

Geoffrey Blainey

on May 23rd

“The creation of the licence fee on the New South Wales goldfields in May 1851 is one of the epoch-making events in our history. It was originally an ingenious solution to an unexpected crisis. As soon as the gold finds near Bathurst were announced, it had been feared that people would leave their jobs, thereby wrecking the existing economy, in order to dig for gold.”

“The government’s decision was simple. Nearly every free person could dig for gold but first they had to pay for a very expensive monthly licence. The licence could not be transferred: it was also an identity card describing one’s physical features. The idea was that those who found no gold would return to their daily work. The licence and its high tax was really a system of rationing scarce labour.”

“Victoria soon found even richer gold. It copied the licence fee. Alas, Victoria continued to police the gold licence long after the original reason- a scarcity of labour- had passed. The increasing disputes between miners and police at Ballarat led to the death of some 35 miners and soldiers. The expensive licence was abolished, too late. ” – Geoffrey Blainey

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MAY 23 - THE FACTS

THE PROUD HISTORY OF REJECTING GOVERNMENT ID

May 23rd marks an important anniversary in the history of democracy and freedom in Australia and particularly Victoria. On that day in 1851 the Colonial Government of New South Wales (which then covered all of what is now Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales) introduced a measure to bring order to the new Gold fields. It was a license to dig for Gold and was to be produced on demand. The price was 30 shillings (one and a half pounds) a month – the same as the cash wage for a labourer. The cost to personal freedom and domestic tranquillity was found to be much higher.

To ensure this revenue measure (which was also intended to blunt the allure of gold digging over paid employment) severe rules and penalties were introduced. The license allowed digging within a specific area and laid down certain rules. Diggers must carry their licenses with them at all times, they would be fined 5 pounds for the first time they were found without it, 15 pounds the second time and up to 30 pounds the third and subsequent times. Digging was not permitted within ten feet of a public road, tents had to be erected at least 20 feet apart, and all diggers were to 'maintain, and assist in maintaining a due and proper observance of Sundays.

In July 1851 Victoria separated from New South Wales, and in August the Miners Right system was introduced for the new Colony.

The searches or 'hunts' for unlicensed diggers became a source of increasing frustration and resentment across the gold fields. The demand for 'a license you dirty digger' not only led to an ingrained distrust of licensing, but introduced the name as part of our national pride – Australian's now rejoice in the name Digger.

The rising anger led to protests and payment strikes and restrictions. Finally in 1854 the new Governor, Latrobe, was facing a financial crisis and decided to enforce the full fees with twice-weekly hunts across the Gold fields. This was the tinder from which the Eureka Stockade burst forth. The language was similar to that of the American War of Independence. 'No Taxation without representation' - 'No chains for free Englishmen'.

The symbol of the movement of the Anti-Gold License Association and the Ballarat Reform League was a red ribbon and later the well known flag.

The population supported the fight against the License and the compulsory identification to be carried at all times. The verdicts of the Eureka captives show the juries sentiments clearly. All those charged were found not guilty.

The result of the Eureka Rebellion was a vastly reduced fee for the new Mining Permits, a firm restriction on when these permits could be demanded, and universal male suffrage for a Legislative Assembly.

A LESSON LEARNT FROM EUREKA

The lesson drawn from Eureka is that if Government becomes so over bearing it disrupts the social fabric. Demands for ID, and making citizens subservient to our bureaucrats are a historically guaranteed method of creating resentment and reducing the co-operative nature of a truly civil society.

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