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# The Political Association of Van Diemen's Land: a failed experiment in democracy

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IN THE EARLY 1830s Van Diemen's Land was ruled by its lieutenant-governor under instructions from the British government, and colonists had no voice. The Political Association of Van Diemen's Land had a short and unsuccessful existence after it was established, according to its proponents' rhetoric, to represent the free people of Van Diemen's Land in front of the lieutenant-governor and, if necessary, parliamentarians in London. In reality, a significant factor in its establishment was the hostility of its leaders towards George Arthur's rule, although there was undeniably also a real desire by some to accelerate the introduction of 'free institutions' such as an elected legislature and trial by civil jury. These objectives conflicted with Arthur's vision of a well-functioning penal colony, so he flatly refused to recognise or communicate with the Association. This led to it being ineffective from the outset and, coupled with some poor choices of issues to campaign on, the Political Association failed within eighteen months.

The leader of the Political Association was a London-trained attorney, Thomas Horne, who was given to fiery oratory and at one stage conjured up a vision of armed rebellion in Van Diemen's Land. Although the Association was led by anti-Arthurites, it was not only a response to him, but drew inspiration from a similar organisation set up in Sydney, whose own roots went back to political reforms emerging in England at the time and the earlier formation of the Birmingham Political Union. Each of these bodies failed in turn for similar reasons including internal conflict and being out-manoeuvred by the 'establishment'.

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## **Birmingham, 1830**

The Birmingham Political Union was formed in 1830 when reformer Thomas Attwood led a requisition to the high bailiff of the city for a public meeting concerning reform of the House of Commons in the light of on-going ‘mismanagement of public affairs’ and to form a so-called political union between the lower and middle classes. This type of movement was seen by authorities as a subversion of the existing borough and parliamentary structure, so the high bailiff refused to call the meeting. Not to be thwarted, Attwood and his supporters plastered the city with placards advertising the meeting directly and it went ahead.<sup>1</sup> The first meeting attracted between 10,000 and 20,000 people, but the movement at first failed to galvanise the general populace and lacked well defined objectives. The Van Diemen’s Land press followed its progress, reporting on its meetings and reproducing the Union’s objects, rules and regulations.<sup>2</sup> When the Whig Earl Grey formed a government later that year with a reform agenda, it gave the BPU and Attwood new impetus and Attwood became a national figure, attracting crowds of up to 200,000 people to his ‘reform meetings’. After Grey’s Reform Bill of 1832 passed into law, Attwood was elected to Parliament but did not shine. The Union fragmented, with its members largely disillusioned, and it broke up in 1834.<sup>3</sup> The Van Diemen’s Land Political Association would have a similar trajectory.

## **Early appeals from New South Wales to London for better representation**

In February 1830, a public meeting in Sydney considered a petition to the House of Commons raised by Sir John Jamison for trial by jury and ‘taxation by representation’.<sup>4</sup> It was agreed to circulate the petition and then send it to an agent in London for presentation to the House.<sup>5</sup> It found its way to Henry Lytton Bulwer MP, diplomat, author and reformer, who tended to radical pronouncements, and in June 1832, he tabled the petition in the Commons.<sup>6</sup> The motion was easily lost in a sparsely attended chamber with under-secretary for the colonies, Lord Howick, speaking against it. He reported that trial by civil jury for criminal cases had already been agreed to.<sup>7</sup>

Another public meeting was held in Sydney in January 1833 to organise a further petition for an elected House of Assembly for New South Wales, with Sir John Jamison and William Charles Wentworth leading the addresses. Jamison was a wealthy pastoralist with a rocky relationship with colonial governors, but he was also a magistrate and a supporter of bringing

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free institutions to New South Wales.<sup>8</sup> Wentworth was an explorer, grazier, barrister and co-founder of the *Australian* newspaper. He was also a critic of the government, often in strident terms, and was also a campaigner for free institutions, especially a free press.<sup>9</sup>

After the passing of the Reform Act in the United Kingdom in 1832, the petitioners thought the reformed parliament would be more sympathetic to reforms in New South Wales.<sup>10</sup> The petition became one to the home parliament and a committee had been formed, chaired by Wentworth and with John Stephen its secretary. Stephen was the brother of Alfred Stephen, the attorney-general of Van Diemen's Land and they were both sons of the late New South Wales judge John Stephen.<sup>11</sup> The committee decided to entrust Bulwer with the petition's carriage to the Commons, and sent it to London. At the same time, Edward Smith Hall, the editor of the *Sydney Monitor*, wrote to Bulwer on an issue 'even more important' than a House of Assembly, namely the recently introduced Ripon Regulations that had done away with free land grants in favour of auction.<sup>12</sup> Hall was roughly aligned with Wentworth on the issue of free institutions, especially the press, but such divergences of opinions and priorities among the opinion leaders would hinder the campaigns of political associations in both New South Wales and in Van Diemen's Land.

Bulwer duly put the petition to the Commons, and reported back to Sydney in September 1834 that the issue lacked public visibility and support in England and thus did not attract much attention in parliament.<sup>13</sup> He suggested that a committee be appointed in Sydney to feed ideas and information to an agent in London, who would lobby on their behalf. Bulwer offered to take this role *pro bono*. A meeting in Sydney on 29 May 1835 to respond to Bulwer was opened by Stephen and chaired by Jamison. Wentworth was another prominent speaker. The meeting resolved to take up Bulwer's suggestions and to form an Association, and Jamison was appointed its President.<sup>14</sup> Richard Hipkiss moved a motion that the colonists of Van Diemen's Land be invited to cooperate with the Sydney meeting and this was also carried.<sup>15</sup>

The new Association quickly re-named itself the Australian Patriotic Association, possibly to avoid the stigma of being seen to be aligned with some organisations in England that had been outlawed, when they were seen to be wishing to be a 'parallel government' and to usurp the royal prerogative.<sup>16</sup> Jamison wrote to Governor Bourke on behalf of the Association asking for £2,000 to fund its various expenses, which Burke declined, but as requested, sent the request to London.<sup>17</sup>

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## Stirrings in Van Diemen's Land

Meanwhile, in Van Diemen's Land, a proportion of the populace were unhappy (to say the least) with the policies and actions of Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur, including his unwillingness to allow free institutions such as trial by jury and a free press, and also with Arthur's more rigid, uncompromising administrative style compared to his predecessor. A public meeting was called for 23 May 1831, ostensibly to congratulate William IV on his accession to the throne, but this may have been a smokescreen, as it soon became apparent that the meeting was to be used primarily to express grievances and besides, William had become king almost a year earlier.<sup>18</sup> A series of grievances was debated and made the subject of resolutions concerning tax, usury, the efficiency of the Survey Department, the lack of local representation, local taxation and the hardship of the dog tax, amongst others.<sup>19</sup> During these debates, other 'Arthur-oppositionists' spoke, including Henry Melville and William Gellibrand. Francis Smith moved the resolution on usury; he, like Horne, would later become a Supreme Court judge and in Smith's case, chief justice. The presence of these two legal figures may have been related to the fact that the Supreme Court had been closed for some months.<sup>20</sup> In spite of the high rhetoric, like most of the grievance meetings held around this time, not much changed as a result of it.

Secretary of State Viscount Goderich wrote to Arthur in early 1833 about the petition he received.<sup>21</sup> Whilst initially brushing off the petitioners' grievances, he was careful to direct Arthur to comply with previously given directives where they applied. In respect of the four resolutions concerning taxation and representation, Goderich observed that it was not the government's intention to alter the *Australian Courts Act* (1828) which granted an expanded but still appointed Legislative Council and limited trial by jury. He did, however, note that he had previously directed that the colony's budget Estimates should be published in the *Government Gazette* and directed Arthur to allow public access to sittings of the Legislative Council. A meagre dividend from the public meeting, but one that opened the curtains of government a little.

The Hobart reformers held another meeting on 13 August 1832, with the object of petitioning the home parliament for elected representation in the colony, the background being the perceived high taxes spent unwisely and/or repatriated back to London.<sup>22</sup> The meeting was reported to have been attended by representatives from across the colony and the resolutions proceeded smoothly until the question of the appointment of a committee to prepare information for London to support the petition was proposed.

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Attorney Thomas Horne, who would rise to much greater prominence in later meetings, stridently opposed this on the grounds that the appeal for representation should be sufficient in itself, and not be ‘cloaked’ by words put up by a committee: ‘If our prayer is not granted now, we must reiterate it, again and again, until it is, in the same way as the Catholic emancipation was reiterated, or as when Mr. O’Connell said – we will make our chains rattle from pole to pole’.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Gregson, a prominent long-standing opponent and agitator against Arthur and something of a firebrand himself, contested Horne’s position of not trusting a committee to write a representative document, to which Horne replied: ‘the sentiments of the community would never be correctly ascertained by 20 or 30 individuals’.<sup>24</sup> This was a remarkable statement in view of Horne’s involvement in the Political Association later. After some squabbling amongst Gregson, Gellibrand and a few others, the motions for the petitions were passed and a committee of about thirty prominent government oppositionists (not including Horne) was appointed to collate a document of ‘facts’ to accompany the petition to the House of Commons. Following the lead of Sydney, the petition was forwarded to Bulwer, to whom they added Irish nationalist leader and reformist Daniel O’Connell.<sup>25</sup> That choice, attached to a petition to parliament, was surely designed to be provocative.

The idea of an association to form a united front against Arthur, who had refused to even countenance trial by jury or to support any sort of elected representation, was first canvassed in the Van Diemen’s Land press by the Launceston *Independent* in January 1833:

The people must be united and rally round some point, after the manner of the British Unions. Let a standing committee be formed for the purpose of watching over the political interests of the colony, and let every district choose a member of such committee from among themselves by acclamation ... Thus organised and united, the people of this colony would receive some consideration from the government, which otherwise they never will. Their grievances might then be redressed, or at the very least, they would by shewing their fitness to receive the privileges of a House of Assembly.<sup>26</sup>

This appears to have fallen on deaf ears. Another public meeting for a petition to the home parliament for a Legislative Assembly was held on 2 August 1834. Thomas Horne, who had added his spicy oratory to the previous meeting, rose and began another impassioned oration with: ‘Mr. Chairman and you unthinking people, who are now struggling to obtain

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one of the blessings of the English Constitution’ and went on to denounce the revocation of their inalienable rights as Britons, no matter how far from the mother country. He invoked the ‘American States’ who ‘threw off their allegiance’ to obtain the right to pass their own legislation. After two versions of an Address to the King were proposed, Horne rose again and spoke with even greater fire, including:

The conclusion is evident – this people have arrived at such a pitch of power and fitness, that the British Government must see that their privileges cannot safely longer be withheld. By withholding the boon we now ask, they must see that they will make Britons, at the distance of 16,000 miles, a dissatisfied and a turbulent people, ready to use their power and assert their rights, if necessary, by force of arms. Such an alternative although it is to be deprecated by every good subject, is still an alternative, which is not only possible but probable.<sup>27</sup>

Notwithstanding it was extraordinary that an attorney in Hobart Town should warn in a public gathering, with the Sherriff present, that an armed struggle was ‘probable’, this was probably the height of public oration on high-minded ideals in respect of the Political Association. The meeting adopted an address to the king and a deputation of no fewer than 92 was appointed to present it to the lieutenant-governor.

Still, nothing changed until after the New South Wales group’s meetings were reported in the Hobart Town press in 1835, with details prominent in Henry Melville’s *Colonial Times* and Gilbert Robertson’s *True Colonist*.<sup>28</sup> A letter from ‘An Old Colonist’ was published in the *True Colonist*:

those persons, who have been thus gratuitously and inhumanely insulted [by the likes of Arthur and Alfred Stephen], ... should at all events not only unite and support the Free Press of the Colony, but also be more prompt and liberal in coming forward, to form a Political Association, to co-operate with their fellow-Colonists in New South Wales, to correspond with their able and independent Parliamentary Agent in England, Mr. Bulwer.<sup>29</sup>

Sure enough, a meeting was held on 1 September to pass resolutions attacking the lieutenant-governor, his administration and the appointed Legislative Council, and calling for the establishment of an elected House of Assembly.<sup>30</sup> The meeting was heavily populated by ‘anti-Arthurites’ such as Thomas Gregson and Thomas Horne. Gregson noted that the Hobart Town sheriff had declined to convene the meeting (echoes of the refusal

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Thomas Horne in later life  
(TA, Allport Library and Museum of Fine  
Arts, AUTAS001136190261)

of the Birmingham High Bailiff to call the first meeting there) and then spoke at length against conditions in the colony before moving the first resolution: 'That it is contrary to the principles of the British Constitution, and subversive of the liberty of the subject, to render English men in person or property amenable to any law inconsistent with the enactments of the Imperial Parliament, unless by their own local Representatives'.<sup>31</sup>

Thomas Horne remarked that the government benefited from a disunited opposition and proposed that a form of people's representative body be established:

What communication have the People now with the Government? Their interests are as widely separated as the North from the South Pole. Suppose the establishment of a Political Union, composed of all classes, who would delegate a body that would exert itself, and the difficulty is overcome; and I can see no possible chance of your gaining attention at the hands of the Authorities but by an acknowledged body of the People, acting for the whole.<sup>32</sup>

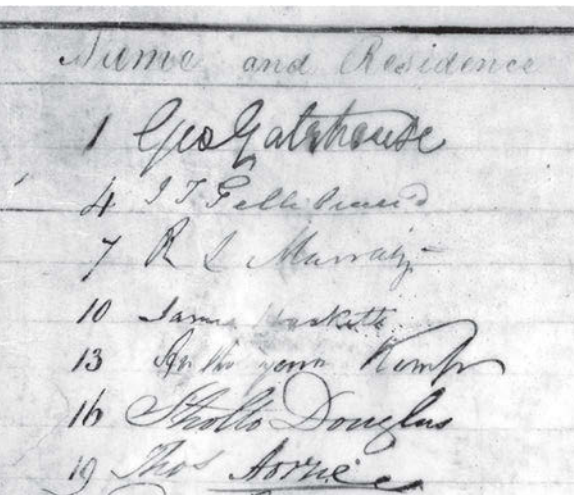
Later in the meeting, he proposed a resolution to form a Political Union to provide a platform to communicate with the government, but after discussion on the advisability of the name 'Political Union', he withdrew his resolution, conditional on the subject being the topic of a future meeting.<sup>33</sup> The meeting resolved to send a petition, containing complaints about the operation of the local appointed Legislative Council, the punishment recently given to a British sailor and the behaviour of some magistrates, including 'young Military Subalterns', to Henry Bulwer for presentation to the House of Commons. How much interest the Commons would have in the latter two topics might have been questioned at the time.



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## Horne's Political Association takes form

Shortly after the last-mentioned meeting, an advertisement appeared in the Hobart Town newspapers for the 'First session of the Union' to be held on 17 September at the Argyle Rooms.<sup>34</sup> The *Colonial Times* reported that five hundred were present for the meeting.<sup>35</sup> The same group of Horne, Gellibrand, Kemp and Douglas in turn moved the first four resolutions, which were to form a 'Political Association' to represent the citizens to government 'until the Elective Franchise' was obtained by the people, and also to frame its basic membership provisions and leadership positions. Henry Melville was made the Secretary for the time being. A list of members was inscribed on a long parchment roll; in all, about four hundred appear to have signed then, and about sixty others appear to have been added later, either individually or in groups in the same handwriting.<sup>36</sup> Surprisingly, given his opposition to the government, Thomas Gregson is absent from the list.



Members of the Political Association of Tasmania:

Above: The first seven signatories are Gatehouse, Gellibrand, Murray, Hackett, Kemp, Douglas and Horne. Although names were numbered across the scroll, it appears people wrote them from top to bottom (TA, NS467/1/1)

Right: Political Association of Tasmania, List of members (TA, NS467/1/1)





The Political Association as James Ross portrayed it (*Hobart Town Courier*, 25 September 1835)

The meeting was reported on favourably by three Hobart Town newspapers, namely, the *Tasmanian* (edited by Robert Lathrop Murray), *Colonial Times* (Henry Melville) and the *True Colonist* (Gilbert Robertson). Melville and Robertson were well-known opponents of Arthur, but Murray's support, which continued beyond the initial meeting, is more difficult to understand, as by then he was a supporter of Arthur.<sup>37</sup> A decidedly different tone was adopted by James Ross' *Hobart Town Courier*. Ross was formerly the government printer who published the official *Hobart Town Gazette* and, from 1827, the *Courier*, in which he maintained a staunchly pro-government editorial line, frequently attacking Robertson in particular. Ross' report of the first meeting was bitingly satirical.<sup>38</sup>

This raised the fury of some who attended the meeting, including Anthony Fenn Kemp, who complained that the article was 'nothing but a tissue of falsehood, from beginning to end'. Robertson also attacked Ross and the *Courier*, with an article opening with a reference to Ross as 'Poor Slop'. This began a slanging match over the Political Association that would last even after it had effectively folded.<sup>39</sup>

The *Colonial Times* also attacked the *Courier*, claiming that 'copies of the Courier and the supposed writers of the article were burnt in effigy all over the Colony', as did the *Tasmanian*, in barely more restrained terms. The *Courier* responded to the attacks, amounting to not much more than a tit-for-tat attack on Melville and Robertson, plus Gellibrand, Kemp and Douglas, while maintaining a mockery of the Association.<sup>40</sup>

## THE POLITICAL ASSOCIATION.

(We have been favoured with the following report of the proceedings of the first meeting of this society, and as no notice of its existence has yet been suffered to appear but in the crime-promoting journals, (which no decent man would admit into his house,) and which are professedly opposed to truth and the good of the colony, and as we had not the pleasure of being personally present, we avail ourselves of this opportunity to communicate it to the reader. We were not aware till we read the report of the immense weight of the Association, or rather Parliament, and induced alike by the desire of glory as of profit, and in the hope that we are not too late, we beg leave to offer ourselves as a candidate for the highly honourable and lucrative office of sub-Secretary, and respectfully to solicit the votes and interest of the members generally, but especially of the influential gentlemen who spoke upon the occasion.)

Happy Van Diemen's land! The day has at length arrived when we can exultingly exclaim, we have a 'constitution' upon the model and form of the Three Estates in our native land! We have now the representative of Majesty—the Privy Council under the Head-Executive Council—the Lords represented by the Legislative Council, and the House of Commons by the 'Sovereign People!' 'The Secretary of State not having been informed of the revolution about to take place in the Government here, has not authorised the expenditure of any of the public money to defray the expense of building a house suitable for the Lords and Commons, and therefore upon the first sitting of our Parliament it was found that the room in the Ship Inn, bar and all, was not sufficiently capacious to contain the members and the numerous auditory. The Argyle

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By this time, the Patriotic Association of New South Wales had elected John Stephen as their Secretary, on a salary of £300 per annum, and had funds standing at £4,000.<sup>41</sup> Stephen's brother Alfred happened to be the Van Diemen's Land Attorney-General who upheld Arthur's refusal to introduce civil juries, one of the grievances of the Van Diemen's Land group, or, in the words of the *Tasmanian*:

the Attorney General here is exerting his powerful talents, not only to the withholding [the advantages of British law] from the people here, but to the construction of Laws, which, we are convinced, the day will come when he himself will be the first again to denounce, as "FIT ONLY FOR TURKEY AND PERSIA!"<sup>42</sup>

The second meeting of the Political Association got down to business on 5 October. Thomas Horne read out the seven Objects of the Association, of which the first was 'To obtain, by every just and loyal means, a REAL AND EFFECTUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE OF VAN DIEMEN'S LAND'. The meeting and its results were published locally and in the *Sydney Monitor*.<sup>43</sup> James Ross in the *Courier* again satirised the meeting.<sup>44</sup>

Thomas Horne, who had taken the initiative on establishing the Political Association, became its Chairman. He was born in England and admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1827. On arriving in Van Diemen's Land in 1830, he began practicing as an attorney and barrister, establishing the firm of Horne and Wynne.<sup>45</sup> After taking the maximum grant of land, he fell out with Arthur, supposedly over some slight received at Government House and thereafter was firmly against the lieutenant-governor; in early 1833 he was for a time editor of the anti-government *Colonist* newspaper.<sup>46</sup> He earned a reputation for radical pronouncements – in 1835 at a public meeting he called for an end to the 'penal character of the colony' and 'proposed to bring here and set at liberty every man who was convicted of crime in England'.<sup>47</sup>

The Political Council, comprising 'no less than' thirty men, had control of the Association's business and was supposed to meet weekly, with records of proceedings kept. Its meetings were not public, no reports of its proceedings appear in any of the newspapers as general news and no records of it survive. James Ross took time out from his satire of the Association to attack it as a wolf in sheep's clothing and its leaders as 'illiberal, anti-patriotic, oppressive men', basically pushing their own interests under the guise of a popular cause.<sup>48</sup> Even Gilbert Robertson, although approving that the meetings were held in private, expressed concern about the lack of transparency: 'What of the petition to the home Parliament? ... Will no one tell us?'<sup>49</sup>

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What of these charges? Those of Ross were serious and with a solid foundation of truth, in that the Association and Council were led by men largely pursuing an anti-Arthur agenda, that just happened to encompass the establishment of free institutions. In his final editorial preface to his *Hobart Town Almanack* of 1837, Ross was still smarting from the attacks made on him by those he had lampooned and criticised:

“No quarter” was their cry “Down with his standard” (that of truth) and they rushed upon me from their dark concocting corners of Hobart Town and Launceston, with the impetuosity, the cruelty of savages. They assailed me with falsehood. They charged me with crime. In the garb of false patriotism they cajoled the unwary to join their hostile ranks.<sup>50</sup>

He was unbowed:

But firm and unshaken, I maintained my position. One after another, I gave them discomfiture. I struggled for the colony, and the friends of the colony. I stood by the settler in every conflict.

That said, his sometimes oily praise of the lieutenant-governor, in this preface as well as elsewhere, suggests that his criticism was not as high-minded as he would lead his readers to believe. In 1838 Ross put into a column the more precise operational reasons he thought the Association fell through: ‘[failure] will ever be the result of false patriotism, which, under the popular mask of *pro bono publico*, seeks only the gratification of private spleen or party faction’.<sup>51</sup> Equally, though, the establishment and operation of the Association cannot be entirely ascribed to self-serving antagonism to Arthur either; there should be no doubt that the desire for ‘free institutions’ was real in the colony at the time. Robertson’s complaint about lack of information on the Council’s proceedings is also well founded. That a de facto ‘people’s assembly’ could conduct its business in secret and purport to make representations on behalf of the citizenry with little or no transparency, undermined its credibility for anyone inclined to be the least sceptical. It is a wonder Ross did not attack that aspect more.

Not only was it secretive, but what did emerge from the Political Council fell short of the lofty ambitions of the early Association meetings. Its first substantive action was to send two letters (in the Council’s name, not that of the Association) to the lieutenant-governor, dated 14 November 1835.<sup>52</sup> The first complained about the use of ‘felons’ as police constables and expressed disbelief that the British Government had ever intended to invest felons with the powers of a constable. The second complained

about the employment of military juries in criminal cases and asked the lieutenant-governor to grant civil juries for criminal, as well as civil cases.<sup>53</sup> This was a weak first step by the Political Council. Neither issue went to the Association's core objective of obtaining elected representation of the citizens. Moreover, the use of convict police was well established by Arthur and he revelled in its success, so it was inconceivable that he would want to change that policy.<sup>54</sup> The issue of trial by jury in civil cases on the other hand was an issue for the Association, but the letter was weak, and its being coupled with the convict police letter, rendered it ineffective. In reply, Horne received a short letter back from Arthur's private secretary, Adam Turnbull, stating that the lieutenant-governor would not be entering into correspondence with any 'Association' without the express sanction of the King.<sup>55</sup> That was that. Unlike Governor Bourke in New South Wales, Arthur simply refused to recognise or engage with such a body of men purporting to represent the colonists.

Arthur's tactic may have un-nerved some in the Association. The *True Colonist* criticised those on the Political Council who were not attending meetings and editorialised that perhaps the name of the Association should be changed to that used in Sydney – the Patriotic Association – being more benign to the authorities.<sup>56</sup> The pro-Association newspapers exchanged some friendly-fire regarding the reporting of the issue by the other, such as between the *Colonial Times* and the *Tasmanian* and then the *True Colonist* and the *Tasmanian* in January 1836.<sup>57</sup> These squabbles would not have enhanced the reputation of the Association, given that two of the papers were edited by members of the Political Council. The spiteful exchanges between Ross in his *Courier* and Melville at the *Colonial Times* and Robertson at the *True Colonist*, continued all during this time, with Ross continuing

his satire of the Association and its leaders ('Mr Thomas Thumb, Princess Rusky Fusky, Sir Benjamin Backbite') and the others replying with a mix of hurt and return-in-kind (Ross as 'poor Slop' and the *Courier* as 'the slop bucket'). The *Courier* probably had the better of it.

Arthur's secretary's reply to the letters from the Political Council (*Colonial Times*, 24 November 1835)

*Government House, November 21, 1835.*

SIR,—I am directed by the Lieutenant Governor, to acknowledge the receipt of two communications, bearing your signature, as Honorary Secretary to certain individuals, styling themselves, a Political Association,—and drawing His Excellency attention to questions, in reference to which, His Excellency is quite confident, the anxiety manifested by the Government, for the public welfare is fully appreciated by the community generally.

But, I am to add, that the Lieutenant Governor does not feel authorised, without the express sanction of His Majesty, to enter into any correspondence whatever with any such Association.—

—I have the honor to be, sir,  
your obedient humble servant,

ADAM TURNBULL.

To T. Horne, Esq.

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A meeting of the Association on 18 January 1836 was attended by four to five hundred members, according to the *Colonial Times*. An additional fifteen men were elected to the Political Council, including Gilbert Robertson of the *True Colonist*, bringing the total to a bloated forty.<sup>58</sup> The first resolution at the January meeting was to petition the King to remove Arthur as lieutenant-governor, so the rhetoric had not changed much in the intervening four years and yet again, the Political Association failed to rise to its early promise and merely pursued Arthur personally. Interestingly, members of this committee consisted of Political Council members, with the addition of Thomas Lascelles and Thomas Gregson, who weren't members of the Association but were prominent Arthur critics.

In contrast to the petty attacks on Arthur from the Van Diemen's Land group, the New South Wales Patriotic Association were engaged on serious matters. It had prepared two draft bills to be forwarded to London for consideration by members of the House of Commons on the governance of New South Wales, including proposing an appointed upper house and an elected lower house, although an elected upper house was also contemplated. Copies of these bills were forwarded to Hobart by the Patriotic Association Secretary, John Stephen, in January 1836.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, Wentworth's *Australian* newspaper in Sydney criticised the Van Diemen's Land Political Association for its petition to remove Arthur, writing 'that is not the way to obtain a House of Assembly'.<sup>60</sup>

John Stephen was in Hobart Town in February 1836, visiting his brother, Alfred. The forwarding of the New South Wales draft Bills to Hobart Town caused the Political Association to change tack and consider producing a Bill of its own. The Political Council first resolved to have a draft Bill prepared calling 'for the future Constitution of the Colony with power to take the advice and opinion of the Council for their guidance at the expense of the Association'.<sup>61</sup> So, no elected House of Assembly, merely a voice for the Political Council – another abrogation of the prime objective of the Association. Possibly under the influence of John Stephen, they soon changed tack again and adopted a modified version of one of the New South Wales Bills, and this was discussed at a meeting on 25 February, which was attended by John Stephen.<sup>62</sup> The Bill sought to limit the powers of the Attorney-General, establish Circuit and Quarter Session Courts and to have an appointed 'Council' of fifteen and an elected 'Assembly' of fifty members. The Association was finally pursuing its stated main objective.

The *True Colonist* lamented that so few of the Association leaders were present at the meeting Stephen attended. Unable to engage locally with Arthur and with some Political Council members losing heart and

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not turning up, the Political Association's days were numbered. Several months later, the *Tasmanian* wrote that the Association was 'inert', having promised much but 'effected nothing!'<sup>63</sup> At last, in May, printed copies of the Association's Bill were sent to Bulwer and other MPs in London. After that, the Association was officially 'adjourned' until it heard back from Bulwer. Then, whatever wind remained in the Association's sails was taken out when news of Lieutenant-Governor Arthur's recall to London was made known in the local press in early June 1836. A meeting in September on receipt of a letter back from Bulwer was poorly attended.<sup>64</sup>

The Patriotic Association in Sydney was also having difficulty. There were moves against John Stephen as Secretary during his absence in Hobart Town in March. He went on to London, followed by accusations of improprieties on £500 promised to Bulwer that failed to arrive.<sup>65</sup> This caused Bulwer to give up the office he had established and the dedicated secretary for the New South Wales cause. At the same time, the rebellion in Upper Canada, in part emanating from conflicts between nominated and elected legislatures, made parliamentarians in London uneasy about granting an elected chamber to Sydney.<sup>66</sup> By mid-1837 the Patriotic Association was suing members for unpaid dues. The Political Association in Van Diemen's Land struggled on. When Bulwer was appointed Ambassador to Constantinople in August 1837, he recommended Charles Buller to replace him as parliamentary agent for the colonies.<sup>67</sup> Like Bulwer, Buller was a radical Parliamentary and electoral reformer, who supported secret ballots and the removal of bishops from the House of Lords, amongst other measures.<sup>68</sup> Buller wrote to the Association in mid-1838, advising on names he thought suitable as local Legislative Councillors, but the *True Colonist* disapproved of a number of them and of Buller's activities on behalf of the colonists.<sup>69</sup>

In London, the winds were changing in a way that would deeply affect Van Diemen's Land. In so far as there was any interest in the Australian colonies in Parliament, it was now focussed on the management of convicts, under scrutiny by the Select Committee on Transportation, chaired by another radical, William Molesworth. The 'Molesworth Committee' sat during 1837-38, investigating the nature of convictism in the colonies, with its principals looking to abolish transportation. One of the conclusions of the Committee was that transportation with assignment 'though chiefly dreaded as exile, undoubtedly is much more than exile; it is slavery as well'.<sup>70</sup> The Molesworth Committee's reports ultimately facilitated the abolition of assignment and the fateful introduction of the probation system in Van Diemen's Land. Although Buller continued to communicate with the Van

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Diemen's Land Political Association into the early 1840s, for all intents and purposes, the Association was dead.<sup>71</sup> There was no Arthur to rail against and its leaders had died or moved on under Arthur's successor, Sir John Franklin. Joseph Tice Gellibrand disappeared on an expedition to Port Phillip in 1837, George Gatehouse died in Hobart in 1838, Henry Melville sold out of his newspapers in 1838-39 and retired to New Norfolk, and Anthony Fenn Kemp and Thomas Horne were on the government payroll – Horne was appointed Attorney-General in 1839.<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusion

The Political Association of Van Diemen's Land had a gestation of a number of years, marked by periodic spasms of public discontent expressed in public meetings, but these were easily absorbed by the authorities and left no lasting mark. In 1835 the Association was birthed to local acclaim and self-importance, with the primary stated objective of bringing about elected representation of the citizenry, but its leadership betrayed one of its actual *raison d'être* – to be a vehicle to attack George Arthur, weaken him and work for his recall. It was doomed, probably from the start, not least because the deliberations of its managing body were secret, surely antithetic to its stated objectives. A Government-aligned newspaper pointed out the self-interest of the leaders and held the entire project up to ridicule. The Association's very first communication with the lieutenant-governor was not concerning its core objective of representation and in any event, Arthur simply ignored the group. The Association's next action was to petition the King to remove Arthur – again, unconstructive, and this earned a reprimand from the Sydneysiders. Even without the departure of Arthur (unrelated to the petition), the Political Association would still have been in its death throes in late 1836 and it sunk shortly afterwards.

John West devoted only a paragraph to the Association, including: 'a standing council was organised, under the auspices of certain leading politicians, who discussed the measures deemed necessary to amend their social and political condition'. True enough to a certain degree but omitting the partisanship of the leadership. West went on to note Horne's failed correspondence with Arthur's and Ross' ridicule of the Association.<sup>73</sup> Overall, West did not appear to give the Association much weight.

Elected representation was brought about in Van Diemen's Land in 1850, after the British parliament passed the *Act for the Better Government of Her Majesty's Australian Colonies* (1850), also known as the *Australian Constitutions Act*, which allowed for a majority elected Legislative Council

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via a limited male-only franchise, and provided for an elected lower house for Van Diemen's Land in the future. A major issue in the colony in 1850 was the end of transportation and all two-thirds of the elected Legislative Council members were anti-transportationists.<sup>74</sup> Transportation to Van Diemen's Land ended in 1853 and the following year the Legislative Council passed the *Constitution Act* which provided for a bicameral local parliament. The home Parliament passed an enabling bill and the new two chambers met for the first time in December 1856, the colony already having been re-named Tasmania.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, the primary objective of the Political Association of Van Diemen's Land was realised twenty years after its conception but with little, if any, thanks to its efforts.

The Association's leader, the fiery Thomas Horne, restrained his outspokenness afterwards. He became Attorney-General under Sir John Franklin in 1839 and made Puisne Judge on the Supreme Court in 1847, succeeding Algernon Montagu.<sup>76</sup> He was elected to the first Legislative Council while still a judge in 1856 and was made its President. He died in 1870.

MALCOLM WARD has recently submitted his PhD on the life of colonial settler George Meredith and is currently editing a book of Meredith's letters to his wife, to be published in 2021. After Meredith, Malcolm intends to research the life of Tasmania's second premier, Thomas George Gregson.

#### ENDNOTES

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