

A cultural celebration in London next week will mark the centenary of the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, in which Britain gave Australia a limited form of independence. From January 1901, Australia would not be independent in foreign policy, nor have its own navy, flag or currency, but these things did not weigh as important to the Australians who came to London carrying their document. In an almost colourless moment in Australian history, the British parliament virtually rubber-stamped the agreement. The Australian delegates were so happy when the document was passed that they joined hands and danced around a table.

Two years ago, when Prime Minister John Howard, former prime ministers and the state premiers decided to mark this centenary in London during the first week of July, there were no traditions to follow. And if it was a blank book for Australians, it was even blanker for the British. Other countries have also untied themselves from Britain this way and have done it with all the brouhaha of receiving a driving licence.

So why don't the festivities during Australia Week look like bonfire night or the Fourth of July? Instead of showing exuberance, Howard has decided to diplomatically re-secure the ties that bind Australia to Britain.

The 190 members of the Australian Federation Guard Service – a third of them in army slouch hats – will mount guard at Buckingham Palace and St James's on odd dates (dismounting on even dates) from July 1 to 19. The Queen's Guard is loaned regularly to foreigners and this is an appropriately showy way to mark an occasion. But why not top Australia House with searchlights, or have massed choirs along the Thames singing *Waltzing Matilda*? Given that Australia



Weak-end party

Instead of a celebration of Australian culture, London's Australia Week – commemorating the centenary of federation – presents a familiar program. **Michele Field** believes a lack of vision surrounds the occasion.

Week will be mid-summer in London, it is a shame that apart from a few street performers nothing else will happen in the open air.

The prime minister intends to celebrate the moment of federation indoors in a sedate manner that the dignitaries of 100 years ago would have understood. There are at least two royal encounters: with the Queen at a service at Westminster Abbey and with the Prince of Wales at a Guildhall business dinner. And Anne, the Princess Royal, will

open an Arthur Boyd exhibition at Australia House a week before Howard arrives.

The prime minister's appearance at the service at Westminster Abbey on July 7 is his most public event, but tickets for the occasion were advertised on the internet by the Australian High Commission and applications were due before the end of April, so this congregation is not a typical one. A British journalist or two has joked already that nothing in Australia Week relates to

the immigrant or convict ancestors of the politicians who in 1900 came to London to break with the past.

At present, the very phrase "federal constitution" makes British Prime Minister Tony Blair's skin crawl. The commissioners of the European Union are insisting that the EU quasi-federation will fall to pieces without a constitution and are drafting a document for December. This will be a tetchy time in British politics, yet – in