Profiles of the Four Main Actors

THE MINISTER

Patrick McMahon Glynn (1855–1931)

An Irish barrister, Glynn emigrated to Australia in 1880 and was a South Australian delegate to the 1897 Sydney and 1898 Melbourne Federal Convention sessions. He is perhaps better known for his whirlwind courtship and marriage to Abigail Dynon during the Sydney Convention, and as the delegate who successfully proposed the insertion, at the beginning of the preamble to the Constitution, of the words ‘humbly relying upon the blessing of Almighty God’.¹

Glynn was a key player in the protracted negotiations between New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria, and chairman of the committee which drafted the interstate agreement formalising the Commonwealth River Murray Waters Act of 1915. As a politician and practising lawyer, he was hard-working, patient, and thorough. A complex character, he often seemed most comfortable when writing opinions and working through committees.

Colleagues admired his involvement in the processes of Federation and other political issues of the day, but often considered that he was too concerned with finer details rather than the larger picture. He would have countered that it was important to check all facts.
and opinions from several sources and so maintain independence and integrity in decision-making. This, as his departmental secretary quickly discovered, meant that off the cuff decisions were unlikely to be made, as detailed and careful documentation was needed to win him over to a preferred position. Meticulously correct when it came to his own use of government resources, Glynn also often required convincing when applications were made to raise salaries or increase expense allowances for departmental staff. But, when agreement had been reached on the desired action to be taken, he was prepared to fight fearlessly for this decision, in Cabinet and in other formal committees and informal negotiations.

By 1905, he was already known as a Federal politician whose general independence of thought and complete integrity was respected, even by those who found his rapid delivery, Irish accent, and literary allusions at times very difficult to understand. Under the heading ‘People we know — Policy and Principle’, The Melbourne Weekly Punch (31 August 1905:288) noted that many of his personal characteristics, while admirable, could also be drawbacks in political life. Contrasting his approach with that of George Reid, the writer observed that:

Political aptitude has carried Mr. Reid further than Mr. Glynn’s cosmopolitan culture. Mr. Glynn is a scholar and a sound lawyer. But Mr. Reid, who has less learning and is not a juror, has a natural gift of advocacy which has carried him beyond the student.

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Labour members cannot follow Mr. Glynn in his fine conceptions. He talks over their heads, but they respect his transparent sincerity and honesty. No one has ever hurled a nasty interjection at him. Like Mr. Skene he occupies a uniquely independent position. Members may agree or disagree with him, but they will always acknowledge his singleness of purpose.

A few years later, when Andrew Fisher was Prime Minister, Glynn’s fairness in debate and lack of vindictiveness was described in a pen
portrait by ‘Theseus’ in the Melbourne Argus (‘Among the Federal Members’, 13 August 1910:4):

Mr. Glynn’s orations contain light without heat. If he had lived under the previous Labour Government — that is to say, in France of 1793 — his fair-mindedness would certainly have brought him to the guillotine, but he would have spent the last ten minutes in demonstrating, calmly and philosophically, that his execution was an illogical and dangerous act, and when his head was in the basket his shoulders would have moved with the old familiar shrug.

The very best description of Mr. Glynn that I have ever read was printed this week, when an English batsman said of the bowler J. T. Hearne, “No other man in England bowls you out so honestly”. Mr. Deakin sends up googlies with unexpected results. Mr. Bruce Smith’s bowling is mostly off theory — dangerous to smack at, but right enough if left alone. As for Mr. Hughes and Mr. Joseph Cook, I mourn to say that the Speaker must cry “No ball” very often. Mr. Fisher’s fondness is for wides. But, Mr. Glynn pegs away with a dangerous straight ball; sooner or later the middle stump flies out of the ground, and Mr. Fisher retires to the pavilion to explain to the Treasury officials how it happened.

The writer summarised a recent debate on the proposal that, in order to pay for funeral and other expenses at the time of death, the old age pension should be paid for the whole period due to the pensioner.

As Mr. Kelly persisted in pleading for this little (and just) payment to help bury the poor old pensioner, Mr. Fisher began to assume his adamantine air. The proposal was unpractical. The cost of administration would be three times as much as the direct expenditure. The chances of decent burial for the pensioners looked blue. Then, suddenly, we had Mr. Glynn once more. He showed how the thing could be done cheaply and effectively; and Mr. Fisher had to consent, learning once more that one of the chief charms of a perfect theory is the fact that it is refutable. The Opposition proposed the concession, the Opposition
showed how it could be managed, and nothing was left for the Ministry save to change its mind, and agree.

Glynn’s position as one of the South Australian delegates to the Federal Convention had brought him into competition with several other South Australian lawyers, all vying for prominence and a future stake in the Federal arena. At the 1898 Melbourne convention session, when J. H. Gordon failed to gain agreement on federal control of the Murray River and its tributaries, Glynn would not let the matter drop. He managed to introduce an amendment that promoted South Australia’s right to a ‘reasonable’ river flow. However, delegates from New South Wales felt that they had already given away too much and the amendment was defeated.²

It was indicative of Glynn’s tenacity of purpose that he continued over the next two decades to work towards securing an agreement. His efforts were acknowledged when the Commonwealth River Murray Waters Act of 1915 was finally ratified by New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria.³

In 1912, his penchant for lengthy written opinions and exhaustive references worked against his candidature for judicial office. Gordon’s response to an inquiry from Hughes (who often found Glynn’s lengthy expositions infuriating) was that Glynn, although ‘a good enough fellow’, was a ‘pamphlet in breeches’ who would take far too long over judicial reviews and constitutional issues.⁴ Perhaps an even more negative factor, which destroyed any chance Glynn had of being appointed to the High Court, was his dislike of being any part of an implacable opposition, and his sense of fair play. Littleton Ernest Groom, a contemporary political colleague, who was not a member of the tightly competitive South Australian legal world, provided a more positive assessment. Under the heading ‘A Literary Member’, he described Glynn’s role as one of the makers of Federation (Brisbane Courier Mail 29/11/30:19).

One of the most beloved of the Federal members was that genial Irishman, the Hon. P. Mc. M. Glynn, of Adelaide. He won the
affection of his fellow members by his kindly nature and his wit. He was essentially a scholar. While busy with his political and ministerial duties, he continued to memorize beautiful passages of poetic literature. “I love literature,” he said. “It keeps the mind pure.” He lectured frequently on literary and historical subjects. A sincerely religious man, he made an eloquent speech in the Federal Convention in favour of the insertion of the words that are now in the preamble to the Constitution, “humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God”. He made a close study of the problems of the Murray River, and wrote a very complete report on the legal questions involved.

Along with many of his contemporaries in the new Federal Parliament, Glynn was continuously juggling his political, professional and family responsibilities. His diaries are interspersed with comments on political events and personalities, family celebrations and legal cases. With his wife and growing family in Adelaide, and a busy legal practice to attend to, Glynn sometimes found the lengthy train travel to Melbourne extremely tiring. After the 1913 Federal Session ended and he was able to return in time to share in the family celebrations, he recorded these comments:5

Christmas Day, 1913

It is five minutes to three; the members of the household are settling down to the ordinary distractions of an off-day after the feast of the festival.

I returned by the first express from Melbourne. The Session closed on Friday morning, just as dawn was setting in. It was eventful in being barren of matter. A Government without a majority while the Speaker was in the Chair, or for that matter in Committee pulled through. I managed to get passed the Bill to extend the Darwin and Pine Creek Railway fifty-four miles south eastwards to Katherine River; and the Norfolk Island Bill.

The weekly journey of over a thousand miles by train takes the edge, if any, of political life.
As the Minister for External Affairs, administrative issues relating to the Northern Territory and Papua may have seemed more pressing. Yet, despite these other distractions, Norfolk Island affairs would receive the same careful attention. It was this fair, judicious, but sometimes cautious and wordy politician, who was called upon by his departmental secretary to support and promote the cause of an unknown New South Wales public servant to be the first Commonwealth Administrator of Norfolk Island.

THE SECRETARY

Atlee Arthur Hunt (1864–1935)

In May 1901, Prime Minister Edmund Barton appointed his private secretary, Atlee Arthur Hunt, as secretary and permanent head of the Department of External Affairs, which, until 1909, also included the Prime Minister’s Office. During the next two decades Hunt played an important role in the development of Australia’s influence in the South-West Pacific. He visited and reported on British New Guinea in 1905 and helped secure the passage in 1906 of the Papua Bill, through which Australia assumed control of British New Guinea. Although clearly a man of his times, as far as immigration restrictions and general attitudes of racial superiority were concerned, he was also able to appreciate and respond to requests for exemptions and discretionary clauses. Davies describes him in these words: ‘Dapper, courteous and kind, Hunt left a reputation for initiative, political acumen and common sense’, and ‘concerned himself with establishing guiding principles of permanent value’.  

On 24 January 1907, a pen-portrait in the regular ‘People We Know’ feature in Punch, used the sub-heading ‘A social butterfly’. This was to illustrate how, when he became Barton’s private secretary, Hunt’s style of dress and general manner had led others to underestimate
him. The writer pointed out that critics had overlooked the knowledge and experience Hunt had gained from work in the New South Wales public service, and later as a barrister. Although he had been described in the Press ‘as a trifle domineering, a good deal dogmatic and greatly tenacious of purpose’, the report noted that these were important formative years in his life as well as that of the Commonwealth:

With the advent of Federation, Mr. Hunt became Secretary for External affairs, — than which there can be no more interesting position in the Public Service of Australia: He is the channel of communication between the Prime Minister and subordinate Departments, between the Federal Government and the Imperial Cabinet, between the Federal Government and State Ministers, between the Federal Government and foreign nations.

He strikes out on new lines. He is widely read, observant and has a good memory. Also, he is wise in his generation where politicians are concerned. When he errs it is generally from too much zeal and taking himself a little too seriously. These are things which time will rectify. He takes the keenest delight in his work, especially that which relates to the fascinating South Sea Islands, and he never goes wrong from inability to take pains.

Throughout his career, his independence of mind, and practice of departmental negotiations through informal as well as formal communications, were sometimes criticised, particularly by those who felt that more respect and formality was due to their position. During the transition to Commonwealth authority, all formal correspondence regarding Norfolk Island took place between the Governor of New South Wales and the Governor-General, and was then forwarded, often via the Premier or the Prime Minister, to the Ministers concerned. This ponderous process could sometimes be expedited, but only when both sides accepted the appropriateness of less formal and more direct communication.

On 3 May 1912, anxious to resolve the drawn out negotiations which had delayed the transfer of Norfolk Island to the
Commonwealth, Hunt wrote directly to the Governor of New South Wales, Lord Chelmsford. He noted that Chelmsford’s letter of 15 April to the Governor-General had been referred to the Department and would be submitted to the Minister after he returned from the Northern Territory towards the end of May. Hunt was not sure if Mr Thomas was familiar with all the circumstances, and would be glad to receive relevant reports, so that he could prepare a memorandum to brief the Minister on his return. Hunt concluded:7

I hope you will pardon me addressing you in this informal way but I know that you are anxious to have the question definitely settled as soon as possible, and the supply of information that I ask for will, I think, help towards that end.

It was clear from his curt reply that Chelmsford felt that this was over-stepping the mark, and that correct protocol should be followed. His reply of 21 May was short and to the point:

Dear Mr. Atlee Hunt

I have postponed answering your letter until I could forward the information.

I now enclose it, herewith, and hope it will be of value.

As I think it irregular and inconvenient to have private letters on public affairs, I have filed your letter with the official papers in the Norfolk Island Office. It will be a great thing if we can have the matter settled one way or the other.

Sincerely yours.

Chelmsford

Hunt clearly enjoyed the ‘behind-the-scenes’ power he was able to exert, particularly in defining Australia’s position in the South–West Pacific. At the beginning of his career as a Commonwealth senior public servant, he was closely involved in the awarding of a regional mail services contract to Burns Philp & Co. Its founder, Sir James Burns, was a major shareholder in the Australasian New Hebrides
Co. Ltd. A condition of the contract was that the company would provide assistance with land and passages to British settlers, both as a way of countering increased French settlement and as a natural extension of Australia’s sphere of influence.8

As a departmental secretary and senior political adviser in the early years of Federation, Hunt was instrumental in developing new procedures and protocols in dealing with inter-government relations. Yet, as the Governor-General’s reaction to the 1915 Royal Commission on Mail Services between Australia and the New Hebrides [discussed in detail in Chapter 7] illustrated, political and bureaucratic ambitions for Australia to acquire greater authority and recognition, often came up against Imperial insistence on ‘correct’ protocol.

While Hunt’s independence of thought and action sometimes created problems, his preference for parallel informal contacts reflected a genuine concern and loyal support for those with whom he worked — politicians and public servants alike. He had enjoyed working with Barton and Deakin. When the first Labor Ministry took over in April 1904 he recorded that: 9

My experience with the two Chiefs I have had has been exceptionally fortunate. For the future, though I hope to be on the best terms personally with the Minister, I can hardly expect to receive so much trust and assistance as I have done in the past.

Later he noted:

Mr Deakin wrote an appreciative note of the work of the staff, in which he refers to my “judgment, loyalty and unflagging zeal”. He could hardly have chosen words that would give me more pleasure.

This willingness to go the extra distance, above and beyond his departmental duties, was illustrated by his assistance to members of the family when E. L. Batchelor, then Minister for State for External Affairs, died in office in 1911. He showed the same concern for Glynn, who suffered bouts of ill health, often exacerbated when Parliament was in session by the weekly train journeys between
Adelaide and Melbourne. In March 1914, Glynn wrote that he was not feeling the best but would come over to Melbourne if necessary. Hunt immediately responded:\textsuperscript{10}

I am sorry to find from your letter that you are not so well as we would like you to be. I am very glad you have decided to remain over in Adelaide this week as the rest and the freedom from train journey will, I hope set you right. I am sure that everlastning travelling 1000 miles a week continually must tell on your nervous system. Please do not think of coming across. I do not see at present it is necessary to send anyone over but if you feel any difficulty I will send Carrodus or go across myself.

Perhaps the most illustrative example of Hunt’s concern for those working under difficulties can be found in the letters he exchanged in 1913 with H.E. Carey, then Private Secretary to the Administrator, and later Director of the Northern Territory. A serious industrial dispute had arisen while the Administrator, Dr J. A. Gilruth, was away from Darwin. This was not the first time that Carey had been left to resolve a simmering problem. He wrote rather despairingly to Hunt, outlining the difficulties of his situation. Hunt’s reply of 19 April 1913 is similar to many informal letters he wrote to departmental staff when they were in need of encouragement and support:\textsuperscript{11}

I don’t know what you have done in some former existence to be so plagued in this but it is a bit rough on you whenever the Administrator goes away for anything like a time to be pestered as you were last October and have been again lately.

I am just sending this line to convey my personal sympathy for you in your troubles. I did hope that by this time I should be on my way to Darwin, where not the least of my pleasures I look forward to is that of meeting you, but fates decreed otherwise and I do not seem any nearer getting that personal first-hand knowledge of the territory conditions which would help so much in my work.
At the same time Hunt’s friendly and informal manner was accompanied by a strictly official approach to terms and conditions of service. Despite his sympathy for Carey, Hunt could not support his request for a pay increase. On 29 November 1913, he responded pleasantly but firmly that this was not possible. At the same time he softened the decision, by adding an apology for reacting negatively to some government property valuations which Carey had provided.

I remember feeling when I read them that you were quite right and that had my attention been called to the previous communication which you referred to I should not have written as I did. I am always prepared to have my errors pointed out to me and think all the more of an officer when he takes a firm and courteous stand as to the soundness of his views or the wisdom of his actions.

This then, was the Secretary, whose personal and professional contacts with a New South Wales surveyor, later Officer-in-Charge of Norfolk Island Affairs, dated from Hunt’s early days as a clerk in the New South Wales Lands Department. During the next few years they were to become close personal friends, exchanging visits and sharing their official successes and private concerns. But, in 1914, the task was to gain the support of his Minister and, against all odds, Cabinet approval, for Michael Vincent Murphy, currently Chief Magistrate and Deputy Administrator, to be confirmed as the first Commonwealth Administrator of Norfolk Island.

THE ADMINISTRATOR

Michael Vincent Murphy (1859–1935)

Like Atlee Hunt, Michael Vincent Murphy attended Sydney Grammar School. He then entered the New South Wales public service as a cadet surveyor, joining the Surveyor General’s Department in 1878. In 1896, as a licensed surveyor, he was
attached to the Royal Commission on Norfolk Island Affairs, and spent three months on the Island with Commissioner C. N. J. Oliver. In 1898, he was directed to survey and map Lord Howe Island and was also involved in settling land disputes there.

In 1903, he was appointed secretary to the Norfolk Island Royal Commission on Land Matters. Commissioner Alexander Oliver was in ill health, but went to Norfolk Island in September 1903 and completed a report in 1904, shortly before his death. Oliver concluded this interim report by expressing great appreciation of ‘the valuable services rendered by Mr. M.V. Murphy, who has acted throughout in the threefold capacity of Secretary, Surveyor, and Guide’. The final report was published in 1906, and contains a survey map in which Murphy identified all leasehold, freehold and Crown land on the Island.\(^{12}\)

Over the next few years Murphy made additional surveys of Norfolk Island and was seconded to assist the Pacific Cable Board in the construction of the Cable Station and access road. In 1905 he was appointed Officer-in-Charge of Norfolk Island Affairs, and later became Deputy Administrator, reporting directly to the Governor of New South Wales. For several years he was closely involved in negotiations between the Commonwealth and successive New South Wales Governors over the transfer of control of Norfolk Island. Unofficial private correspondence with Hunt during 1909 and 1910 reflected the tensions which these negotiations created. On one occasion New South Wales refused permission for information to be provided, and on 11 August 1909 Murphy wrote somewhat ruefully to Hunt:\(^{13}\)

> I’m sorry I could not send you the information you required by Monday’s mail but the Premier has taken a very definite stand in the matter. I am quite sure you will understand that I am not in any way responsible for the delay. I will explain more fully when I see you.

As a practical surveyor and departmental officer, Murphy had a very matter-of-fact and down-to-earth approach to his work. This stood
him in good stead, both before and after his appointment as resident Administrator and Chief Magistrate on Norfolk Island. He fully realised that the combined roles of Administrator and Chief Magistrate sometimes placed him in an invidious position. Nonetheless, Murphy was able to work with and accept the idiosyncrasies of a small, conflict-ridden community, without becoming too closely involved. This talent had been remarked upon during his attachment to the Pacific Cable Board. On 24 February 1902, the General Manager had written to the Premier asking that Murphy’s term be extended as he was ‘an officer of great tact who has won the confidence of the Islanders’.\textsuperscript{14}

To quite a remarkable degree, Murphy was also able to gain the respect, trust, and enthusiastic support of successive New South Wales governors, in particular Sir Gerald Strickland, who presided over the final arrangements for the transfer of Norfolk Island to the Commonwealth. This meant that he could, without fear of the rebuke which Hunt had received from Lord Chelmsford, write unofficially to Sir Gerald Strickland. In one letter, dated 16 November 1913 and marked ‘Private’, he provided an update for the Governor on the twists and turns in local politics on the Island.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{quote}
The Executive Council here are not a happy family just now. There seems to be a feeling that Allen Buffert, the President, who is an honest and well intentioned islander is influenced by Charles Nobbs, the Vice President, another islander, who is much more clever, but whose motives do not always impress his fellow councilors, as being more in the interest of the Public than of himself. He is a Storekeeper and large land holder. His paddocks are fenced, and the present law seems to suit him. Masey Quintal, a lawyer is another islander, one of the elected members, who in the present case sides with the President & Vice President.
\end{quote}

His acquaintance with Hunt had begun in the 1880s when he was a surveyor and Hunt a clerk in the Lands Department. A warm friendship developed during the lengthy and sometimes tense negotiations with successive New South Wales governors and
departmental officials. In January 1914, after Murphy had been appointed the New South Wales Administrator, Hunt stayed with him at Government House. During this official visit, Murphy entertained members of the Executive Council, including Charles Nobbs, who was later to be the most persistent ‘thorn in the side’ and critic of successive Commonwealth Administrators.

Although his position was not confirmed until the following November, Murphy took over as Commonwealth Administrator on 1 July 1914. Murphy’s friendship with Hunt deepened over the next few years. When on official visits to Melbourne during his term as Administrator, Murphy and his son and daughter-in-law were frequently entertained by Hunt and his family and, in January, 1916, Hunt’s two sons, Bob and Bruce, spent a holiday on Norfolk Island. A sense of mutual understanding and respect is reflected in their continuing personal correspondence on political, bureaucratic, and family matters.16

In August 1916, Hunt wrote that, despite his wife’s anguished feeling that he was too young, their youngest son Bruce wanted to enlist as soon as possible after his eighteenth birthday. Bob had already enlisted and Hunt felt that he could not object, but wondered if perhaps Murphy could keep him for a few weeks longer on Norfolk Island. Despite these concerns, Bruce returned on time and other letters reported that he was enjoying army training. In February 1917, when the new War Ministry was announced, they shared their opinions of the new Ministers. Despite some regrets from Hunt at the departure of the amiable William Bamford, both agreed that Glynn was a most acceptable Minister with whom they could both work.

In 1919, Murphy wrote to alert Hunt that, although his term did not officially end until mid-1920, he would like to leave Norfolk Island at the end of the year. Clearly worn out by persistent petty conflicts and the intractable communication and transport difficulties which had made sustained economic development impossible to achieve, Murphy spent the last months of his contract in Sydney
sorting out land transfers and other administrative matters. His last letter, in the Hunt papers at the National Library of Australia, was written in September 1920. It reports how much Murphy and his family had enjoyed a visit to their home from Hunt’s wife and son Bob. A year later, the Governor of New South Wales presented him with the obsolete Norfolk Island Imperial Seal, as a token of appreciation of his service, both to the Government of New South Wales and to the Commonwealth. This created some unexpected problems, which are outlined in Chapter 7.

In 1926, following a Royal Commission on problems relating to the administration of Norfolk Island, Murphy returned as the interim Administrator. Accompanied by his son and daughter-in-law, he spent a further six months settling disputes and calming the community after the turmoil of the termination of Colonel E. T. Leane’s appointment. It is illustrative of his practical approach to the position of Administrator, that one of the complaints during the Royal Commission hearings was that, unlike Murphy or his successor General Parnell, Leane had introduced an extraordinary level of pomp and ceremony out of keeping with the Islands more democratic ethos. E. D. Ogilvie, a retired Naval Officer, pointed out that: ‘While Mr. Murphy and General Parnell mingled freely and easily with the people, the present administrator and his wife do not’.17

Unlike Glynn and Hunt, Murphy’s personal background is less well documented. At the time of his appointment some testimonials referred to him as ‘single’ but, after he became Commonwealth Administrator, his son Claude was appointed as his private secretary. Claude’s wife Edith acted as Murphy’s official hostess, and managed the domestic arrangements of Government House. The shipping invoices for Claude and Edith Murphy’s return to Sydney in February 1927, refer to fares for Mrs. C. V. Murphy and two children. After this last encounter with Norfolk Island, Murphy and his expanded family retired back to his home in Lindfield. When he died in 1935, a letter to Claude from the Prime Minister’s Department and an obituary in the Sydney Morning Herald...
recorded, in the understated way which had been the hallmark of his professional career, Murphy’s service to New South Wales, the Commonwealth of Australia and Norfolk Island.\textsuperscript{18}

But, in 1914, Sir Gerald Strickland’s earlier appointment of Murphy as Acting Administrator and Chief Magistrate was seen by some as an attempt to force the Commonwealth’s hand. This meant that, despite all the glowing testimonials, it was far from certain that he would continue in the position.

\section*{THE PATRIOT}

\textit{Charles Chase Ray Nobbs (1859–1938)}

During the early years of Commonwealth control of Norfolk Island, C. C. R. Nobbs, a farmer, businessman and local councillor, was one of the most influential and persistent proponents of self-government and islander rights. A grandson of George Hunn Nobbs, he had spent several years in Sydney, as a school boy and bank officer, before returning to Norfolk Island in 1882. His biographer describes him as: ‘Staunchly loyal to the British Empire, he defended Norfolk’s rights to self-government and exclusive rights to land, free from Australian interference’.\textsuperscript{19} His education, diligence, and more cosmopolitan experience soon drew the attention of official visitors to the Island. In 1885, Commissioner Henry Wilkinson reported to the Governor of New South Wales, Lord Loftus, that after a public meeting with the islanders:\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{quote}
It was also agreed that two gentlemen, Messes Francis and Charles Nobbs, who will visit Sydney in March should confer with the trading merchant and inform him as to the stores required, and the produce likely to be ready for market.
\end{quote}

After a more prolonged stay, Wilkinson provided a definitive report to the Governor. He had checked all the land registers and sealed the
books until such time as new regulations were approved. In the meantime.  

I have supplied Mr. Charles Nobbs with the necessary formulae, and have requested him to make out any wills and agreements with regard to the sale of land, etc., and retain copies of all such documents until your Excellency’s pleasure is known regarding the matter.

Nobbs was a strong supporter of self-government and only reluctantly accepted the initial annexation to New South Wales, with New Zealand as an alternative option. When the New South Wales Deputy Administrator William Houston visited Norfolk Island in 1903, the notes of his interview with the coffee planter Alfred Waterhouse recorded the following exchange:

Mr. Waterhouse: Charlie Nobbs, a week before you came, was strong on annexation to New Zealand if they could not get it to New South Wales. Now he has turned round.

Mr. Houston: What does he want now?

Mr. Waterhouse: He wants local self-government.

Mr. Houston: That will come probably, but it won’t come with these people — it will come possibly bye-and-bye — not with these people.

Nobbs became known as an energetic and progressive farmer and trader, always ready to take up any new opportunity. In 1913, when the New South Wales Administrator M.V. Murphy introduced the idea of experimental agricultural plots, Nobbs was one of the first to volunteer to take part. When Atlee Hunt made an official visit in January 1914, Nobbs was also an active participant in formal and informal meetings, and met socially with Hunt at Government House. At that time, he was apparently quite sanguine regarding the takeover by the Commonwealth, believing that the removal of Australian tariffs would improve trade and economic progress. However, his general antipathy to outside control soon increased
when the salary and other conditions of the Commonwealth Administrator were published in the *Government Gazette*. On 15 August 1914, he wrote to Miss Gertrude Farr that:

Mr. Murphy has been reappointed Administrator by the Federal Government at a salary of 700 pounds per annum with 100 pounds allowance and a free house. I mention this fact because I think that it is a wasting of a good deal of money which might be diverted to other necessary matters. I think 400–500 pounds per annum with a residence is ample for any one holding this position, because at the most, there will not be much work attached to the position.

It can only be imagined how he reacted to the news that Murphy’s son Claude had been appointed as the Administrator’s private secretary, and would receive an initial salary of 156 pounds. During Murphy’s term as administrator, Nobbs became increasingly strident in his opposition, particularly after he was fined for failing to obey quarantine regulations. The vituperative tone of many of his letters of complaint was strangely at odds with the more moderate criticism he had earlier voiced. Undoubtedly, Murphy’s dual role of Administrator and Chief Magistrate provided a great deal of ammunition for attacks on particular rulings. Unfortunately, whatever the logic of his arguments may have been regarding a particular complaint, most were without foundation.

In Australia, with conflicts surrounding the issue of conscription and looming problems as to what to do with returned soldiers, the problems and tensions on Norfolk Island probably received only limited attention. Some of Nobbs’ accusations, particularly those which related to the accidental drowning of four young Islanders, may have been aimed at shocking the Minister and his Departmental Secretary into a more prompt response. However, they seemed to have the opposite effect. By February 1918, even Glynn, usually the most kindly and equable of Ministers, had lost patience with Nobbs, writing on the margin of one complaint ‘Similar complaints in the past have not raised any *prima facie* inference of reasonableness’.24
Despite all attempts to get him to moderate his crusade against the Administrator, the barrage of complaints continued until the end of Murphy’s term in office. In 1921, after General Parnell took over as Administrator, Nobbs was elected President of the Executive Council. His term was only for that year, and he seemed to lose some of his zest for the fight against the administration. This may have been because of increasing financial problems due to the failure of the lemon juice industry, in which he had heavily invested. However, in 1924, he applied unsuccessfully for the position of Administrator and, when Colonel Edward Leane was appointed, returned to the attack with renewed vigour. In the light of subsequent events, it is ironic that in a memorandum to the Minister dated 31 October 1924, Leane, while rejecting a complaint from Nobbs, also provided the following positive assessment.

As you are doubtless aware, Mr. Nobbs is a man of strong feelings, who clothes his propositions in extravagant language. His motto is, “Norfolk Island for the Norfolk Islanders”, the apex of his ambition is to become Administrator of Norfolk Island, and until then he cannot see any good in the Administration, or your Administrators.

On the other hand, independent of this idiosyncrasy, he is a good man. He has brought up 16 children on Norfolk Island and given every one of them a first class education in Sydney, and he is without doubt the most progressive man of the community, I wish there were more of his calibre, even with all his failings.

Nobbs was to prove more successful in his efforts to get rid of Leane, whose term of office was terminated in mid-1926. In a further, somewhat whimsical, turn of fate, it was Murphy, the earlier target of his most trenchant criticisms, who was then called back as interim administrator, to bring peace to the troubled community. Until his death in 1938, Nobbs lost none of his enthusiasm for a fight, or his determination to maintain the rage against Norfolk Island’s dependent status. At the same time, it is clear that he was often in conflict with other community leaders, and that he may have had more in common with business and commercial contacts, both on Norfolk Island and in Australia.
In 1931, he was one of a group of businessmen and government officers who unsuccessfully presented a petition to the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales seeking approval for ‘Lodge Norfolk’ to be established on the Island. He continued his interest in community and council affairs and was again elected Council President. However, in August 1934, after continuing conflict with Administrator C.R. Pinney, Nobbs was removed from this position. Undaunted, he was elected as a councillor later in the year, successfully obtained sitting money due to him and, although initially claiming 3000 pounds, was finally awarded only two pounds in technical damages. Nobbs seemed quite unperturbed by this setback. At a Council meeting on 21 April 1937, now aged 78 and in failing health, he successfully moved that:

Having regard to the unhappy and unfortunate experience of the Island during the past four years, the Council most earnestly urges that the term of office of any Administrator or Official Secretary should in no circumstances extend beyond three years, unless on the express wish of at least two-thirds of the electors.

Throughout his life, Nobbs corresponded with a wide variety of friends and acquaintances, and his dedication and persuasive approach won over many politicians and other influential Australians. He died on 31 July 1938, survived by twelve of his sixteen children. He had outlived the other three principle players in the first Commonwealth Administration, winning many battles for Norfolk Island although failing to achieve the ultimate goal of self-government for his beloved homeland.
Endnotes


2 Glynn’s amendment, was decided after a tied vote by the Chairman, Sir R.C. Baker. A South Australian, Baker stated: ‘In what I conceive to be the interests of the federation of these colonies, I vote with the Noes’. *Official Record of the Debates of the Australasian Federal Convention*, Third Session, Melbourne 1898 Volume 1:636.


5 NLA: MS 4653, Glynn diaries.


7 NAA: CP697/41 1912/348, ‘Re Commonwealth Government’s take-over of Norfolk Island administration’.


9 NLA: MS1100, Hunt Diaries, entries for 21 and 27 April 1904.

10 NLA: MS52 Series 28. Hunt papers, letter to Glynn dated 16 March 1914

11 NLA: MS 52/18/1036–1054, Hunt papers.


13 NLA: MS52/20/1169–1224, Hunt papers.

14 NAA: A1 1926/16927 ‘Murphy, M.V. — Appointment as Administrator, Norfolk Island’.

15 NAA: CP697/56/1, Norfolk Island’.

16 NLA: 52/20/1169–1224, Hunt papers.

17 NAA: CP423/1, Bundle 1, ‘Transcripts of evidence at Royal Commission, Whyall Commissioner’.

18 *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 July 1935:10.


22 NAA: A 37/1, ‘Norfolk Island. Papers from Mr. Houston’, Notes of a private meeting between the Deputy Administrator W. Houston and Alfred Waterhouse, 16 May 1903.

23 NLA: 4653/16/253, Glynn papers.

24 NAA: CP 423/2 ‘Royal Commission on Norfolk Island Affairs’ Exhibit No. 75.


26 In the biodata supplied with this petition, Nobbs is recorded as having been initiated into Lodge Macquarie, New South Wales, in 1880, with a certificate to that effect dated 18 June 1881. See Grahame H. Cumming, *Freemasonry on Norfolk Island*, West Pennant Hills, 1996.

Cook Ministry (1913–06–24 to 1914–09–17)
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