

FEDERATION REVISITED

Long long ago, before the coming of the white man to our shores we lived in peace and harmony with our neighbours. Grazing on the rolling plains and majestic mountain ranges, drinking deeply from the great rivers and tranquil billabongs. My cousins, the winged ones scoured the pristine landscape in their thousands, chattering idly with one another as they flew by. Ours was a timeless land unchanged in all its virgin beauty, but that was long ago, before the twilight of this present darkness.

Old Man Emu was the king of beasts in those days, no one knew why he had been chosen to rule over us, it had always been so-from the beginning of time. Perhaps it was because he was so tall and imposing, or maybe for his swift passage across the desert plains. For it seemed to be that not even the wind could outrun Old Man Emu. We, the animals accepted his wise rule, bringing our territorial disputes and day to day troubles to him for his wise judgments. It was true he was known to be harsh, but he was always fair. Yes, Old Man Emu was the wisest of us all.

But with the coming of the white skinned ones came the great troubles, like the roaring winds and whirly whirlies they scattered us. The great forests which had been our home from time immemorial were cut down to make way for their cities and farms. The pale skinned ones hunted us mercilessly, set traps, and poisoned us till we were too scared to move-lest the terror of his thunder sticks find us.

Alas, the killing was not all he brought with him-he also introduced his animals, strange beasts which baaed, mooed, and cackled. The furry little ones with the big ears were the most numerous by far, for they ran wild and free just as we did. Like a bushfire, they spread all over the land, driving away the kangaroos, wallabies, and wombats. Even Old Man Emu's relatives went hungry for the first time any of us could remember.

Old Man Emu however, through all of the troubles remained curiously silent, and when he did speak, it was to urge us to do nothing. Lest the white invaders fell upon us and slaughtered us all. So it was that we, the indigenous animals of this Great Southern land began to grumble amongst ourselves.

Why was it that Emu did nothing to protect us?

Could he not see what was happening to us? Or was he so used to his unique position of privilege that he was no longer aware of our needs? Were we not capable and able to take care of ourselves? And who was it that appointed Emu to be the judge of us all?

The rumblings of discontent eventually reached the ears of Old Man Emu. The angry rebellious talk saddened him, and he sagely suggested that perhaps the animals should convene for a grand council-in order to decide our future.

Such councils were not unusual, we had often met together to map out our strategies, but tonight's council was going to be the council to end all councils.....

The Old Man looked to be as imposing as ever as he ascended the Rock. His feathers blowing fitfully in the wind that was gusting in from the interior. He gazed longingly and lovingly around about him at the assembled multitudes. Old Man Emu had spent much time in thoughtful contemplation, and so, much to the annoyance of the Marsupial Lords he had invited the Ferals. There was much grumbling about this state of affairs. The Possums in particular, were careful to keep their young away from the feral dogs and cats, the foxes were especially suspect.

"It has come to my attention," the Old Man began in his best speaking voice that he normally reserved for solemn occasions. "That there are those among you who doubt that I am capable of leading you as I have always done."

At this statement there were murmurs of disapproval, Kookaburra laughed so raucously that everyone turned round to stare at him.

"I have pondered deeply on these matters," the Old Man went on to elaborate. "And I have decided that we will borrow an idea that has come own to us from our enemies, the white skinned ones."

"What can they possibly have that we could use," Kangaroo snorted haughtily, Emu ignored the biting comment and continued.

"Recently. The white skinned ones adopted a form of government they called Democracy. It

seems that not so long ago, they broke away from their homeland and became the Federated States of Australia. They have this place called a Parliament where elected members who represent the people, gather to discuss their laws along with all the various problems that arise from time to time.”

He paused for effect.....

“What I am proposing to you is this. That all of you select from amongst yourselves, those who are most sympathetic to your various needs, and that you cast your votes for them just as our enemies do. The candidate with the most votes becomes the Prime Minister. He must then form a government from other members of his party, let them be your rulers, if that is what you so desire.”

All the animals were amazed at his words of wisdom. Even Kookaburra who normally laughed at anything was silent.

We decided amongst ourselves that three months from now we would meet to cast our votes. The animal who collected the most votes would become Prime Minister. In appreciation however to Old Man Emu for all his hard work over the years, we decided to make him the Governor General-just in case things went wrong.

The Marsupial Lords saw right away that they were in the minority. They stood a good chance of losing the election when faced with the Feral Animals of Australia, the F.A.A.

Not to mention the Working Animals Democratic Union; who were called W.A.D.U, who consisted mainly of domesticated animals. They felt genuinely exploited by man and ostracized by the creatures of the wild. It was Kangaroo who hit upon the novel idea.

“We will amalgamate with the Native Bird Party and form a coalition, then we will have the numbers to win a majority.”

And so it came to be, that when the last vote was counted the M.N.B.P had an overwhelming majority. It was a proud moment indeed when Kangaroo who was nicknamed 'Big Red,' stood upon the Rock and accepted his appointment at a swearing in a ceremony conducted by Old Man Emu. The F.A.A were mortified and many saw it as a catastrophe of national significance, for all knew that the Marsupial Lords were not sympathetic to the plight of the new immigrants the Ferals. Big Red however smiled benevolently upon them all as he made his opening speech.

“Friends and loyal citizens of Australia, we all have our place here, for there is room for all, whether great or small, native born or foreign born. We have plenty of room to spare so let us share what we have with each other. For we are a young nation with boundless opportunities for all.”

At this stirring speech, all the animals cheered. Big Red stepped down from the Rock and made plans to convene the first Parliament. We all believed him, even the F.A.A and W.A.D.U murmured contentedly. But there was one other matter to decide, and that was the administration of government, who was going to pay?

The elected members of the M.N.B.P insisted that as a matter of respect they be paid for all their hard work and service. Added to this of course, were the vast numbers of workers required to run our new democracy. It was Old Man Emu who saved the day yet again. If this was a true egalitarian society, then let all the animals bring in a share of the food they gathered and then there would be plenty for everyone. The elected government operating through its various agencies and departments, could then dole out food and manage our resources. This was unanimously agreed upon and so it began, our great day of freedom, we celebrated long into the night and for many days afterward. Euphoria swept over the land and even Kookaburra admitted that he had been wrong to mock the Old Man. But that was in the beginning...

Season followed season just as always, although things were different, for now we had a democracy. Every three years we gathered to cast our votes for a new government, solemnly putting our paw prints on pieces of pre-marked bark. The party who polled the most votes would then take the reins of government. We began to have diplomatic relations with other nations overseas. Like the Great Eagle from America and the Lion known as Britannia.

But there were subtle differences beginning to appear, although at first we failed to notice them. Like the notion that the Dingo was not a proper citizen, having been brought in by our other enemies, the black skinned ones. The Dingo was banished to the far Northern wastes where no one wanted to go anyway, or confined to the outskirts of our settlements where it was rumoured, he would steal our young and our food. Other things began happening too. The Marsupial Lords

owned vast tracts of land, that they began leasing out to the rest of us at vastly inflated prices. Not only that, they also sold pieces of the country to the Lion and the Eagle, even the Tiger and the Dragon from Asia began moving in on us. The Marsupials said it was all in the name of national interest. But there were those among us who noticed that their pouches were getting fatter and fatter with each succeeding year. They lorded it over us with a paternalism that made us feel small and insignificant. The Rabbit being so numerous, was especially singled for unfair exploitation. He became a cheap form of labor, exploited by the Marsupial Lords. Rabbits became transient workers, moving from one farm to the next seeking better grazing. The Marsupial Lords often praised the industrious nature of Rabbit, but they made sure all the same that he would never attain to the reins of power.

The F.A.A championed the causes not only of Rabbit, but also the Sheep, Cattle, Feral Pigs, and even Chickens. Their arguments in session around the Rock were so persuasive, that even Big Red was forced to back down to the tide of public opinion. His attempts to pass laws that were discriminatory were curtailed.

So furious was he at this state of affairs that he sought to ban the F.A.A, or at least to limit its power in opposition. The working animals under the auspices of W.A.D.U began a series of nationwide rolling strikes, giving the portion of their produce normally reserved for their fellow animals to man.

The F.A.A supported W.A.D.U, after all, they were Ferals weren't they? To further add to Big Red's woes they even suggested that Dingo be granted full citizenship rights. The Marsupial Lords all said that such an idea was preposterous, everyone knew Dingo was an uneducated savage. Big Red eventually had to back down from his belligerent stance, and although it was many years before Dingo was officially recognised, the die had been cast.

So proficient were the Ferals, that the F.A.A managed to win a few terms in government. But their terms were short lived, the older more traditional parts of the country tended to favour the M.N.B.P for wealth was on their side. But things were changing slowly. Dingo was finally granted full citizenship rights in our Democracy, and although no one could undo the wrongs that had been done to him, at least he had voting rights like the rest of us.

It was shortly after this monumental event that the F.A.A, under the leadership of the Water Buffalo, gained control of the country, even promising land rights for Dingo. After all, he was an indigenous animal wasn't he? And yet he had fewer rights than those who had come as migrants to the Great Southern land. The cattle identified with Water Buffalo because he was similar in appearance to them, many of the Ferals also looked up to him.

He championed the causes of the oppressed not only here, but also overseas. He set about making changes to the country that upset the Marsupial Lords in their castles of grass. They raged against the fact that a Feral now lorded it over them, and so the Son of Big Red sought to have him removed by blocking the supply of Bills on the Upper Rock. With the F.A.A brought to a standstill the M.N.B.P took their cause to Old Man Emu, it was only with great reluctance that he agreed to sack the government.

The violent protest that engulfed the country nearly destroyed us. Water Buffalo lobbied long and hard, but it was to no avail the odds had been stacked against him.

Many accused the Great Eagle of meddling in our affairs, for it was well known that Buffalo was distrustful of Eagle. He had favored Tiger, which had made the Marsupial Lords uneasy, even though they admitted that Tiger was becoming very wealthy. The country was still gripped by the fears that Tiger would descend upon us from the North and devour us.

Hungry years followed and there was great want in the land, many of us cried out for relief, just as our fathers and fore-fathers had done. The M.N.B.P held firmly onto the reins of power, promising us things would get better after the next election, but afterwards forgetting all that they had said.

Their days were numbered though. Kookaburra took charge of the F.A.A and to everyone's surprise he won the election. We all loved Kookaburra because he made us laugh. Although none of us trusted his Treasurer, the surly bad tempered Feral Pig. We all thought that now the F.A.A were in power that things would surely change for the better.

How wrong could we be?

For the F.A.A had grown fat and lazy, they deserted their traditional power base with W.A.D.U, gaining new allies in the supporters of the Marsupial Lords who were the big business animals. The Ferals became the new silvertails, Kookaburra's snarling Treasurer who was called Razorback kept everyone at bay. His tax burdens grew even heavier and heavier than Son of Big Red's, till we could take no more. Razorback then turned on his old friend Kookaburra and chased him away. As the new leader of the F.A.A he assumed the mantle of power, he even won a term in office. He didn't like Eagle, preferring that we foster closer ties with Tiger and Dragon.

The more cynical amongst us suspected he was just going to sell the country to them. The real winners in our 'Animal Democracy' however, were the heads of the various government departments, with all their attendant civil servants. For no matter who was in power they always kept their jobs, manipulating our elected representatives to make sure that they would be the true masters. If anyone threatened their position of authority they felt uneasy and would hamstring the processes of government, so as the grand schemes always came to nothing. Many times over the years their corruption had been revealed, but no one seemed able to do anything about them. Even our leaders once they had retired, admitted having lied and deceived us, but no one seemed able to touch them, they were beyond the law and even the penalties did not seem too great. It was as though an unwritten law had crept into our constitution that it was perfectly all right to steal, as long as you weren't caught. We, the common animals, whether Marsupial or Feral were in a state of dark despair, would no one rise up to save us from the criminals in power?

It was a dark day indeed when Old Man Emu climbed on the Rock to hear our grievances. We had called upon him again to save us. The M.N.B.P were back in power again, opposed by their old rivals the F.A.A. Possum, Echidna, Deer, and other forest dwelling animals were up in arms over the threatened extinction of our ancient forests. They had formed the Bush Dwellers Union, the B.D.U, Koala was especially vocal. Dingo had formed the Australian Union of Dingoes; the A.U.D and wanted land rights. The wild dogs, cats, and foxes, all traditional hunters, had been prohibited from hunting and had formed the United Federation of Hunters.

Old Man Emu listened patiently as the complaints mounted higher

W.A.D.U was concerned for the rights of working animals, whose conditions had worsened over the years', thanks to the mis-management of former governments. Who in their turn, seemed only interested in selling all our national resources to overseas interests. None of us believed in the 'Great Dream' anymore. Our great 'Animal Democracy' that had started out with such grand ideals was now in ruins. We were in a worse state than when we had started.

Oh what to do?

Old Man Emu listened for three days and three nights as the arguments swayed back and forth around the Rock. Each party wanted power and promised to reform the country, but when the webs of deceit and trickery were unraveled. It was found that all had lied and defrauded us.

As dawn broke over the Rock on the fourth day, the Old Man drew himself up to his full height. He stared sadly at each of us in turn, and for a long time he was silent.

With a shake of his head he gave us his answer.

"God preserve us all, from feeble minded opportunists."

And at that, Old Man Emu slowly and reluctantly walked away.