John Forrest: Architect and Founder of Modern Western Australia

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There is no better summation of John Forrest's unique 53-year record of public service than that of Professor Frank Crowley, Forrest's biographer:

Right Honourable Sir John Forrest, Baron Forrest of Forrèt in Scotland and of Bunbury in Western Australia; Privy Councillor; Grand Cross of St Michael and St George; Honorary Doctor of Laws; Fellow of the Royal Geographical, Geological and the Linnaean Societies of Britain; Honorary Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of Italy and of the Imperial Geographical Societies of Vienna and St. Petersburg; Chevalier of the Order of the Crown of Italy et cetera, et cetera.

Member ex officio of the Legislative Council 1883-1890 and Member of the Legislative Assembly for Bunbury 1890-1901 in the legislature of Western Australia and Member of the House of Representatives for Swan 1901-1918 in the parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia.

Sometime Surveyor-General, Commissioner of Crown Lands, Premier, Colonial Treasurer, and Colonial Secretary of Western Australia; Postmaster-General, Minister for Defence, Minister for Home Affairs, Treasurer and Acting Prime Minister of Australia.

Born Picton, near Bunbury August 22, 1847, he died at sea September 2, 1918.

Most other men would have been content with having risen to the top of any one these three closely connected yet distinct careers. But on three separate occasions Forrest proved to be the only man capable of overcoming the unique challenges of first surveying and exploring Western Australia, then of successfully leading the newly independent colony of Western Australia as premier during the turbulent days of the 1890s gold-rushes, and finally, as one of its most experienced members, helping to found the fledgling Australian federal government as a minister in four portfolios.

Forrest’s success in life owed a great deal to the example set by his Scottish parents and their industry. His parents were people who, prompted by the prospect of bettering themselves, saw their future in Western Australia as one of building on solid foundations and not resting content with only what they had. Forrest’s upbringing threw him and his family into the vicissitudes of carving out a living from virgin bush. These pioneering experiences gave added meaning to his having been the first Western Australia born to occupy high public office in state and federal politics, and the first Australian-born commoner to be elevated to the peerage.

The fourth child and third son of ten children, John inherited from his millwright and engineer father’s skills, his easy handling of arithmetic, as well as his ability to measure accurately, and to record and plan. Similarly, like his younger brother Alexander (b. 1849), he must also have learned from his father the importance of book keeping and the proper handling of money.

Forrest, like so many country-born Australians, was, from the very beginning, essentially a bushman for whom the Australian outback and the worlds of pioneer and explorer were second nature. There can be few state and federal politicians, in the history of Australia who can match Forrest’s first-hand knowledge and experience of the Australian environment and of its geography. Unfortunately, his geographical skills were more apparent to overseas geographers and geographical, botanical and geological scientific societies than to his fellow, mainly urban-based, Australians.

His bush upbringing drew him into surveying; first as a humble chainman, hauling heavy Gunter chains, camping out and sleeping rough as he assisted survey work in the Bunbury district. His work was so satisfactory that he was appointed in December 1865 to the Survey Department under the legendary Surveyor-General, J S Roe. He was then nineteen years of age and the first Western Australian born and trained land surveyor. He was given a permanent position in the following year.

Forrest’s career horizon and character development blossomed as he advanced beyond the humdrum chores of aligning roads and sub-dividing land into the higher flights of triangulation. He soon became one of Australia’s most proficient land navigators and mapmakers: skills which, when combined with his natural abilities of observation and leadership, were to make him one of Australia’s greatest explorers whose exploits never lost a man. As a geographer he had an uncanny ability to draw inferences from the evidence around him and from them to draw conclusions laid down in plain, easy to understand, English. He had a phenomenal memory and could remember places, things, and people decades after his first encounter. As he rose higher in the Survey Department his ability instantly to recall names of people he had met years before proved of inestimable value. These skills he developed further as he went about his later life as an administrator-cum-politician.

Without Forrest’s contribution to triangulation, the mapping of Western Australia would have remained nothing more than a set of unconnected and piecemeal surveys. His superior navigational and mapmaking skills were well illustrated by the extraordinary success of each of three major journeys of exploration under his leadership. The first, a deep penetration of the interior conducted in 1869 in search of the remains of Leichhardt and his party, gave Forrest an experience and a taste for exploration. A year later, he was instructed to lead an expedition to retrace Eyre’s 1841
track from the opposite direction from Kojonup eastward to the head of the Spencer Gulf, and thence to Adelaide. Although not entirely an original route, Forrest’s 1870 expedition brought back all the necessary detail and topographical information for the laying of the first transcontinental telegraph line a few years later. It also confirmed the whereabouts of the eastern limits of pastoral settlement on the Western Australian side of the border with South Australia.

Forrest’s greatest achievement was his 1874 west to east journey leading an expedition exploring the desert country between the upper Murchison and the Adelaide-Darwin telegraph line: which he then followed south to Adelaide. The desert section was plagued by shortages of water. His route took him close to present-day Warburton. As a trained professional Forrest belongs to that unromantic band of Western Australian highly professional surveyor-explorers whose honour role includes that old war-horse and founder of surveying, Septimus Roe, R Austin, the brothers Frank and Augustus Gregory, C C Hunt, as well as Forrest’s brother, Alexander. Their lasting contributions to the settlement of Australia are largely unacknowledged outside of Western Australia where the fruitless but more romantic journeys of men such as Burke and Wills attract far more attention than they deserve. Indeed, it is the very absence of drama in the conduct of Western Australian expeditions that explains why their leaders, and especially John Forrest, never became part of Australia’s exploration mythology as did, taking the extreme example, Burke and Wills.

Forrest, in common with all Western Australian explorers of the time, accomplished all his missions on foot and horseback, which were quite unsuited to travel in desert country where the gaps between watering points were long and uncertain. To emphasise this point we need only refer to the privations suffered by Colonel Warburton’s camel-mounted party the previous year on its east-to-west journey across Western Australia on a line of march some 300 km north of Forrest’s 1874 route. Although Warburton’s camels could, in theory travel for up to ten days without water, his party—which came from South Australia—was nevertheless often desperately short of water. This makes Forrest’s use of horses along a very similar line of country an even greater achievement: especially when one takes into account the fact that whereas Warburton lost fifteen out of his original seventeen camels in his dash across the continent, Forrest lost only six of his eighteen horses. To add to his achievement, Forrest brought to the world the first scientific account of the desert interior of Australia.2

The 1874 expedition’s success owed a great deal to Forrest’s foresight in including as members of his party Aboriginal trackers Tommy Windich (who had been with Forrest on his 1870 expedition) and Tommy Pierre. Their close working association with the two Forrest brothers in scouting for water ahead of the main party more than once saved the expedition from failure, or possibly death. Besides his brother Alex, and Windich and Pierre, the party also included police constable, James Kennedy, and farrier, James Sweeney.3

Although Forrest’s attitude toward Aboriginal people, dating back to his early days in the bush, was essentially paternal Aboriginals were, to him, real people. Deeply committed as he was to the development of Western Australia, he neither ignored nor lightly brushed aside Aboriginal beliefs and attachment to the land. For example, on his 1875 visit to England he addressed the Anthropological Institute on the desert Aborigines and many years later he wrote and presented a paper on “The Marriage Laws of the Aborigines of North-West Australia”. In 1887, Forrest supported, for the best of motives, the proposal to establish an independent Aboriginal Protection Board.4 What is more, and considering what it is now politically correct to say about Aborigines in custody, Forrest had this to say in 1883 when he was, for a time, Superintendent of Convicts.

If Hon. Members only knew the trouble and trials these natives had to go through and the hardships they had to endure, even before they were sentenced at all, they would probably be inclined to look at this matter in a different light. They would be hunted like dogs, in the first instance, and when at last captured, being pounced upon in the middle of the night, they were chained by the neck and dragged about perhaps for weeks together, before they came to be tried, with their chains cutting into their flesh, and tied together to a tree at night. When the poor wretches at last reached the place they had to be tried at, they were, if convicted, sent on board ship, still in chains, and kept until they eventually reached their destination, Rottnest, where they were kept perhaps for ten or twelve years in misery and possibly ill-health. I think we owed these natives more than repression.5

To which he added, ‘Colonisation would go on with very slow strides if we had no natives to assist us.’ This reminder was especially true of the pastoral districts where there was widespread ill treatment of Aborigines. As premier he had to take a wider view that seems to have been, on occasion, at odds with his sympathy for individual Aborigines.6

Although it would be wrong to imagine that Forrest was some sort of unrequited idealist as far as Aborigines were concerned, he was, as his treatment of non-Aboriginal prisoners confirms, a man of compassion and sensitivity toward those whom most of his contemporaries would have shunned. Nevertheless, despite his abiding affection for individual Aborigines, his views about Aboriginal people as a whole were not entirely different from those of his time.

In 1883, Forrest was appointed to the position of Surveyor-General and Commissioner for Crown Lands in succession to Malcolm Fraser. He was
Forrest had to overcome two disadvantages. First, that he was colonial-bom in an age when all high colonial officials were London appointments with British qualifications. The fact that the British Colonial Secretary approved Forrest's appointment indicates that London was not above appointing West Australians to high positions. The second disadvantage was that Forrest was not only a rough-hewn country boy, but also, in a society that placed much importance on family origins, one who lacked family connections. Forrest seems to have used both these disadvantages as spurs to greater effort.

That he was a man of no mean talent he had already proved by his skilful and brilliantly executed journeys of exploration and discovery. As to his supposed social disadvantage, it must have been obvious to more than one highborn daughter of Western Australia’s petty gentry that a man of such proven abilities was a good ‘catch’. This helps explain how on February 26, 1873, eight years prior to his appointment, Margaret Elvire Hamersley had come to marry John Forrest in St George’s Cathedral, Perth. Although childless, the marriage proved to be an extremely successful partnership.

Forrest’s elevation to Surveyor-General and Commissioner of Crown Lands made him, ex-officio, a member of the Legislative Council, which, before responsible government, was a part-elected and a part-appointed legislative body. By convention official members were duty-bound to support the governor as their chief executive: official members included the Commissioner for Railways, the Attorney-General, and the Director of Public Works.

Forrest not only proved himself a good administrator but, in bringing to bear his experience in organising and leading expeditions, as well as his knowledge about Western Australia and its people, he quickly demonstrated that he was absolutely the right man to choose for high office. As Surveyor-General and Commissioner of Crown Lands Forrest had immense powers. As Crowley put it, ‘He could generally act, if he had a mind to it, as the Land Czar of Western Australia: an attitude of mind that still pervades the higher ranks of the Western Australian public service’. In executive council he was largely responsible for advising the Governor on a wide range of matters affecting land and, in Legislative Council, for drafting and presenting land and mining regulations.

As hundreds if not thousands of documents carrying his comments and signature bear witness Forrest was punctilious in dealing with matters raised by individuals and an observant and critical reader and commentator on department business: especially with regard to the expenditure of public money. In short, Forrest was establishing himself as a brilliant administrator, whose skills were later to see their greatest flowering during his service as a federal minister helping to establish the fledgling Commonwealth Government on firm administrative foundations.

**John Forrest**

As Crowley noted:

His style of writing in minutes, memos and letters was direct, straightforward, and lucid. He was always sensitive if his authority or decision were called into question by his superiors — he only had two, the Colonial Secretary [Malcolm Fraser, his former chief] and the Governor [who Forrest tended to regard as a visitor to the colony]—and he was quick to reply in detail to anything which he regarded as a slight or an aspersion.

The latter trait led him into controversy with Governor Broome when, within a few months of Forrest’s appointment as a permanent member of Executive Council, Forrest criticised the governor’s autocratic style of government at a time when governors ruled rather than reigned as they did after self-government in 1890.

Throughout his life, Forrest was an Australian patriot who had a deeply abiding and passionate faith in Western Australia and its attachment to the British Empire and its imperial mission. For him, Britain, especially in its parliamentary traditions of government and public service, set standards that he did his best to emulate. He combined a love of Australia, and especially of Western Australia, with the conviction that life and living in Australia was given meaning by its membership of the British family of nations. He was a true Child of Empire. Indeed, Forrest’s elevation to the peerage was as much a recognition by the British establishment that he was ‘one of us’ as it was an honour in itself.

Nevertheless, he was a realist who saw things as they were in Western Australia. His native-born nationalism helped, at least partly, to explain why he was prepared to criticise Governor Broome, an English expatriate, in his indictment of the governor’s ‘political character and the style of his administration’.

Forrest’s acceptance as a member of the imperial elite was begun during the course of two visits to England. The first visit, in 1875 while he was on leave, was a great personal success. He was not only cordially welcomed by officials of the Colonial Office, as one would expect, but also invited to a luncheon at the Foreign Office as a guest of the Countess of Derby. He was presented to Queen Victoria at St James Palace and made such an impression on the Earl of Carnarvon, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, that the Earl extended Forrest’s leave and ordered that he be ‘granted 5 000 acres of Crown land in any district of the colony’ on his return. The Earl also recommended the bestowal on Forrest of the special title of Deputy Surveyor-General at an increased salary. While in England, Forrest gave an account of his three expeditions to the Royal Geographical Society which, two years later, awarded him the society’s much-prized Gold Medal in recognition of these exploits. He also
addressed the Anthropological Institute in London on the subject of Aborigines of Western and central Australia.\textsuperscript{12}

Forrest's second visit in 1887 visit was a more formal affair as, apart from taking leave, he was sent, accompanied by Septimus Burt, to represent Western Australia at the first Colonial Conference in London. Accompanied by his wife, he also travelled in the company of three leading Australian politicians—John Downer of South Australia, Samuel Griffith of Queensland and Alfred Deakin, then a minister in the Victorian government. All three were elected members of parliaments from long established self-governing colonies: a privilege that Western Australia had yet to enjoy.\textsuperscript{13}

As well as taking part in Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee festivities, the Forrests visited the Hamersley's ancestral home near Oxford—both of which must have increased their imperial pride.\textsuperscript{14} In an address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science on Geographical Work in Western Australia 1870-1887, Forrest drew attention to the possibilities the Kimberley region presented for scientific research.\textsuperscript{15}

The Forrests decided to return to Australia across the Pacific Ocean via the United States and Canada. There they spent some weeks sightseeing. Their journey across the continent brought to John's attention the importance of constructing railways ahead of settlement to spearhead and direct the opening up of new lands for agricultural development and settlement by European migrants. This was to make a deep and lasting impression on him. As they travelled by train across hundreds of miles of barren, uninhabited country separating western from eastern Canada, the federalist in Forrest also began to appreciate the role the transcontinental railway played in bringing British Columbia and the Prairie Provinces into the Canadian confederation. Years later, he made the construction of an east-west transcontinental railroad a central condition of his support for a federal Australia. He was also impressed by the American free-homestead farm policy as a means to achieving 'closer settlement.'

The idea that Western Australia desperately needed settlers was deeply ingrained on the minds of all West Australians and, over the years, various schemes had been tried to attract settlers the most desperate of which was the reception of some 9 000 exiled British convicts between 1850 and 1868. Forrest's North American experiences did much to help him synthesise ideas he had already partially developed about making Western Australia more attractive to settlers.\textsuperscript{16}

As an Australian explorer of great renown, and one of the very few with any pretence to having a scientific background, Forrest took geography beyond the contemporary view that its main concern was with exploration and discovery by advocating a new geography devoted to the scientific study of what had already been explored aimed at formulating principles which could be put to good practical use. This helps explain why, as a geographer with an international standing, Forrest was invited by the newly formed Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science to be the inaugural president of Section E, Geography, for its meeting in Sydney in the centennial year, 1888 where he clearly enunciated these new ideas at a time when most people thought of geography as tales of discovery and exploration.\textsuperscript{17}

The idea that Forrest was fundamentally a geographer might seem contrary to received opinion, but the fact that he was acknowledged as a geographer by first rank national and international geographical and scientific societies gives us more than an inkling as to his mindset. Forrest's skill as a field observer and his unrivalled abilities as a navigator and mapmaker place him among the best, if not the very best, of Australian explorers. His powers of observation as a geographer enabled him to think holistically about Western Australia. This helps explain his extraordinary ability to think and to plan comprehensively. In all his major speeches in parliament he seems always to have grasped a bigger picture than was immediately apparent to those around him: a trait which must have, on occasion, infuriated lesser men.

The near universal failure among Australian commentators to recognise that Forrest was essentially a geographer and, in particular, one who thought like a geographer (in contrast to other ways of thinking), helps to explain why he can never be neatly pigeonholed as a politician; and why, as popular as he was in federal parliament, he was not, at bottom, 'one of them.'\textsuperscript{18}

In his invited 1888 presidential address to Section E, Geography, at the Inaugural meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, Forrest made an extraordinary tour of Australia's geographical horizon as a continent 'thirty-three times the size of England and Scotland'.\textsuperscript{19} He began by predicting that because the age of interior exploration was over it was now time scientists devoted themselves to the scientific study of Australia. He castigated colonial governments for the paucity of their support for scientific exploration, which, he argued, should now be used to reveal the true riches of Australia. Fifty years ahead of his time, he put the case for nationally organised geological, botanical, and zoological surveys.\textsuperscript{20} He wanted each of Australia's main drainage basins investigated with special reference to irrigation and water conservation. He also expressed the opinion that the existing colonial boundaries, drawn along lines of longitude and latitude, were no longer appropriate to the country's needs.

He used his North America experience to advocate federation. As he put it, 'One of the charms of visiting the United States, or Canada, is the feeling that you are under one flag and one law.' He may have been right with regard to their flags, but neither Canada nor the United States were then, and nor are they now, entirely under one law. Forrest was particularly impressed by the way in which the transcontinental railroads
of the United States were really the backbones of a rail network so dense to his eye that when he first saw a railroad map he thought it a road map. Forrest said that geography has a great work before it:

not perhaps so much in adventurous travel or in the discovery of great natural features, but in scientific and in minute and careful observation. The outside superficial work has to a certain extent accomplished, but the real scientific investigation remains to be completed.21

His experience as a member of the executive council and the knowledge he had gained of Western Australia, through his journeys of exploration, was a training for political office matched by none of his contemporaries nor by any of his successors. Consequently, when he became premier Forrest was no empty vessel waiting to be filled by an ideological commitment to a party line, or by pet schemes and ideas already harboured by departmental bureaucrats, or by populist policies, but a man who, like the Duke of Wellington, had the ability to see ‘... what was on the other side of the hill’. Even such lauded schemes as the Fremantle Harbour works and the Coolgardie Water Scheme, so brilliantly executed under C Y O’Connor’s leadership, were ideas which can be traced back to his 1890 election speech.

Politically, Forrest, as a former member of the Legislative Council, was one of the few members of the newly created Legislative Assembly with any previous experience of parliamentary style debates and the drawing up of legislation and knowledge and experience of how government departments actually worked.

As self-government loomed closer—a struggle in which he, as a civil servant, could not publicly engage—it became increasingly obvious to him, as well as to many other members of the power elite, that his experience as an appointed legislator, when combined with his skills as a practiced administrator and his standing as a national and international figure, made him admirably suited to be the colony’s first premier. According to Crowley, Forrest had long harboured an ambition to lead the colony as its first premier. Lawyer, and experienced member of the old Executive Council, Stephen Parker, had seemed for a time to be a likely contender but, probably sensing a lack of support, he withdrew from the contest leaving the way open to Forrest.22 Western Australia owes much to Stephen Parker for clearing the way for Forrest to become premier. Indeed, the more one contemplates what would have happened had Forrest not been premier and treasurer during the crucial 1890s, the worse it gets. To take just two examples, first, O’Connor would not have been appointed as Chief Engineer, and second, parliament would almost certainly not have agreed to such a bold policy of public infrastructure loans under anyone else than Forrest. This would have been resisted especially by those members who believed everything could be left to private enterprise.

Forrest’s presidential style of government worked hand-in-hand with his way of life. The Forrests lived in Hay Street, a stone’s throw from the Legislative Council and only a minute or two away from the four pillars of the establishment: the Weld Club, Government House, the Treasury Building, wherein he had his office as Surveyor-General, and the Anglican Cathedral. Their house, called the Bungalow, became both a gathering place and a weekend for a wide circle of Forrest and Hamersley family friends and colleagues.23 The Forrests were, therefore, already very much in the centre of things long before John entered politics where his earlier quarrel with Governor Broome and his autocratic ways before self-government gave Forrest experience in the cut and thrust of personality-based political conflict.

The passage of the Constitution Enabling Bill on 21 July 1890 granting Western Australia self-government came at the most propitious moment since the colony’s foundation in 1829. During the 1880s, Forrest, as an official member of the Legislative Council and surveyor-general and commissioner for lands, was directly involved in laying the groundwork for change involving the construction of the first railways—principally the completion of a privately financed 243 mile (394 km) land grant railway from Beverley to Albany and the opening up of land for settlement either side of what became known as the Great Southern; the formulation of more progressive land regulations; the appointment of an agricultural commissioner for lands; the appointment of an agricultural commissioner to report on agricultural development; and the discovery of gold in the Kimberley, the Pilbarra and the Yilgarn (Southern Cross). As a consequence, the colony’s population rose between 1881 and 1891 from 29,708 to 49,782—double the 1871 population of 24,785.

All that had occurred in Forrest’s life before the granting of self government was by way of prelude and an apprenticeship which ended, on 21 November 1890 when, as part of his election campaign for the new Legislative Assembly, he set out a visionary plan for the future development of the whole of Western Australia to the electors of Bunbury at the Mechanics Institute in Bunbury.24

Seamlessly combining a moving and a masterly depiction of Western Australia, as it was in grim times past, with a prophesy of what it could be in bright times future, Forrest called upon his audience to commit themselves to new ways of thinking about themselves and their future.25 He reminded them that, following independence, they were ‘no longer tenants, but are [now] freeholders of this immense territory.’ And, as freeholders they must now ask themselves, ‘how are we to use the great privileges; the great opportunities’ of this great gift. As West Australians he believed they had only two alternatives:
One course was to follow on and work in the same manner as they had been working in the colony, relying upon their own capital and upon their own industry. ... Probably there would be a little more prosperity... and possibly during the next twenty years they might do somewhat better than during the twenty years preceding.

Or, as Forrest then explained, they could:

... boldly make an effort to improve the state of which we are freeholders and should do our best to make it attractive—to make it a place worthy of coming to and to do all in our power to improve our property, in the same way as if it were our own personal estate... I regard the public estate in the same light as if it were my own, and the question is whether I should try to develop it with my own resources or borrow money to improve it. I see very little difference between that and being intrusted [sic] with the management of the public estate.... The colony is now known to the world. Thousands are looking at it and it is necessary that the colony should make known that we have something to offer those whose eyes are cast towards us.

Although the discoveries of gold at Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie were still more than two years away, Forrest's eyes were already clearly focused upon devising a means by which to hold, as permanent settlers, the thousands of people who were bound to flock to Western Australia to participate in what he knew would be a short-lived mining boom. To this end, he urged upon his audience the need for a long-term agricultural development programme as an alternative source of employment. However, well aware of a widespread antipathy toward 'othersiders'—those who came from eastern Australia—he reminded his audience that 'because the miner is a consumer of all the products of the agriculturalist, you ought not, therefore, come into conflict but to work together hand in hand and thus be productive of great good to the colony.'

With his experience of the desert interior, he warned that water shortages were going to be 'a drawback'. And, unaware of the extent to which he was committing himself, he declared 'it will be the duty of the new Government to try and provide a water supply for the Greenbushes tin fields, on the road to the fields and on the gold fields.'

Forrest’s views on the future of mining were remarkably prophetic. Closely involved as Commissioner of Crown Lands with the as yet unpublished findings of a royal commission into agriculture, he drew attention to the importance of regarding mining and agriculture development as being complementary to one another. Since the colony had never been self-sufficient in foodstuffs, Forrest proposed that Western Australia begin by aiming for self-sufficiency by replacing imported with locally produced foodstuffs, by introducing more modern family farming techniques and expanding the extent of cultivated land from its current meagre 73,000 acres. This would require large scale land clearing by government contractors and survey prior to sale under conditional purchase; the breaking up by sale or by requiring owners to cultivate large areas of land locked up in big, unproductive, estates; agricultural railway construction; and the provision of agricultural credit. To this end he promised a systematic government-backed program of agricultural development, including the adoption of the North American free land grant system.

Focusing on the need for extensive network of railways to open up new agricultural land, Forrest drew attention to the need for improved port facilities to access overseas markets. Albany had long been the point of connection between Western Australia and the rest of the world during the days of the sailing ship. But now, with particular reference to mail steamers using the direct route via the Suez Canal between Europe and Australia, Forrest advocated building a new harbour at Fremantle to serve Perth and the inland agricultural settlements along the Great Southern Railway.

Although a strong supporter of federation, for which the first faltering steps had already been taken earlier that year in Melbourne at the first Australian Federation Conference, Forrest took a west coast continental view. And, taking as his example British Columbia on the west coast of Canada but separated from it by the Rocky Mountain barrier, he advocated 'that the terms upon which Western Australia should enter the federation should be a railway communication between the colony and Adelaide, and extensive harbour works at Fremantle, which would then be the first port of call from Europe (for ships en route to the eastern colonies) and would be for Australia the same as Bombay to India'. He used the same idea of unity in support of expanding Western Australia's government-owned telegraph system into new territories as they developed as a means of unifying the governance of the entire colony.

Forrest had an opportunity to test his views at the first Federal Convention in Sydney in 1891 as the senior of seven Western Australian representatives: but alas, with little luck. Indeed, as with almost everything he tried to achieve for Western Australia during the 1891-1898 convention phase and the subsequent premiers’ conferences, his pleas for special recognition were largely ignored. Nevertheless, he never gave up the idea of a federally supported east-west transcontinental railway. He finally succeeded in 1907 when the commonwealth parliament approved a bill to survey a route between Kalgoorlie and Augusta. The railway was not completed until 1917. Forrest’s view of federation was essentially that of a federalist who knew about and took into account the geographical factor. Whereas, from the very first, the eastern federalists, led by Sir Henry Parkes, ‘Father of Federation’, by constantly stressing Australia’s supposed uniformity, conveniently ignored the very real differences between the eastern and western sides of the continent. A key plank in Parkes’ uniformity argument was that all the colonies were so prosperous...
that 'we are now in a condition that we may be contrasted favourably with some of the wealthiest States in the world'. In saying that he obviously either knew nothing of Western Australia's poverty-stricken condition. Again, in claiming that 'we had made wonderful progress during the last generation' Parkes seems not to have appreciated it was that very same progress in the eastern colonies over two (not one) generations that had left Western Australia so comparatively poor that, for example, it accepted British convicts from 1850 to 1868.33

Bearing in mind that Parkes was making a key-note opening address setting the scene for federating a continent, his presumption of uniformity went even further when, ignoring the vast tract of waterless desert between the eastern colonies and Western Australia, he tied his economic argument to the notion that 'Nature has created no obstacle...there is no lion [!]...and no natural difficulty before us' in Australia. The only argument of uniformity in his favour was that, by pre-empting the French occupation of New Holland in 1827, the British had ensured the extension of English language-culture right across the continent.34

Forrest's wide-ranging speech included a brief reference to the colony's newly instituted constitution which he thought, would be premature to change. This ensured that electoral power remained in the hands of sandgroper West Australians—at least for the time being. The concentration of the franchised population in the pre-1890 urban settlements was to be expected, but with 73% of those qualified to vote for the newly created Legislative Assembly, the major settlements, dominated by Perth and Fremantle, were allotted only fourteen out of its membership of 30 seats. By contrast, rural constituencies with less than 100 persons on their electoral rolls were given eight seats, with Murchison, the smallest constituency, having only 24 electors. The fact that the largest concentrations of gold miners were gathered in two of the least populated constituencies soon became the cause of much dispute between the old Swan River settlers who, having only just secured their independence from London, were not disposed to hand it over to 'othersiders' from Victoria, whose scorn for West Australians for their backwardness and conservative ways was only too evident.35

Forrest dwelt at length on Western Australia's increasing creditworthiness and the role cheap British loan money could play in rapidly bringing to fruition a well-thought-out programme of public works.

Forrest's skill was not only in fashioning a coherent set of interconnected proposals from seemingly disparate elements, but also, by boldly suggesting using loan funds raised on the booming London money market, to provide the only means by which a colony of less than 50,000 people could modernise itself.36 It is, therefore, no wonder that Western Australia under Forrest earned the title 'Loan Land'.37 The adoption of his policy enabled, in a little more than ten years, the construction of public buildings, roads, bridges, railways, telegraph systems, and, above all, the Fremantle Harbour Works and the Goldfields Water Scheme using cheap London loans.

Towards the end of his long address Forrest made it abundantly clear that his objective was to change Western Australia and its ways forever when he said:

'I am sure that we have only one object in view—the welfare and prosperity of the colony. The day of small things is passing away—I trust forever... The gloom of the early days is passing away, the dark cloud is being dispelled, and a brighter day is, I trust, about to dawn upon us. In that future I trust you will always remember with honour the names of those early colonists, the founders of the district.38

Although at the time neither Coolgardie nor Kalgoorlie gold had been discovered, Forrest was basing his blueprint on the presumption that gold, already found in small quantities, would be found in large enough quantities to attract sufficient capital and labour—both of which the colony had been desperately short of ever since its foundation in 1829—to convert Western Australia from a sleepy backwater living in genteel poverty to a thriving, prosperous modern state open to the world.

The process of change began almost immediately after the discovery of gold at Coolgardie in 1892, when tens of thousands men began to pour into Western Australia from economically depressed Victoria and South Australia and then, as news spread, from the British Isles. A year later, it became a flood with the discovery of far superior reserves of gold at Kalgoorlie's Golden Mile. In the peak year of 1896, 55,215 immigrants arrived: almost 9,000 persons more than the total population of Western Australia (46,290) six years earlier. In the ten years between 1894 and 1903, migrants increased Western Australia's population by 139,000 persons.39

In contrast to his boldly conceived and executed program of public works, Forrest's approach to social, economic, and political change was far more cautious. According to Professor Crowley, Forrest delayed taking any action on contentious issues until public pressure had built up sufficiently to allow him to introduce and secure widespread support for measures which, otherwise, would have been resisted by the more conservative members of his largely West Australian dominated cabinet. By the use of this tactic, Forrest was able to achieve an impressive legislative record: albeit at the price of being regarded by many as an arch-conservative.

So great was the influx of newcomers, it was inevitable, as he himself had already forecast in his Bunbury speech, that these and the increased prosperity brought by gold would sweep away many of the old ways and old attitudes. One of the consequences of having to use foreign investment completely to finance what was literally an industrial revolution meant that
there were no large, locally-owned mines. Consequently, there were no West Australian gold-mining magnates, no grand gold-mining family show- houses, but instead 'canvas towns' clustered around the mines whose habitations consisted of canvas, calico or hessian covered wooden-framed accommodation. Those who were fortunate to make any money out of gold generally used it to leave Western Australia for better climes.\(^{46}\)

To gauge the extent of the changes wrought during Forrest's tenure as premier we need only compare the number of pages in the Western Australian yearbook for 1891, a mere 144 pages, with the 1283 pages for 1902-4 year book: a nine-fold increase over the period.

Having achieved virtually all that he had set out to do in 1890 and more besides, it must have become increasingly obvious to a man of his character, experience and foresight that his time as premier was coming to an end.\(^{41}\) Indeed, Forrest was becoming increasingly unhappy with the political consequences of many of the changes he had helped bring about. Something of an autocrat, he was at heart an old-fashioned, non-party parliamentary democrat.\(^{42}\) This seeming contradiction can be explained by his preference for a parliament composed of independent members representing constituencies and not parties. He was particularly opposed to the idea of members belonging to disciplined political parties. Consequently, the fledgling Labor Party's system of caucusing and block voting—which he regarded as thoroughly undemocratic—reinforced a dislike of socialism that grew stronger with the passing years. Nevertheless, he supported the public (state or municipal) ownership of services and facilities as a means of avoiding the abuses of power commonly associated with private monopolies, and, especially with regard to ports and railways, as a means of both directing development and earning a profit where it could be earned. Consequently, it was Forrest who, although a strong believer in private enterprise, deliberately widened the scope of Western Australia's pre-existing benevolent, colonial-style, state-financed and controlled infrastructure to include railways, ports, harbours, health, education, and water supply as well as creating the range and size of government departments necessary to run a modern state.

While premier, Forrest did not form a political party. His election and re-election to office came from what Crowley describes as Forrest's 'large and amorphous group of supporters'. These included his school chums, members of the Weld Club, his old surveying associates, his wife's as well as his own relatives, business and professional men, and, of course his brother, Alex, whose finger was alleged to be in every political and economic pie.\(^{43}\)

As Treasurer (his correct title), Forrest's perambulations around Western Australia were akin to a medieval royal progress, with petitioners waiting anxiously to tell him of their woes, and even more anxiously waiting to hear how much financial support he was about to give a worthy local cause. Frederick Vosper, the founder-editor of the *Sunday Times*, thought Forrest had 'become a royal personage' and that "'when touring had a placard on his coat tails declaring 'Ask and ye shall receive'."\(^{44}\)

Forrest was, above all, an administrator and master of the files. According to Crowley, Forrest could have as many as 150 files on his desk and would regularly bring as many as 100 to a cabinet meeting.\(^{45}\) As one who has combed through many of the same ministerial files, I can vouch for the care with which Forrest read and responded, generally in a few words, to the matter in question. He was adept in passing on to the relevant minister anything that came his way by correspondence asking for a favour or dispensation of some kind or other. He was particularly careful to do nothing that would in anyway harm the colony's credit worthiness: especially with regard to the London money market.

Forrest was undoubtedly the architect of modern Western Australia, but it was his 1891 appointment of O'Connor as Engineer-in-Chief that gave him a builder capable of turning vision into reality. Indeed, without Forrest's support and Connor's genius as an engineer, Western Australia's great public works programmes would not have been built as well and effectively as they were. The Fremantle Harbour and Goldfields Water Supply Scheme is their joint memorial, but between them they were responsible for a host of lesser works comprising railways, bridges, public buildings and the like, that now lie scattered throughout Western Australia.

Forrest's foresight lay in realising that the gold rush would have failed Western Australia as a lever for change had the government left matters to private enterprise and market forces as advocated by George Leake, his parliamentary rival. To succeed, Forrest had to plan in advance to provide the means to hold in Western Australia the labour and capital it had attracted after the expected gold rushes had run their course. To Forrest that meant opening up the inland with railways, organising a system of land settlement and, by concentrating development on Perth and Fremantle, ensuring that future growth would not be stifled by a wide and uneconomic scattering of services. Indeed, for all the glory due to O'Connor for its design and construction, the port of Fremantle would never have been the success it turned out to be if Forrest had not been prepared to push it against the claims of Albany, once the colony's premier port, and those of Esperance, Western Australia's nearest port to the eastern colonies which most of the eastern Goldfields miners still regarded as home and from where mine supplies and machinery originated.

Albany, Esperance and the Eastern Goldfields, however, did not share Forrest's wider view that what was for the good long-term good of Western Australia as a whole would be good for them: because it plainly was not. Spurred on by their respective newspaper editorials, and with the aid of certain South Australian politicians, they began to agitate for separation either as part of neighbouring South Australia or as a new state. The deterioration of relations between Forrest and the goldfields at this time was exacerbated by the fact that easily won alluvial gold was fast
running out. Thousands of increasingly desperate alluvial miners were involved in the riots of 1898 and 1899. The lesser-known riot of November 1899, incited by firebrand editorials in the Kalgoorlie Miner, had more than a whiff of insurrection about it. Indeed, had not cooler heads prevailed, the miners with their modern high-velocity repeating rifles and high explosives could have made the 1854 Eureka Stockade affair look like a minor affray.46

Forrest operated in days before the establishment of disciplined, ideologically-driven political parties and at a time when parliamentary debates were deliberative and members spoke to the issue, and not for the party. Although Forrest had his supporters, he could not always depend on having a ready-made majority. Even Forrest's brother, Alexander, would vote against him if it suited his purpose. Other members of parliament considered themselves to be 'free lances' and beholden to no one. Indeed, during Forrest's premiership, there was a greater separation between executive and legislative powers than at any time since.

Nevertheless, by the help of 'ministerials'—members who could be relied upon to support the government often merely because they wanted a settled future and not for party-political reasons—Forrest was generally able to get his way. Walter Hartwell James, a leading 'free lance' member of parliament, during a debate on the development of the Goldfields in November 1894 pleaded on behalf of those who believed that matters should be decided by deliberative rather than party-line debates when he said:

I think the time is past for us to stand forward and advocate party government—a system of contradiction. I did hope that a Government having to face only an Opposition of free lances would not inflict upon us the great evil of party government—and it is a matter of sincere regret to me, when nearly all the writers who deal with this question of party government condemn the system, to find that our Premier, who has it in his power to wipe it out, is doing his best to encourage the party system of government. If it were not so, what reason is there to make this a party resolution tonight?—Why cannot we fight out this question without dragging up the Ministerial marionettes to vote one way or the other?

James, who was criticising the government for having sent out a three-line whip to its supporters, went on to say:

I cannot help expressing my regret now, when the Premier has a chance of abolishing party government in this colony, and of carrying out a system that is approved by all the leading writers on Constitutional questions, he persists in copying the old standards by simply drawing up his Ministerial majority and thereby doing his best to drive the Opposition into a concrete body by force of circumstances. I do hope that the Premier will consider this during the recess for the purpose of abolishing party government.47

Alas, Forrest was, like most Australian politicians to this day, wedded to the English parliamentary or Westminster system of government whereby the autocratic powers of the monarch are exercised by an executive which, when parliament is divided into government and opposition, is effectively in control of the legislative as well as the executive arms of government because it can rely on the support of the party members: hence James' reference to them as 'marionettes'.

Because Forrest never converted a parliamentary majority into an organised parliamentary party, and as the overwhelming majority of members of parliament were, at that time, constituency based, his power base was really a loose alliance rather than a disciplined party. It was not perhaps surprising that, as a member of federal parliament, he was wont loudly to complain against the Labor Party's system of caucusing and pledging. He believed that anyone who subscribed to these were 'dumb driven cattle' and little better than 'a cypher, a cog, a political drone'.48

However, James's 1894 warning to Forrest that he was drawing the 'Opposition into a concrete body by force of circumstances' went unheeded. Three years later, in 1897, an organised opposition led by George Leake, Forrest's most serious rival, began to emerge. Its members included defectors from the government benches. James, true to his principles, retained his independence by sitting on the cross bench.49

Forrest's decision to resign the premiership of Western Australia in 1900—he left parliament in the December—must have been influenced by his realisation that he had accomplished practically all he had set out to do in 1890. And, in the process of modernising Western Australia he had helped create a new breed of men and women whose ideas were contrary to his own. This applied especially to Labor Party men from the goldfields, as well as men, who, like the goldfielders, were eagerly waiting their chance to throw out Forrest's so-called 'Perthmantlebury' oligarchy.50

Leaving neither political heirs nor an organised political party, replacing Forrest was not that easy. In the year following Forrest's departure, George Throssell, George Leake, A E Morgans and Leake for a second time, in quick succession, formed short-lived governments. Some stability was restored, however, after Walter James's appointment to the premiership in July 1902. Since then, and beginning with the first Labor government in 1904, Western Australia has been governed by organised political parties either alone or in coalition.

As a skilled and experienced administrator-cum-founder, Forrest's move into federal politics presented him with a new challenge worthy of his talents and his considerable experience in founding the new federal government. He was also, by then, a national figure having taken part as a premier and delegate in the 1890s constitutional debates where he became
personally acquainted with most of Australia's senior politicians before federation. As the member for Swan, Forrest remained a member of the federal parliament until his death in 1918. He was, therefore, a member of the federal parliament longer than he had been of the Western Australian parliament. According to Crowley, Forrest's vision for Australia was less developmental and more as an outpost of Britain and a key element in an empire which then included most of Africa, much of the Malay Peninsula, and all of India. Forrest's occupancy of the ministerial offices of Post-Master General, Defence, Home Affairs and Treasurer, were perhaps more a measure of his skill as an administrator than of his standing as a politician. This may explain why his peers never made him prime minister. Of his previous commitments to public works, only Forrest's devotion to the cause of an east-west transcontinental railroad remained unabated. The railway's completion in the year before his death vindicated 30 years of struggle to convince those who would not accept that an east-west transcontinental railway was an essential ingredient in confirming that the new federation was indeed a continental nation: as were already the federations of Canada and the United States of America. It must have given both him and his wife particular pleasure to undertake, in their own country, their second rail-borne trans-continental journey 30 years after their first crossing of North America.

If, on the one hand, we look back from Forrest's visionary speech of November 21 1890 to Western Australia's first founding under Captain Stirling in 1829, we see nothing but 60 years of penny-pinching and genteel poverty marked, more often than not, by hardship and despondency. After 60 years of struggle, the colony still had less than 50 000 inhabitants. If, on the other hand we look forward from 1890 to 1950, we see not only a new country with more than ten times its 1890s population, but the realisation of Forrest's vision of 60 years on such a sweeping scale that we may not only claim him to be Western Australia's second founder, but also, her greatest son.

Endnotes

1 I have relied heavily on Frank (F K) Crowley's biography of Forrest, Forrest 1847-1918: v. 1, 1847-91: Apprenticeship to Premiership, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Qld, 1971. The projected second volume was never published. Instead, a new and revised biography incorporating material from the first volume was published under the title Big John Forrest 1947-1918: A Founding Father of the Commonwealth of Australia, University of Western Australian Press, (hereafter UWAP) Nedlands, 2000. This too has proved especially valuable in understanding Forrest's second career as a federal politician and one of the founders of the federal executive.
botanists and geographers who, at the time, opposed his work as being premature.
21 Forrest, 1889, p. 353.
22 Crowley, 2000, pp. 77-93 gives a full account of how this came about. Had self-government come in 1880 instead of 1890, that is before a prospect of a bright future based on gold had come about, Forrest might then have had to give way to one of the members of the social establishment such as S H Parker or Septimus Burt.
23 In those days, St George's Terrace was Western Australia's Whitehall, Fleet Street and Club-land rolled into one.
24 Forrest was returned unopposed.
26 The *West Australian*, 22 November 1890. All quotations, which in the original were in indirect speech, have been changed to the first person. Another account of this speech was published on the same day by the *Daily News*.
27 West Australians had been hoping ever since the New South Wales and Victorian discoveries in the 1850s that payable quantities of gold would be found locally. See Martyn and Audrey Webb, 1993, Chapter 1 for an account of the period before the first discoveries of payable gold at the short-lived Halls Creek rush in 1886.
28 The Royal Commission into Agriculture was appointed by Governor Broome in 1887. Its report was published in 1891. Observers coming to Western Australia during the 1890s were appalled at the state of its agriculture and quality of its livestock.
29 The North American system was based upon migrants paying their way to a free grant of land, whereas the Australian system was based upon government-assisted or free passage to settlers prepared to buy land. The success of the North American system was related to the fact that there was a linkage between shipping and railroad companies and public and private landowners.
30 Sailing ships reached Australia after having rounded the Cape of Good Hope following the Southern Ocean westerly winds. This made Albany an easy and obvious landfall for sailing vessels, most of which were en route for the more populated eastern colonies. Detouring to Fremantle would have been both costly and time consuming. With the cutting of the Suez Canal and introduction of the steam ship Fremantle was no longer off the beaten track.
31 The first federal conference was attended by 13 members two from each of the colonial parliaments, including New Zealand, with the exception of Western Australia which sent only one, Sir James G Lee Steere. As a public servant Forrest was ineligible to attend.
32 The South Australians had, as their ambition, a similarly funded north-south transcontinental railway.
35 Echoes of this disparity are still to be heard from supporters of the one vote one value movement. At the time, the argument centred upon the clash of two different approaches. For the newcomers, many of whom came from Victoria where a Miner’s Right automatically conferred upon the owner the right to vote, there was a strong sense of discrimination: whereas, the for West Australians, most of whom lived in the coastal districts, gold miners and prospectors were ‘birds of passage’ and would soon be gone.
36 So short was capital in Western Australia that financing the Southern Cross mines in the 1890s exhausted what little local capital there was. Never again were West Australians to be more than very minor players in the development of their own resources. This still applies.
37 The importance of government-backed loans was that they encouraged private investors to make far larger investments on the goldfields, in deep-mining ventures, and mining infrastructure as well as in the Perth metropolitan area. The London stock market ‘Westralia Craze’ between 1893 and 1904 raised a nominal capital of £145,928,320, Martyn and Audrey Webb, 1993, p. 265 where the craze is fully explored in Chapter 9.
38 WA, 22 November 1890.
39 Population data from Malcolm A C Fraser, *Western Australian Yearbook for 1902-04*, Govt. Printer, Perth, 1906. There was a two-way movement of people. In the ten years between 1894 and 1903, 340,000 persons arrived in Western Australia and 183,000 moved back. This was a grand total of more than 500,000 movements. According to Fraser (1906), reliable records were only kept after 1893. These show that between 1893 and 1904 there was an excess of immigration over emigration of 1,139,131 persons.
40 The only exception was the Coolgardie or Eastern Goldfields Water Scheme. This was not completed until after his resignation. Had he stayed on as premier his presence might have saved O’Connor from being hounded to his death. See Martyn Webb, *Death of Hero: the Strange Suicide of Charles Yelverton O’Connor*, *Early Days*, 11:1 1995, pp. 81-111.
41 This elitist approach to democracy, that is, democracy as a parliamentary democracy existing inside parliament rather than outside among the mass of the people, helps explain why Forrest seemed less perturbed about electoral mal-apportionment than others. As Michael Bentley explains, Politics Without Democracy 1815-1914, Fontana Press, 1996, this was how the British parliament operated during the nineteenth century.
42 Crowley, 1971, p. 474.
43 ibid.
44 Crowley, 2000, pp. 234-235.
For a full account of these riots and of separation movement as seen from Kalgoorlie, see Martyn and Audrey Webb, 1993, and especially Chapters 12, 13 and 14. Despite all the romance attached to alluvial miners and those who toiled as 'dry-blowers' their actual production of gold was miniscule compared with shaft-mined gold. However, a man had only to find one ounce a week to survive quite comfortably on the thought that he might do better next week. Because dry-blowing was labour intensive, the number of men involved was disproportionately large compared to production. Between 1897, when accurate data were first collected, and 1903, the peak total gold production year, only 215,115 ounces of alluvial gold was reported as against 11,446,762 ounces of gold from ore, i.e. deep mined. That is, less than two per cent and even if we double the amount recorded to account for under-reporting it is still less than five per cent of the total.

Parliamentary Debates, 1894, pp. 1604-1606.

Crowley, 1971, p. 730.

For a detailed exposition of how party politics emerged in Western Australia, see B K De Garis, 'Self-Government and the Evolution of Party Politics 1871-1911,' in C T Stannage, 1981. The author may think I am too generous with regard to Forrest but my reading of practically every debate that had anything to do with the goldfields confirms my view that while Forrest may have had what were then known as 'ministerials,' the parliamentary debates then were far more deliberative and government far more 'responsible' than is the case today. For a brief but informative biography of Walter James see Lyall Hunt, 'Sir Walter James: The Social Reformer,' in Lyall Hunt, ed, Westralian Portraits, UWAP, Perth, 1979.

Perth, Fremantle, Bunbury (Perthmantlebury).