

# The Eureka Debate



## Was Lieutenant-Governor Charles Hotham right to strictly enforce the mining licence that led to the Eureka rebellion?

December 3rd marks the anniversary of the Eureka Rebellion. This is the name given to a rebellion by gold miners in a field at Eureka, near Ballarat Victoria in 1854. At the Eureka Stockade, the miners protested excessive mining licence fees (tax), the arbitrary, and at times brutal enforcement of the licence and their lack of their democratic rights, including the right to vote.

Gather two teams together, each with 4 members, and decide which team will defend the affirmative and negative points of view. The topic to debate is:

### Was Lieutenant-Governor Charles Hotham right to strictly enforce the mining licence that led to the Eureka rebellion?

#### Affirmative



The colonial government - struggling to manage and control mass migration of people through an unexpected gold rush.

This team will have representatives of the government. However, one member of this team must be a police trooper working for the government to keep law and order.



#### Negative



The gold miners - fighting for individual freedom and liberty against oppression through fair representation.

This team will have representatives from the gold mining community. One person in this team must be a family member of a miner.

Each team will need to research details of the Eureka rebellion to prepare arguments for the debate. Being able to imagine yourself in the shoes, or position of a miner, family member, police trooper, or government official will help you consider their point of view and what they might have been thinking during the events leading up to the rebellion at the time.

The following prompts can help guide preparation for your arguments and any rebuttals you will encounter!

- How did Lieutenant Governor Hotham's background and experience shape his approach to the miners and the mining licence?
- What benefits could the government have gained if miner's grievances were heard and terms negotiated before issuing taxes and licence fees? What changes would have been made?
- Think about possible options the government could have taken if a miner did not pay their fees.
- What do you think the government did with the money collected from the licence fees and taxes at the time?
- How did mining contribute to the Victorian economy? What would have happened to the Australian economy if the Gold Licence stopped the mining industry and immigrants coming to Australia?
- How did the miner's background and experiences shape their attitude to the mining tax? What do you think the miners were thinking when they staked their claim for diggings on Crown land?
- Why did the government introduce strict alcohol laws on the Ballarat diggings?



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## Was Lieutenant-Governor Charles Hotham right to strictly enforce the mining licence that led to the Eureka rebellion?

### The Miner's Perspective:

The miners revolted after unfair mining licence requirements were introduced and arbitrarily enforced by police officers. Miners had to pay an exorbitant licence fee whether they found gold or not. Worse still, enforcement of the mining licence was adhoc, arbitrary and at times corrupt.

Many of the miners were working-class immigrants coming from countries where revolutions against the government/ruling class had occurred, such as France and the American Colonies. During this time, the Chartist movement was gaining momentum and many miners supported the Chartist ideals which focused on individual rights such as the vote for all men, and the secret ballot.

As many miners were unable to vote nor stand as a member of Parliament, they objected to paying a mining licence fee that was introduced without an opportunity to have a say in the tax.

"The tendencies to serious outbreak amongst masses of population are usually a signal that the government is at fault..." -Report of Commission, 1855, in Molony, J. 2001, pg. 194

In addition, mining contributed significantly to the Australian economy. The gold rush brought in much needed labour to Australia. These immigrants were predominantly male and at the prime working age. Technical innovation and improvement of mining techniques also occurred which in turn improved the productivity of other mining industries. As a result of the economic growth from the gold rush, Australia, in terms of per capita income, became the richest country in the world.

*"We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other to defend our rights and liberties"- Peter Lalor*

### The Government's Perspective:

The discovery of gold had created unexpected challenges for the authorities. Once the word got out about how a fortune could be made panning for gold in the rivers and creeks throughout Victoria, the gold rush was on!

A mass migration of people traveled across from all parts of the country, and indeed from around the world. At Eureka, the government found itself suddenly needing to manage a large number of people that had rapidly gathered in one area. Every day new people arrived and established individual camps, cramped together staking a claim to diggings on land that was owned by the Crown.

Living conditions for the miners and their families were difficult and the newcomers struggled. There was no sanitation and little availability of essential items for day to day living, such as food and equipment. Small traders established stalls to sell goods, but as soon as supplies arrived the shelves were stripped bare. Shelter was either basic or non-existent and any miner who owned a tent was considered to be fortunate.

In addition to these challenges, conflict regularly broke out among the people, as they fought to keep their prized little plot of land from another miner taking it over. If anyone discovered gold, they usually kept it to themselves for fear of being robbed, or even murdered. Personal security was at risk for everyone. The government had to do something to manage and control the situation. Maintaining law and order was the first priority and a police force was assembled. Regular troop patrols were important in keeping the peace amongst the miners and their families.

The licence system helped the authorities keep track of who was at the diggings and how many people were involved. It also, provided revenue to help pay for the services and facilities that were required for the new communities being established.