Before 1901, Australia was not a nation. At that time, the continent consisted of six British colonies which were partly self-governing, but subject to the law-making power of the British Parliament. Each colony had its own government and laws, including its own railway system, postage stamps and tariffs (taxes). This caused a lot of problems and people began to think about the benefits of uniting as one nation, under a federal system of governance.

The path to federation

During the 1890s, each colony sent representatives to special meetings, called conventions, to try to agree about how to form a new federation. Eventually the delegates agreed on the rules for a federal system and a draft constitution. The people of the colonies voted in a series of referendums to accept this new Australian Constitution. It was then passed as a British Act of Parliament in 1900, called the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, which came into effect on 1 January 1901. The Constitution established a federal Parliament which could make laws on behalf of the new Australian nation.

The Northern Territory

In 1901, the two territories did not exist. The Constitution provided for the establishment of a national capital, to be located in New South Wales but at least 100 miles from Sydney.

In 1911, the Australian Government created the Australian Capital Territory for this purpose. In the same year, the Northern Territory was also created. Until then, this area had been part of South Australia. Although part of the Commonwealth, the territories do not have the same legal status as states.

Responsibility for governing the NT is transferred to the Commonwealth Government in 1911. An Administrator is appointed to represent the Commonwealth in the NT.

At the time of Federation, the NT had a member in the SA Parliament, and could vote for the SA representatives in the Commonwealth Parliament. After the 1911 transfer, the NT had no representation or vote in any Parliament.

After elections in December 1947, the Legislative Council first sat in 1948. The Administrator was the President of the Council and it had limited legislative powers.

The NT was granted Self-Government on 1 July 1978, and is now able to make most decisions about how the Territory is governed.