wires was magic.

When Marconi claimed to have transmitted a signal across the Atlantic in December 1901, many refused to believe him. They thought nature may have played tricks with his equipment, or bravado with the interpretation of his results. Although 'Mr Marconi has gradually accustomed us to the wonders of wireless telegraphy', wrote *The Times*, the achievement was still 'in some degree a shock to all preconceived notions'.¹ But the man who a few years later shared the Nobel Prize in Physics with the German wireless innovator Karl Ferdinand Braun was not deceived.² He had done it first, then tried to work out how. Human understanding of the transmission of electromagnetic energy over long distances had some catching up to do.

By 1906, when the Commonwealth Parliament took a train down the Bellarine Peninsula, the Italian was a global celebrity. Though his London-based company had still not turned a profit, it had a global network of subsidiaries and affiliates and some prestigious customers – the Royal Navy, Lloyd's and Cunard. Marconi was not going to be in Queenscliff himself, but if his system of wireless magic was coming to town, everyone wanted to be there. In his place came a representative, Captain Louis Walker, and two technical assistants. Signing himself 'Agent in Australasia for Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company Limited', Walker spent a year and a half in Australia and New Zealand trying to sell three things: the idea of wireless, the Marconi wireless system, and shares in Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company. He was to be paid a 5% commission on any business contracted.³ The immediate priorities were the international passenger steamers and point-to-point communication between the Australian mainland, New Zealand and Tasmania.⁴ Walker had very little success.

The timing seemed good. Walker arrived in Australia soon after the first *Wireless Telegraphy Act* was passed by the Commonwealth Parliament in 1905. The Canadian Parliament also passed a *Wireless Telegraphy Act* that year, as had New Zealand in 1903 and Britain in 1904. (Baker

1970, 110; Wilson 1994, 92) Under pressure from the Colonial Office, the governments of the empire responded in unison to the new technology. They asserted public control of the airwaves, but left open the possibility of licensed use of them by private operators.

The Australian Parliament's legislation was the second major use of its constitutional power over 'postal, telegraphic, telephonic and other like services'. (see LaNauze 2001) The first, the *Post and Telegraph Act 1901*, consolidated the separate state post, telegraph and telephone administrations into a single national monopoly responsible to the Postmaster-General.⁵ Some had argued a monopoly would ensure the new organisation did not resist new technologies that threatened existing investments. This might have occurred if the telephone had not been controlled by the same colonial agencies that ran the telegraphs. (Moyal 1984, 88–90) The *Wireless Telegraphy Act* appended Marconi's medium to this Commonwealth colossus. A state monopoly of the ether was argued to be 'purely a formal measure',⁶ although there was some confusion about whether or not the Commonwealth was also taking over privately-held wireless patents. Attorney-General Isaacs explained this was not the case. The intention was 'not to appropriate the invention, but to control it'.⁷

A demonstration of wireless communication across Bass Strait seemed a politically savvy pitch to the politicians of the young Australian federation. The distance, around 200 miles, was comfortably within the capacity of Marconi's technology by then. Just fifteen months after the Australian demonstration, in October 1907, the company would open a commercial wireless telegraph service across the Atlantic, using stations in Clifden, Ireland and Glace Bay, Canada. (Baker 1970, 123–128) But it was far from the first telegraphic communication across Bass Strait. Tasmania was first connected to the mainland by submarine cable in 1859, although the cable failed and a permanent link was not re-established until a decade later. (Adams 1992, 3–4; Atkinson 2001) Nor was it the first wireless demonstration in the area. A Post Office engineer established a station near the Black Lighthouse at Fort Queenscliff in 1901, exchanging messages with a ship escorting the Royal Yacht as it arrived in Port Phillip Bay, bringing the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York to open the first Australian Parliament. (site visit 5 Jan 2006)

Permission for a demonstration across Bass Strait between Point Lonsdale in Victoria and Devonport in Tasmania was granted, and Walker's two technical assistants established communication over the route in May 1906.⁸ (Walker and one of his engineers on the trip, H.M. Dowsett, later published many editions of a wireless manual.⁹) 12 July was supposed to be a sitting day for the House of Representatives, which met in Melbourne at the time. But three-quarters of the members and all but two of the Cabinet told Prime Minister Alfred Deakin they were accepting Captain Walker's invitation to attend the demonstration. So much for the new Australian parliamentary democracy. Politicians prefer a new communications infrastructure project any day.

The House adjourned for most of the day, though not without dissent. The federal member for Corangamite, the electorate adjoining Corio where the demonstration was held, complained the invitation was 'merely to attend a picnic'. There had already been 'a great many picnics' in the five-year life of the national Parliament, he said. And this one was 'a picnic to support a monopoly'—the Marconi system, which the company was trying to make the sole world wireless standard. 'Worse than that,' he said, 'it is a foreign monopoly.'¹⁰

What the member for Corangamite thought particularly offensive was that, to make way for the Marconi picnic, the Parliament had to adjourn debate on the Australian Industries Preservation Bill. This ‘Anti-Combine Bill’ was based on the United States Sherman anti-trust legislation passed in 1890, which outlawed restrictive trade practices. It was a decisive shift away from the English Common Law, which supported freedom of contract, even where the consequences of particular contracts were trade restrictive. Though eventually passed by the Australian Parliament, the legislation was interpreted so narrowly by the High Court in a case a few years later that Australia was left without effective trade practices law until the 1970s. (Walker 1967, 24–36)

So debate on the Australian Industries Preservation Bill was set aside and a specially-organised train took the politicians from Melbourne to Queenscliff station.¹¹ The Governor-General, the Prime Minister, the Governor of Victoria and the sender of Australia’s first telegraph message between Melbourne and Williamstown 52 years before were the stars of a large and luminous cast. They were greeted by 200 schoolchildren who sang the national anthem, a small price to pay for the half-day holiday they were granted.¹² Cobb and Co coaches took the party past the flags, strung between the Post Office and the Grand Hotel, to The Springs, just before Point Lonsdale.¹³ There, *The Age* thought there was ‘little for the eye to see—nothing of ostentatious display’, just two masts 162 feet high. Wires strung across the 70 yards between them provided the aerial, which was connected by cable to equipment housed in three buildings.¹⁴

The 200–300 guests were treated to a luncheon and speeches. Prime Minister Deakin joked that, since the Anti-Combine Bill had not yet passed, he had entered a conspiracy with the Victorian Attorney-General to replace the toast to the Parliament with one to the success of Marconi’s Wireless Telegraph Company. If Tennyson had not been able to foresee the scientific development the crowd had assembled to witness, the Australian poet Brunton Stephens ‘had gone very near to it’, when he spoke of Australia as ‘she whose ear thrills to the finer atmosphere’. Wireless telegraphy ‘seemed likely to transform future economic, political and warlike proceedings all over the globe’.¹⁵

Contemplating future uses of the technology, the Victorian Attorney-General favoured what he called pocket Marconi installations. These devices, he imagined, could be used to transmit photographs to the wives of politicians, letting them know where their husbands were. Prime Minister Deakin thought federal members would have nothing to fear from such mobile applications, though he was less confident about the members of the Victorian Parliament. Governor-General Northcote worried that wireless may make it harder for him to travel beyond the control of the Prime Minister.¹⁶

As the cigars arrived, the exchange of official messages between the Point Lonsdale and Devonport stations began. Deakin sent a message to the People of Tasmania: ‘Australia tirelessly pursuing her great distances by rail and wire, to-day enlists the waves of the ether in perfecting the union between her people in Tasmania and upon the mainland.’ Senator Keating also emphasised the federal theme: ‘We narrow the straits as we call across them.’ Postmaster-General Chapman – the Stephen Conroy of the day – sent a message on behalf of the mainland press to the press of Tasmania: ‘No limits can be set to the beneficent influence of journalism now that the atmosphere has, at the bidding of genius, become its servant.’ (Marconi’s 1906) Chapman had visited wireless stations overseas, including in Italy. He thought people who asked ‘Will this pay?’ needed ‘to look at the matter from something more than the commercial aspect’.¹⁷

The Tasmanian Governor did not miss his moment, reciprocating the mainland's greetings on behalf of the 'small and beautiful sister, by whom Victoria was founded'. He hoped the wireless experiment 'may accelerate the date at which this state's contribution towards cable subsidies can be diminished'. (Marconi's 1906) The Blame Game would be over soon. Across Bass Strait in Devonport, things were less rosy. There was a crowd of 2000, but it did not include ministers in the Tasmanian Government. They were stuck in the Parliament in Hobart facing a no confidence motion.¹⁸ It took forty minutes to get a reply from the Governor of Tasmania there, because of a bit of a backhaul problem. The wireless messages in Devonport had to be written down and sent by bicycle and ferry to the nearby Post Office, where they were relayed by cable to Hobart.¹⁹

The Tasmanian proposer of the toast to the Federal and State Parliaments didn't miss his moment either, using it to complain about the impact of federation. Defences had not improved; there had been no consolidation of State debts; and the nation had implemented a tariff that pleased nobody. This Tasmanian was particularly fed up with minority federal governments: he 'did not want wobblers at the present juncture'. The Master Warden of the Mersey Marine Board proposed 'Prosperity to Devonport'.²⁰

A sheaf of correspondence was sent to Captain Walker by men looking for jobs with Marconi's new medium. Many already had experience in telegraphy at the Post Office or the submarine cable companies in Australia and overseas. Some had worked in the very new art of wireless telegraphy, as ship's wireless operators or with the Royal Navy. An electricity lecturer from the Launceston Technical School wanted to be Marconi's agent. He had 'from the first taken a keen interest in the development of wireless Telegraphy as far as it has been possible on this side of the globe', but stressed he had no interest in the German Telefunken system, Marconi's main global rival, whose equipment he had borrowed for a demonstration. Another, from St James, on the railway line between Benalla and Yarrawonga, wanted to call in and 'see how the latest wonder works'. St James was just a small country town, but it was, he said, the home of Jas Carruthers, the inventor of 'Carruthers Electrical Clock'. This was 'a great thing nearly as great as Marconi's invention, but they won't put it on the market I don't know why'. A strict teetotaler from the Victorian Railways Audit Office, with nearly four years experience as a warden in the Yarra Bend Asylum, said he was 'quick at picking up anything in electricity or machinery'.²¹

Captain Walker helped to sell the idea of wireless, but failed to sell either the Marconi system or shares in Marconi's companies. The Government agreed to place £10,000 on the estimates for a chain of coastal wireless stations, although it had no clear plan for how to spend it. (Curnow 1963, 54) Poulsen's arc wireless system was attracting a lot of publicity as a rival to Marconi's spark system—'These people are all full of this man's invention and talk of nothing else', an exasperated Walker told his boss in London—and the Australian Government insisted there must be an open tender for any wireless stations it decided to establish.²² The idea of conceding the whole field of wireless to Marconi forever, or even for the duration of his patents, was troubling to governments and commercial rivals alike. As to the chances of selling Marconi shares in Australia, Walker said 'although there are a large number of rich men, they would prefer to invest their money in things they understand, and they would regard this as rather too speculative'.²³

Six months after his demonstration, it was clear that Australian communications policy had hit a roadblock. No decisions would be made about wireless in Australasia before the Colonial

Conference in London the following year. It might be useful for Walker to be there himself when the Australasian leaders he had lobbied arrived. He booked a passage home and, with his technical team, arranged for the storage of the demonstration equipment. Four years later, Marconi's new Australasian representative had to break in through the window to collect it.²⁴

Walker told the Secretary to the Postmaster-General's Department he feared Australia's delays would 'not be considered by the Public here or the outside world as in keeping with the splendid progressive traditions of the Australian Colonies'.²⁵ He was frank about the failure of his trip, but he felt the year-and-a-half was not completely wasted. New Zealand Prime Minister Sir Joseph Ward, he said, gave him a verbal promise of a five years' contract with his government. Australian Prime Minister Deakin had told him 'most emphatically that we had distinctly the prior claim for consideration from the Government, and that I might depend upon it that this would be borne in mind by the Government when they came to determining the matter'. At the very least, he said 'if I have failed to obtain a contract by my presence and work here, I have certainly made it very difficult for anybody else to, and have succeeded in keeping others away'.²⁶

Australia eventually got a national wireless network – an NWN – but not for another five years, once a Labor Government, led by a Queenslander – Andrew Fisher – was in office. The NWN was established by the government, not the private sector. The first wireless station was in Melbourne. It did not use Marconi's technology. (Amos 1936) The Italian magician responded in Australia as he did around the world,²⁷ by commencing legal action against the Commonwealth alleging infringement of his patents. Marconi's got a court order allowing it to enter the government stations to inspect the technology, but before the case could be decided, the government changed.²⁸ Joseph Cook's incoming Liberal administration made a large payment to Marconi's and the matter was settled. Then the government changed again. The Queenslander was back in charge, though not for long. Brought down from within his own party, Fisher resigned and headed off to an overseas post. (Day 2008, 347-52)

I could tell a long story about Australian telecommunications, but it may sound like a short story told many times.

NOTE

This is an expanded version of a talk given at the 75th anniversary dinner of the Telecommunications Journal of Australia in Melbourne on 2 August 2010. It draws on material held in The Marconi Archive at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford and in the Mitchell Library in Sydney.

A cairn beside the sports field near Point Lonsdale now marks the spot where the Parliament went for the wireless demonstration. One of the original Morse Code transmissions across Bass Strait was re-enacted at a centenary celebration in 2006 attended by the Governor of Victoria, local politicians, residents and schoolchildren.

ENDNOTES

¹ Leader, *The Times*, 21 Dec 1901, p. 11.

² Nobel Prize. 2010. 'The Nobel Prize in Physics 1909'. Accessed 12 August 2010. Available from: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1909/

3 Marconi Marine Board Minutes, 10 April 1908: The Marconi Archive, Bodleian Library, University
of Oxford.

4 'Memorandum for Captain Walker re Australian business', Sept 1905: HIS 109, The Marconi Archive.
5 *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900*, s. 69.

6 House of Representatives, *Debates*, 24 Aug 1905, p. 1386.

7 House of Representatives, *Debates*, 13 Sept 1905, p. 2243.

8 Dowsett to Walker, 'Report on the establishment of communication between Pt. Lonsdale, Victoria
and East Devonport, Tasmania, 10 May 1906', 14 May 1906: HIS 109, The Marconi Archive.

9 See for example Dowsett, Harry Melville; Walker, Louis Edward Quintrell. *Handbook of Technical
Instruction for Wireless Telegraphists*: 1942/44. 7th edn. London: Iliffe; 1945. 8th edn. London: Iliffe;
1950. 9th edn. London: Iliffe for Wireless World.

10 House of Representatives, *Debates*, 11 July 1906, pp. 1262-3.

11 'Wireless Telegraphy', *Geelong Advertiser*, 13 July 1906: 4.

12 'Wireless Telegraphy', *The Argus*, 13 July 1906: 4.

13 'Queenscliff Visited by Two Governors', *Queenscliff Sentinel*, 13 July 1906: 2.

14 'Wireless Telegraphy', *The Age*, 13 July 1906: 5.

15 'Wireless Telegraphy', *The Argus*, 13 July 1906: 4; 'Wireless Telegraphy', *The Age*, 13 July 1906: 5.

16 'Wireless Telegraphy', *The Argus*, 13 July 1906: 4; 'Wireless Telegraphy', *The Age*, 13 July 1906: 5.

17 'Wireless Telegraphy', *The Age*, 13 July 1906: 5.

18 'Wireless Telegraphy. Successfully Installed', *Launceston Examiner*", 13 July 1906: 6; 'Wireless
Telegraphy. Between Victoria and Tasmania', *Hobart Mercury*, 13 July 1906: 5.

19 'Wireless Telegraphy', *The Age*, 13 July 1906: 5.

20 'Wireless Telegraphy. Successfully Installed'. *Launceston Examiner*. 13 July 1906: 6.

21 Applications for employment with Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company in Australia and New
Zealand: HIS 109, The Marconi Archive.

22 Walker to Cuthbert Hall, 6 Mar 1907: HIS 109, The Marconi Archive. Poulsen was granted two
Australian patents for improvements in receivers in October and December 1905 (nos 4432 and
4814), and a patent for improvements in transmission in May 1906 (no 6034): Spruson to Australasian
Wireless Ltd/Telefunken, 23 Aug 1911, 1 Dec 1911, 23 Jan 1912; Walsh to Australasian Wireless
Ltd, 12 April 1911: Mitchell Library MSS 6275 Box 19 f. 10.

23 Walker to Cuthbert Hall, 20 Feb 1907: HIS 109, The Marconi Archive.

24 Fisk to MWT Co, 9 Jan 1912: Mitchell Library MSS 6275 Box 18 f. 5.

25 Walker to Robert T. Scott, Secretary PMG's Department, 14 March 1907: HIS 109, The Marconi
Archive.

26 Walker to Cuthbert Hall, 6 Mar 1907: HIS 109; Marconi Marine Board Minutes, 25 June 1907: The
Marconi Archive.

27 *Marconi and [MWTCo] v. British Radio-Telegraph and Telephone Company (Limited)* (1911) 27 TLR
274 (3 March 1911); Patent, Design and Trademark Cases. vol. XXVIII no. 10, p. 181 (26 April
1911); *The Times*, 22 Feb 1911, p. 24 [the 'Parker Judgment'].

28 *Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company v The Commonwealth [No. 2]* (1913) 16 CLR 178. A stay
of the order was later granted, pending appeal to the Privy Council: *MWTCo v The Commonwealth
[No. 3]* (1913) 16 CLR 384.

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