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Early Commonwealth control, 1911–46

The transfer of responsibility for the Northern Territory from the South Australian Government was made possible when the Commonwealth agreed to allocate £6,170,548 to retire accumulated debt and to purchase various infrastructure assets (Heatley 1979, p. 27). In addition, the Commonwealth agreed to construct a north–south railway through the Territory to link Adelaide and Darwin, but refused to set a time frame for the completion of this transport link. This particular issue had contributed to the lengthy negotiations surrounding the handover and would not be resolved until nearly a century later with the Federal Government only partially meeting this undertaking.

When the Commonwealth Government assumed responsibility on 1 January 1911, the Territory’s non-Aboriginal population was 3,271 (2,673 males and 598 females) and the Indigenous population was estimated at 50,000 (National Archives of Australia 2014a). As it turns out, the number of Europeans remained at about this level until World War Two. The handover also resulted in these Europeans losing their ability to vote in South Australian elections as well as for the House of Representatives and the Senate. By 1922, this lack of representation was partially addressed with the passage of the *Northern Territory Representation Act* that provided for a single member from the Territory in the House of Representatives without voting powers (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1974, p. 83). Full voting rights would not be granted to the member from the Northern Territory until 1968 and

the jurisdiction was given two Senators in 1974 as a result of the *Senate (Representation of Territories) Act* (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1974, pp. 84–85).

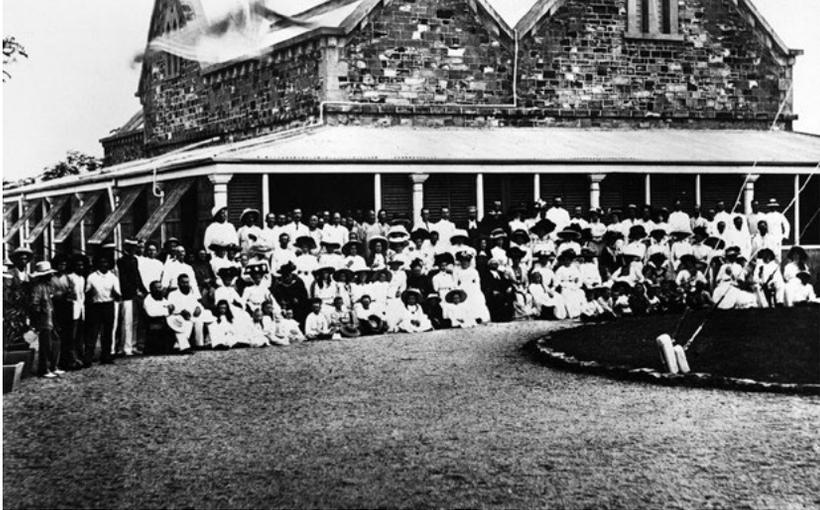


Figure 6. Transfer Ceremony, 2 January 1911.

Source: Creator Paul Foelsche, PH0747/0060, Foelsche Collection, Northern Territory Library.

In keeping with Australia's propensity for state-led social experimentation, the Northern Territory provided the Commonwealth with a place to make and implement public policy that did not require complex negotiations with the states nor did the programs have electoral consequences given that Territorians could not vote. In *The history and problems of the Northern Territory Australia* (Price 1930), a bleak future is predicted for the region due to banning of 'coloured labour' as a result of the White Australia policy.

The story of the Northern Territory presents both national and world problems, because it deals with a part of *the greatest biological experiment in history*, the attempt to keep a whole continent white. It also represents the first effort of the Europeans in a southern continent to develop by white labour their own tropical zone (Price 1930, p. 56, emphasis in original).

This early period of Commonwealth direction did not see a significant change in the role assigned to vocational education and training. The European population was deemed to be too small and widespread to merit the provision of post-primary school education or formal adult

training. For example, the first high school was established in Darwin in 1921 but closed in 1925 due to a lack of students—secondary education would not be reintroduced until 1948 (National Archives of Australia 2014a), which was the same year that apprenticeships were regulated in the Northern Territory. Heatley's (1979, pp. 136–137) account of the governance of the Territory reports that the Commonwealth maintained the essential features of the South Australian *The Northern Territory Aborigines Act 1910*, which allowed for the setting up and control of hunting and living reservations and the regulation of Aboriginal labour. Between the two world wars, extensive Aboriginal reserves were established in the Northern Territory:

into which missionary groups moved to set up centres for religious, charitable and training purposes – the basic view that part-Aboriginals should be separated from Aboriginals and trained to be useful citizens remained unchanged (Heatley 1979, p. 137).

The policy settings regarding the application of vocational education and training were still firmly guided by its mid-nineteenth century philanthropic motivations when the Commonwealth assumed responsibility for governing the Northern Territory in the second decade of the twentieth century. In describing the general results of the interaction between English-speaking people and Aborigines in Australia, Price (1949, p. 124) reports that 'the British philanthropic revolution did create some improvements'. These included the appointment of Protectors of Aborigines, improved justice, establishment of reservations and modest levels of expenditure on health, religion and education. 'Missionary enterprise was to be the basis of this new endeavour' (Price 1949, p. 124). The main usage of vocational training was as a mechanism to prepare Aboriginal people for their transition into the dominant culture by acquiring the skills that would be necessary to lead to productive employment in the face of the predicted demise of their own culture (Joynt 1918).

Two events in this initial phase of Commonwealth governance demonstrate the transition from physical violence to more philanthropically inspired methods of social control in the Northern Territory. The last recorded official punitive expedition against Aborigines accused of murdering a European occurred in Central Australia in 1928 (National Archives of Australia 2014a). The death of a dingo trapper resulted in what became known as the Coniston Massacre.

Over a period of several months, the shooting deaths of dozens of Aboriginal men, women and children took place at a variety of locations to the northwest of Alice Springs. In a sign of changing social values, only four years later in 1932—following the killing of five Japanese fishermen at Caledon Bay, two European settlers on a nearby island and the spearing death of the policeman who had been sent to investigate—the response was quite different (National Archives of Australia 2014a). Although there were demands from the white residents of Darwin for a punitive expedition to be sent into Arnhem Land, a party from the Church Missionary Society went to the area and negotiated the surrender of those Aborigines believed to be responsible for the deaths. All were tried and sentenced to prison terms with one condemned to death for his part in the crime. However, this result was appealed and overturned by the High Court of Australia leading to his release from jail in 1934. The Caledon Bay episode illustrates a change in the tactics that would be used by future governments in the management of society in the Northern Territory. Brutal summary justice, aimed at punishing and terrorising segments of the population, had been replaced by the trappings of the British legal system with its notions of democratic citizenship, civil rights, humanity, fairness and an expectation of obtaining a job. Of course, these are also the same characteristics that describe the middle-class philanthropy that accompanied the settlers when they came to South Australia 100 years earlier.

While this transition in methods of directing the conduct of the population was occurring, the activities of the religious missionaries steadily expanded with the explicit approval and minimal support (usually through the provision of land) from the Australian Government. The *Northern Territory Aborigines Act 1910* allowed for the setting up and control of reserves and the regulation of Aboriginal labour and, between the world wars, extensive portions of the Northern Territory were designated as Aboriginal reserves. The Catholic Church established a mission to the southwest of Darwin at Port Keats (now Wadeye) in 1935. After becoming the Bishop of Darwin, Father Francis Gsell established another Catholic mission at Arltunga to the northeast of Alice Springs in 1942 (later moved to Santa Teresa further south) and had also set up a settlement for part-Aboriginals at Garden Point on the Tiwi Islands in 1940 (Donovan 1983).



Figure 7. Catholic Mission School at Arltunga, January 1947.

Source: Creator Richard Duckworth. PH0542/0033, Richard Duckworth Collection, Northern Territory Library.

In addition to the Roper River Mission Station mentioned previously, the Anglican Church Missionary Society opened another outpost on Groote Eylandt off the east coast of the Territory in 1921. Elsewhere in the northeast of the Northern Territory, ‘the Methodist Church established missions along the coast of Arnhem Land on Goulbourn Island in 1916, on Milingimbi in 1923, at Yirrkala in 1935 and Elcho Island in 1942’ (Baker 2012, p. 2). In a demonstration of the importance of employment to the missionaries’ goals, it is reported that ‘Indigenous workers on Methodist missions in Arnhem Land were not only vital to mission development and survival, over time, they became an increasingly skilled, competent and reliable workforce’ (Baker 2012, p. 1). These newly established missions continued to use the now traditional approaches that positioned vocational education and training as an important element of the efforts to ‘improve’ the living standards of Aboriginal people and prepare them for a productive working life in the mainstream economy that was bearing down upon the traditional tribal lifestyles. ‘Indigenous participation in the economy of these missions led to an increased skills base amongst the majority of workers’ (Baker 2012, p. 1).

For a variety of reasons including the absence of voting rights, two world wars and the Great Depression, the day-to-day governance of the Northern Territory by nine Commonwealth-appointed Administrators in this time period did not provide residents with the same social and economic arrangements as experienced by other Australians.

In particular, Territorians were unable to exert sufficient political pressure on appropriate Governments and their instrumentalities to ensure the completion of educational infrastructure comparable with the Australian Capital Territory and the other States (Urvett 1982, p. 1).

In his 1930 analysis of the problems presented by the experiences of developing the Northern Territory as a successful contemporary economy, Price (1930, p. 58) argues against public, non-market investment in the jurisdiction as a partial result of the prohibition on the importation of foreign 'coloured labour'. Up to that date he reports that only the private sector efforts in the cattle, mining and pearl-shell industries have turned a profit.

Australia should learn from the Territory the greater safety of private as opposed to public enterprise, and the costly failures which State Socialism and Paternalism if misdirected, may bring in their train (Price 1930, p. 58, emphasis in original).

The Commonwealth's reluctance to invest in the Northern Territory during this early era of control was reflecting the national political and economic realities of the times. According to Butlin et al. (1982, pp. 29–37), the states were still the main spenders and funders of capital development and the Federal Government was forced to limit rather than expand expenditure. 'Public policy was now accommodated to the interests of three distinct groups: farm, manufacturing and labour (largely urban labour) interests' (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, p. 29). The various states' attempts to increase the farm populations and open up rural areas to development through assisted immigration ended up in the situation where 'many of these public efforts were disastrous failures' (1982, p. 30). As prescribed by Price above, the Commonwealth had little appetite to risk adding to the mounting number of failed development ventures funded out of the public purse. In fact, in 1933 a proposal for the Territory to be administered by a chartered company re-emerged after having been rejected in the initial handover discussions between South Australia and the Commonwealth (National Archives of Australia 2014a). Similarly, this revised proposal did not proceed even though the

Federal Government showed little interest in the social and economic development of the Northern Territory in the face of economic recessions following World War One and the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Public business undertakings aimed at improving capital infrastructure ensured that ‘the interests of urban and especially metropolitan activities were the primary beneficiaries’ most clearly demonstrated by the shift in resources to the building of highways and away from railways (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, p. 33). Although South Australia had extracted an undertaking from the Commonwealth to build a transcontinental railway in order to further develop the Northern Territory, this was only partially attended to by the end of this early period of Commonwealth control. In 1929, the southern railway from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs was completed providing a link to the emerging national railway system and a northern portion was completed from Darwin to Birdum about 500 kilometres away from the capital (National Archives of Australia 2014a) leaving a gap of some 1,000 kilometres. This marked the end of Commonwealth investment in the promised railway until the line was finally completed in 2004 having been funded by the South Australian, Northern Territory and Australian governments’ joint contributions.



Figure 8. Train (Commonwealth line) with new engines, Northern South Australia, January 1920.

Source: Creator Unknown, PH0386/0050, Bill Littlejohn Collection, Northern Territory Library.

Nevertheless, the Commonwealth was still willing to experiment with different forms of governance in its 'social laboratory' and electorally insignificant Northern Territory. In 1922, Commonwealth legislation (*The Northern Territory Representation Act*) provided for the election of a single member from the Territory to sit in the House of Representatives, but this member did not have any voting rights (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1974, p. 83). From 1927–31, the Northern Territory was divided into separate administrative areas each controlled by a Government Resident assisted by an Advisory Council. Central Australia was administered from Alice Springs while Northern Australia's governance structure resided in Darwin. Due to the high costs of this arrangement, the Northern Territory was reconstituted as a single jurisdiction in 1931 when the Commonwealth repealed the original legislation (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1974, p. 84). In 1936, the second step towards the reinstatement of political representation was taken when the member for the Northern Territory in the House of Representatives was given 'the right to vote on matters relating to Ordinances of the Territory' (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1974, p. 84).

The governance of the Northern Territory during this era was characterised by Heatley (1979, p. 82) as a situation where 'both policy-making and administration have been largely in the hands of [federal] ministers and the senior public servants' who were located initially in Melbourne and then Canberra. The mundane daily implementation of policy was left to the Administrator (with several exceptions to do with structural changes to the bureaucracy and military rule during World War Two). The behaviour of the ministers and administrators unwittingly provided a model of ministerial decision-making and direction that would be continued following self-government. While there is no record of government-funded vocational training for non-Indigenous Territorians from this period, the Administrator was willing to make detailed interventions into education resourcing. In a memo dated 25 March 1941, from the Administrator to the Director of Native Affairs, concerns about the proposed distribution of tools and machines to Aboriginal settlements are expressed:

I am not in favour of this. Under all the circumstances, I consider that when the half-caste school at Alice Springs is closed, the woodwork equipment should be forwarded intact to the Alice Springs school, where it would be utilised (National Archives of Australia 1961a).

The Director wrote back to the Administrator the following day agreeing to implement the decision and citing a similar precedent had been set in Darwin when the Bagot Reserve Aboriginal School had been closed and the equipment was transferred to the Darwin school.

The relationship between the European residents of the Northern Territory and the Federal Government's representative, the Administrator, got off to a poor start and never really recovered. The first Administrator, John Gilruth, clashed strongly with elements of the Territory population, particularly the trade unions, which eventually resulted in Gilruth's retirement and the subsequent forcible removal of his successor (Heatley 1990, p. 7). The federal ministers and senior public servants became very wary of the 'wild men of Darwin' (Heatley 1990, p. 10) and felt they could not be trusted with significant decision-making power or control of financial resources. Heatley (1990, p. 7) summarises this pre-World War Two period of Commonwealth control thusly: 'the brave new world of political and economic advance had not eventuated and the soaring hopes of 1911 had been replaced by truculence, disenchantment and even despair'. This antipathy towards the Commonwealth was ruthlessly exploited for decades to create an identity of a 'true Territorian' who is a victim of distant, uncaring governance that would usher in the next era following the war.

While the Northern Territory did not have any formal system of vocational education and training in this first period of Commonwealth control, it does not mean that the government had no interest in adult education more generally. Tannock (1975) has described how the Commonwealth Government's first major moves into education and training policy came about in an exercise of the emergency powers it had acquired in the name of national security to prosecute World War Two when it set up the Walker Committee in 1943. This interdepartmental committee was established to review Commonwealth responsibilities in the field of education and 'to recommend administrative machinery which might be established to facilitate the future development of Commonwealth education policy' (Tannock 1975, p. 4). The chair of the committee believed that 'the political future and unity of the country depends very largely on the use we make of general education, especially for adults' (Tannock 1975, p. 11). In addition, in support of the war effort the Commonwealth had affected a virtual takeover of the state-based technical education systems through the Technical Training Scheme and the programs offered to armed forces personnel through the Army Education Service (Tannock 1976).

Towards the end of World War Two, the Federal Government became more active in the provision of social services generally and the use of vocational education and training more specifically. In order to avoid a repetition of the economic depression and high levels of unemployment that had followed the end of World War One, a Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme was introduced in 1944 to provide educational and vocational training to the returned service personnel from World War Two. Substantial federal public funding was provided to the various state training systems and individuals to gain the skills that would allow these ex-service personnel to re-establish themselves in suitable civilian occupations. Training was available in one of three categories—professional, vocational or rural—and by the end of the scheme in mid-1951 over 300,000 people had been trained ‘making it one of the most significant strategies for social change in Australia’ (National Archives of Australia 2014b).

Because the actual delivery of this training was undertaken by the State Training Authorities, the Northern Territory’s lack of training facilities and capability meant that this major scheme bypassed the jurisdiction. While some characterise the lack of vocational training in the Northern Territory as purposeful neglect on the part of the Federal Government, it more accurately can be portrayed as an inability and incapacity on the part of the Commonwealth. Quite simply, with the exception of the emergency conditions associated with World War Two, the Commonwealth did not have either the desire or the infrastructure to provide training to the Territory’s civilian population. After considering the findings of a review it had commissioned, the Australian Prime Minister rejected the recommendations made in the 1944 Duncan Report into adult education that proposed a national system and the provision of Commonwealth funding. Whitelock (1973, p. v) reports, ‘Chifley himself, Duncan tells me, remarked that he did not wish “to buy into a fight with the States” on the issue of Federal control of an educational system as recommended in the Report’.

Writing towards the end of this early period of Commonwealth control of the Northern Territory, Price (1949, p. 142) describes the terrible living conditions and exploitation of Aboriginal people and declares that up until the end of World War Two, the ‘Federal record was darker and meaner than that of any state’. Aboriginal residents were not alone in this level of neglect. During the first 35 years of Commonwealth management

there was no local provision for secondary education, apprenticeship training, adult education or university study for the small European population in the Northern Territory either:

It is most noticeable that the Commonwealth Government did practically nothing for Aborigines until the 1940s and educational schemes did not start until the 1950s. The welfare of Aborigines up to that time had devolved upon the Christian missions (Hart 1970, p. 82).

In 1937, the report of the Northern Territory Investigations Committee that had been established by the Federal Government recommended a 25-year northern development plan to counteract '75 years of mismanagement and incompetence by both South Australia and the Commonwealth' and made particular reference to the blanket application of national planning that made little sense in this remote jurisdiction (Anon. 1937, p. 1).

Vocational education and training remained an apparatus to be used by the various missionaries to 'improve' the lot of Aboriginal Territorians. This commonsensical and philanthropically inspired use of training, and its associated funding, obscured what the future would hold for the incorporation of vocational education and training into public policy responses to problems associated with managing the entire population. The opportunity for the Commonwealth Government to take charge of training and use it as a device to monitor and direct the population was brought about as a consequence of the Japanese bombing Darwin and several other northern towns in 1942–43. This external threat to national security catalysed Australia's efforts to finally 'develop' the north following the end of World War Two, if only to protect from a possible future land invasion (Slim 1954).

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