The Commonwealth takes Control

The Norfolk Island Bill (1913) was presented in Parliament and the Minister for External Affairs gave the Second Reading speech on 16 September 1913. He had been well-briefed by his Secretary and provided with copies of the relevant Orders in Council, Commissioner Oliver’s 1903 report, and other administrative and historical material.

Glynn began by reminding his colleagues that, in 1909, a Bill for the transfer of Norfolk Island to the Commonwealth had been before the House. However, it had not proceeded, as further negotiation with the Governor of New South Wales had been required. In response to a question as to why, if Norfolk Island were so much closer to New Zealand than Australia, it would not be better for New Zealand to take it over, he stated:1

I do not believe in surrendering what seems to be our domain. I hope that the interests of Australia will be more manifest in the future, and I say it with the greatest of respect to other nations, whose ideas of government, if applied, may tend as much to the amelioration and advancement of the natives as our own. Placed, as we are, the greater the control we have of islands like Norfolk Island, the better it may be for the people there and here.

While noting that only a small proportion of arable land was under cultivation, Glynn reported that, once greater access to markets was assured, there was every hope that agricultural production would
increase. He was aware that some members might consider that Norfolk Island would prove more of a liability than an asset. Treading delicately, he outlined the history of the *Bounty* descendants, and the present system of governance in which absolute authority was vested in the Governor of New South Wales. However, when asked if Norfolk Islanders would immediately receive a vote in similar provisions to that of Northern Territory and Papua, he demurred:

I think we may proceed too quickly. I am a thorough believer in responsible government. If there have been any troubles at Norfolk Island to an extent it may have been from the lack of a sense of social responsibility, which comes from the outside control of the Governor, who cannot, in the nature of things, often visit the island.

He rejected a suggestion that any lack of social responsibility might be related to the islanders being descendants of mutineers, firmly stating that he had read a history of these descendants and: ‘I hope that the word “mutineer” will not be used invidiously’. He reassured members that previous misunderstandings with Imperial authorities over import restrictions had now been settled. In addition, Glynn emphasised that this was another significant stage in the process of Federation.

I have already mentioned, as a reason for taking the island over, our interest in the development of the Pacific, and there is, of course, the consideration that there should be vested in the Commonwealth the control of all islands at present under the control of the States — that dependencies of the Commonwealth that are not part of a State ought to be passed over to the Commonwealth.

In response to another question, he acknowledged that the people of Norfolk Island, ‘know what is going on; but they have not been consulted by the Government’. This point definitely struck home. Although the notion of prior consultation had not been previously considered, arrangements were immediately made for Hunt to visit Norfolk Island as soon as the Bill was passed. This would enable
him to discuss the implications of the change with the residents, the Administrator, and other government officers.

While there was relatively little interest in, or opposition to, its main purpose, the Bill did encounter some criticism in the committee stage of deliberations. Glynn was back in Adelaide and had been in touch with a number of former residents of Norfolk Island, including Gertrude Farr, who passed on to him the reassuring letters she had received from Charles Nobbs, and other members of the Norfolk Island community. On 24 October, Hunt wrote to inform Glynn of the progress of the Bill through the committee stages. He had been very optimistic that all would go smoothly as ‘at first progress was delightful’. But Opposition members thought it was all going too quickly and again raised the question of leasehold versus freehold allocations of land.2

Concern that the Norfolk Islanders should be more fully involved continued to be expressed, particularly by Dr W. Maloney, Member for Melbourne. He had visited the Island on two occasions, and a number of Islanders had lodged complaints with him regarding past injustices. In particular, they strongly criticised New South Wales, for carrying out the evictions from Crown buildings in 1907 and 1908. Maloney told the House that:3

The year 1907 was a sad year for Norfolk Island. That was the year of eviction. I am satisfied that the Commonwealth Government would never have done what the New South Wales Government of that day did. I am glad that the Island which is the heritage of the Pitcairners is to be brought under the more beneficent role of the Commonwealth.

The debate continued, but, on his return to Melbourne, Glynn finally won the day, noting in his diary on 24 November that: ‘I got the Norfolk Island Bill through the House of Representatives last week’. Some further delays occurred after the Bill had been sent back and forth to the Senate, but it was finally approved in December, just before the House adjourned for the Christmas recess. Glynn was clearly reassured by the positive views expressed in
the letter Nobbs had sent Gertrude Farr. He copied it into his dairy, noting that it was ‘one of three letters received by a lady who spent some years on the Island’.4

On 31st December, the Secretary for the Department of External Affairs, Atlee Hunt, left Sydney for Norfolk Island. He arrived on 5th January and spent 10 days consulting with the Administrator, members of the Executive Council, and other officials. A public meeting was held and a series of formal and informal discussions took place with Islanders, including Charles Nobbs. Although his report reflects the colonial attitudes of racial and social superiority of the day, it was clear that Hunt appreciated the ‘hospitality and mutual self-help’ which were exhibited. At the same time, a lack of motivation and a gentle, easy going nature would mitigate against efforts to develop the island. To overcome these problems, he considered that an injection of capable and enthusiastic settlers would probably be required. On the other hand, while critics had spoken of the lack of morals and ‘untruthfulness and practiced concealment’ of the Islanders, Hunt felt that whatever might have been true in the past, ‘it is the opinion of many well-qualified to judge that this community will at the present bear comparison in regard to morals generally with any in the Commonwealth or the Empire’.5

He clearly enjoyed the warm welcome he had received, not only from Murphy as Administrator, but from many others on the Island. Gifts were exchanged, and contact maintained, with the friendship widening to include Hunt’s family. With the assistance of the New South Wales Department of Agriculture, Murphy continued to work on the project to encourage islanders to increase agricultural production. On 13 March 1914, after returning from a visit to Sydney, he wrote to Hunt asking if there had been any further developments in the formal acceptance by the Commonwealth. In the meantime he reported that: ‘I am going on with the Demonstration Plots. Ross, Chief Inspector of Agriculture N.S.W. came down with me to complete arrangements.’ The letter ended with ‘Kind regards to Mrs. Atlee and yourself and love to Molly and the boys’.6
The Order in Council assenting to the Norfolk Island Act 1913 was proclaimed on 30 March 1914. Arrangements now began in earnest for the final proclamation, which would transfer Norfolk Island to the authority and control of the Commonwealth. On the same day, Hunt had written to Murphy asking his opinion as to whether mention should be made of the origins of the Pitcairners as descended from mutineers and Tahitian women. This was because: ‘Mr. Glynn said that he thought it would be most injudicious to say anything about their origin’. Hunt thought they were rather proud of their origins and that mention should be made of this fact. However, just to be sure that his understanding of the feelings of the Islanders was correct, he asked Murphy to send a two word cable ‘Origin Yes’ or ‘Origin No’ His personal letter also reported that suggestions had been made that the ruins of the old convict gaol should be removed ‘because so long as they remain they revive memories of convict times’. He concluded with best regards to all friends ‘especially the Stephenson household and remember me to the Dicketts, Cox, the Rossiters and Mrs. Metcalfe, Charlie Nobbs and Macey Quintal.’

On 9th April, Hunt received a cable from Murphy : ‘Origin Yes’.

On 29th April, Hunt reported that the Minister was still undecided as to when Hunt’s report on Norfolk Island should be published. There had been a change of Governor-General and political uncertainties made it impossible to be definitive about plans for the ceremonial takeover of the Island. He hoped that the mail of 1 June would carry full instructions.

By that time we shall have our new Governor-General here and shall perhaps see by then what is going on in the whirligig of politics. Mr. Glynn, I think, will try to get the Governor-General himself to go over, in which case he will probably accompany him, but of course the political situation will settle the matter. It would never do for the Governor-General to be away even for a week at a time of crisis.

One reason for Glynn’s hesitation with regard to publication may have been the unflattering assessment by Hunt of the Islanders’
general intelligence and capacity for hard work. As the Minister responsible, Glynn was concerned that the decision to take over Norfolk Island had not been universally applauded. Echoing the views of Sir Henry Parkes that Norfolk Island could prove to be a ‘white elephant’, some politicians feared that substantial Commonwealth funds would be needed to develop the Island. Matters dragged on and the delay created some tensions on the Island. Murphy wrote to Hunt on 12th May that: ‘We are just marking time until we are taken under the Commonwealth wing. No one seems to love us now.’ He was concerned that appropriate financial arrangements would be made in time and also asked if it was intended to retain Werner (the New South Wales Chief Police Constable), as it was important to maintain continuity in police matters. He concluded with respectful regards to Mr. Glynn and ‘chin chin to yourself from all here’.

Whatever hopes Hunt may have had regarding Murphy’s continued appointment were soon dashed. The Cabinet decided that the position should be publicly advertised. On 21 May he sent Murphy an official Memorandum:

I confirm my cablegram to you of 20th Instant, the decode of which is as follows:-Government intend to proclaim transfer July 1st. It has been decided that in accordance with usual practice of government applications will be publicly invited for position of Administrator. Notice will appear in Commonwealth Gazette 26th May returnable 16th June. Telegraph whether you desire to be considered applicant. Salary 700 (pounds) allowances 100 (pounds).

As other political matters began to take precedence, and the government struggled for survival, it became less and less likely that any Commonwealth dignitaries would go to Norfolk Island to celebrate the proclamation. In these circumstances, with his Minister and other Cabinet members preoccupied with planning their election campaigns, it was very difficult for Hunt to secure a decision on the administrator’s position. The death of his brother Eugene, and his own recurring ill health, had created additional
distractions for Glynn. Towards the end of June, Sir Gerald Strickland directed Murphy to return to Sydney to prepare for the formal transfer of records and financial arrangements. Before leaving Norfolk Island he wrote to Hunt thanking him for sending copies of the Order in Council and the draft proclamation, and describing plans for the Island ceremony.8

I shall not be here, the Governor having cabled for me to return to Sydney by this boat, re transfer of the island records, goods chattels etc., but we have decided to hold a public meeting on the 1st July to be opened as usual with prayer by the Chaplain at Rawson Hall. The Commonwealth Blue Ensign will be broken with full honours. The cadets will form the guard … The National Anthem will peal forth and the ceremony will be made as impressive as possible. Uniformed officers will stand at the salute, civilians will uncover. Speeches will be made by the Acting Administrator, the Deputy Chief Magistrate, the President of the Executive Council and also by the Vice-President.

He noted that the financial benefits of the transfer with regard to trade and tourism would be emphasised and the advantages of selected investment and settlement by mainlanders. He concluded: ‘I am now doing all I can to make the 1st July a Red Letter Day here’. This ‘personal and private’ communication also included a somewhat tongue-in-cheek summary of the positive themes which would be conveyed in the various speeches.

The tariff yoke will be removed by Australia, her foot will be taken from the brake of our little island coach whose wheels will be made to run more freely. … Our girls will grow more beautiful, our men stronger. Orchards, coffee plantations and prosperous farms will abound, and henceforth our escutcheon shall bear the cornucopia.

Hunt had already raised with his Minister the question of Murphy continuing in office as the Commonwealth Administrator, emphasising that his knowledge of, and acceptance by, the Islanders would ease the transition. Glynn was quite open but required more information to counter the negative feelings of some of his
colleagues that Murphy was a lackey of the New South Wales Governor and that a ‘new broom’ was needed. Nothing further was done and Hunt became somewhat impatient. He was aware that the position of Administrator (set at 700 pounds a year, accommodation, travel and other allowances) would be eagerly sought after, particularly by retired Army officers.9

On 17 June, the Order in Council placing Norfolk Island under the authority of the Commonwealth of Australia, and the Governor-General’s Proclamation that the Act would come into effect on 1 July, were published in the Commonwealth Gazette [See Appendix 6]. A few days later, the Archbishop of Sydney wrote to Prime Minister Joseph Cook, seeking an appointment to support a Mr. T. G. Adamson, an applicant for the Administrator’s post. Hunt realised that it was time to put more pressure on his Minister, by giving compelling reasons why Murphy was the best candidate. He provided Glynn with some background details and a personal testimony of observations during his January visit. There was strong support for the appointment from a wide range of local leaders and businessmen, and Murphy was considered to be a person of ability, tact and commonsense. He described Murphy’s approach as ‘friendly without being familiar’, and noted that he was adept at sorting out the many small but continual land disputes which arose between individuals and families.10

An officer which had not had previous experience amongst the Islanders and who did not thoroughly understand their peculiarities would probably fail to amicably settle difficulties of this kind. Mr. Murphy, having a thorough knowledge of the customs and feelings of these simple folk, is necessarily placed at a distinct advantage in such matters. He has surveyed practically every square foot of the Island, and the inhabitants are fully aware of that fact, which causes them to look upon his decisions with respect.

Murphy’s unique position as a licensed surveyor meant that there would be less cost to the Department if he were appointed, as he
could oversee and sign off on any surveying which was required. The work on experimental agricultural plots which he had inaugurated with the help of the New South Wales Agricultural Department, and other activities to promote the welfare of the Islanders, could continue smoothly. Hunt also suggested that the wariness and feelings of uneasiness many Islanders felt towards the Commonwealth would be increased if a change of Administrator also took place.

I feel confident that this restlessness would be considerably accentuated if Mr. Murphy was removed from his present position as Administrator. He has so won the esteem and regard of the Islanders, and they look upon him with such affection, that not to appoint him as their head would cause great dissatisfaction throughout the Island generally, and would no doubt seriously interfere with the smooth working of the new territory.

Despite these reassurances, the Minister seemed disinclined to take a stand against what Hunt began to suspect was some opposition among Cabinet members for the continuation of a New South Wales officer, particularly one who had strong backing from Sir Gerald Strickland. Glynn needed further proof and reassurance that Murphy was the right man to act in the dual role of Administrator and Chief Magistrate. So, in a formal memorandum to Glynn, Hunt threw professional protocol to the winds and took the unprecedented action of presenting an official ‘on-the-record’, personal testimonial.11

Memorandum for the Minister

With respect to Mr. Murphy’s application for the position of Administrator of Norfolk Island, I would like to place on record my recommendation that he be appointed to the post.

I have had personal acquaintance with Mr. Murphy for 35 years, and know him to be a man of high character. For some years I was brought into daily contact with him. During the last 10 years I have had occasional interviews with him on the subject of Norfolk Island,
and have been able to appreciate his complete grasp of all office matters concerning the management of its affairs.

When I was in the Island in January last I met all the principal persons, and obtained from them their opinions with regards to Mr. Murphy personally and as Administrator. I would particularly mention Mr. Dicketts, the Officer in Charge of the Cable Station, Dr. Patton, Government Medical Officer, Archdeacon Uthwatt, of the Melanesian Mission, and representatives of the Methodist and Seventh Day Adventist Churches. I would also mention Mr. Charles Nobbs, one of the most highly educated and intelligent of the Islanders of Pitcairn descent and Mr. Macey Quintal, who is of Pitcairn birth and was educated as a barrister in New Zealand. Those two are perhaps the foremost men amongst the original settlers, while Mr. Pearson, ex-banker of Sydney, and Mr. Pinkerton — both storekeepers of full European blood, and Messrs. Waterhouse, formerly of Sydney, planters and traders, are highly respected in the Island. From all of these persons I received strong testimony to the fact that Mr. Murphy was in every way suited for the position, and that he carried out his duties with ability, and what is even more important in a community composed as is that of Norfolk Island, with marked tact.

In moving about the Island in Mr. Murphy’s company I had daily opportunities of observing the relations between himself and the general community, and could not fail to be struck by the respect universally paid to him and the admirable terms, which were friendly without being familiar, on which he was with the inhabitants. He knows everybody on the Island — man, woman, and child — and I think that his removal would be felt as a very severe blow.

With regard to the magisterial portion of his duties, this is not heavy and requires more the exercise of sound common sense than any special legal training. I heard no complaint of any kind as to decisions which had been given by him.

Atlee Hunt

Secretary

23rd June 1914
It is perhaps indicative of the positive relationship and mutual respect that existed between the Secretary and his Minister that Hunt was able to write with such urgency and exert such pressure for immediate action. At the same time, Glynn’s natural caution and attention to detail meant that he needed to obtain independent confirmation from the church leaders and others who had contacted him over Norfolk Island affairs. This would enable him to respond to questions from the Prime Minister or any less enthusiastic members of the Cabinet.

The strong support Murphy was receiving from Sir Gerald Strickland, and his position as a New South Wales departmental officer, were clearly not in his favour. There may have also been some suggestion that Murphy was a less desirable appointee because he was a Catholic who was being supported by the Catholic Governor of New South Wales; Glynn had to have a very strong case to present to Cabinet. At the same time, many of Murphy’s strongest supporters were Anglican and several had been connected with the Melanesian Mission. Glynn had been contacted by a number of Anglican church leaders and others who had visited or worked on Norfolk Island. All had spoken highly of Murphy as a very suitable person to continue as Administrator. He and his wife now paid a call on Miss Gertrude Farr, at the Anglican Manse in North Adelaide, to confirm the support from the Norfolk Island community for Murphy’s appointment. The daughter of a missionary, Miss Farr had spent some time with her family on Norfolk Island and had taught at a private school run by Miss Minnie Buffett. She was unable to provide Glynn with additional letters as the household was about to move and the original letters had been packed away. However, anxious to support Murphy’s appointment, she provided written confirmation of the views which had been conveyed to her:12

Miss Buffett wrote that she feared least Mr. Murphy’s appointment would only last six months & that then there would be another change. These continual changes play havoc with the Island.
Archdeacon Comins late Chaplain of Norfolk Island under Government, & a member of the Mission staff & resident for 30 years on Norfolk Island spoke last year of Mr. Murphy’s possible appointment as likely to be excellent as he thoroughly understood the Norfolkers. During my sister’s residence on the Island when Mr. Murphy was frequently to and fro on Government business the Norfolkers always spoke of him as one they could implicitly trust … The late Dr Metcalfe thought very highly of him. Mr. Murphy came to the Island with Mr. Oliver. I was there then living among the Norfolkers who singled him out at once as one who had their interests in view.

Noting that the Islanders needed calm encouragement and under the wrong person could become very ‘troublesome’, Miss Farr concluded:

My sister says ‘if they send another of those Sydney swells who know nothing about the Island they will just throw everything back’. A good deal of the recent trouble has been caused by social jealousies & a middle-aged unmarried man is able to carry on the work of the Island and not be mixed up in petty social difficulties which arise from the islanders being a community that recognises no social distinctions & a governor’s wife must create a society & come against this deep-rooted communal instinct.

On the 27th June, Murphy wrote to Hunt from Sydney asking what was happening but, not wishing to be appear anxious, ending on a philosophical note:13

As far as my position is concerned I don’t feel any anxiety. Under section 7 of the Norfolk Island Act itself, my continuation in office is provided for. Sir Gerald, however, seems to have been perturbed by the Gazette notice calling for applications for the position. Personally I am glad it was done, but one doesn’t like the particulars broadcasted in all the papers, but that was inevitable.

Despite Murphy’s belief that he could continue in office as a temporary measure, Hunt felt that the situation needed speedy resolution. This was not only for his friend’s security of tenure, but
because uncertainty would mitigate against a smooth transition to Commonwealth control. In a final attempt to obtain an immediate decision, Hunt wrote again to his Minister. This was a very strong and impassioned effort which concluded with suggestions that, if Murphy were not appointed, there could be some grounds for compensation. There could also be negative reactions, not only from Sir Gerald Strickland, but possibly the Colonial Secretary as well.14

Melbourne, 27th June, 1914

Dear Mr. Glynn

You will remember that you said something about a message to be conveyed to the people of Norfolk Island to be read at the ceremony on the 1st July. Will you draft a message you desire transmitted so that it may be in readiness for cabling on Tuesday morning as that will be the last available opportunity.

I do not want to be too persistent on the subject of appointing Mr. Murphy but I do not want any action to be taken without full knowledge of all the circumstances. I would, therefore, like to put these two points before you.

First, you are aware that there is a certain degree of feeling in the Island adverse to the Commonwealth. Before my visit there was a good deal of hesitation amongst the people in accepting the new order of things. That was largely due to a misunderstanding which I think my explanations removed but I feel sure from what I saw in the Island that the personal feeling being passed over and we shall, therefore, begin our new regime with a general feeling of mistrust in the minds of our people regarding the operations of the Commonwealth. They will think that the transfer has been affected not for the purpose of securing benefits for themselves but for the purpose of providing an opportunity for the Government to bestow patronage.

Secondly, and this perhaps a more important consideration, is the attitude which will be taken by the Government of New South Wales. As you are aware that Government through its various Departments has materially assisted the administration during the last few years and
it was my recommendation that we should continue to avail ourselves of the services of public servants of that State. Of course New South Wales is the State most directly interested as being the terminal point of the steamer service. The Education Department has supplied teachers and arranged for the necessary periodical inspection. The Police Department have agreed to detach a man for service to the Island for a term during which he retains his position in their Service, and the Stores Supply Committee have undertaken all the work of procuring the necessary supplies.

I feel sure that the Government of the State will not view the fact of Mr. Murphy being passed over with equanimity and I should think it not unlikely that the resentment would take the form of a refusal to assist us in the directions mentioned. Of course all that assistance is not indispensable as possibly we might get the assistance of State Governments elsewhere and we could make our own arrangements for the purchase and supply of stores, but if we cannot rely on New South Wales to help us then we shall have a good deal of inconvenience and more expense. And, also, there is the question of the surveys. We shall probably have to send a surveyor down twice a year as was done in the past.

I do not know what position I should be in with regard to Sir Gerald Strickland; as I mentioned to you he wanted to discuss the question of compensation to Murphy in case he was not appointed but I declined to go into the matter on two grounds. First that I had no instructions, and secondly that I sincerely hoped it would not be necessary. Of course the only way in which he could make compensation would be out of the Norfolk Island Fund which is at his disposal until the 30th instant. If we send him no communication at all he will say that we have intentionally deprived him of the opportunity of doing what he thought was an act of justice. I feel sure too that Sir Gerald will make very strong representations on the subject to the Colonial Office and I should not be at all surprised if we got a communication from Mr. Harcourt [British Colonial Secretary] that will make very unpleasant reading.
You will remember that Sir Gerald takes the assurance in the Governor-General’s despatch of the 10th September last as tantamount to a definite promise and possible the Colonial Office will do the same.

I must apologise for having set these matters out at such length but I feel strongly on this point both in the interests of a worthy officer, none of whose actions so far as I am aware can be counted to his discredit, and in the interests of a peculiarly constituted community for many of whose members individually I have a strong personal regard.

Yours very truly.

Atlee Hunt
Secretary

Glynn had already canvassed the possibility of Murphy remaining on as a temporary measure. There now appeared to be some legal technicalities, as Sir Gerald Strickland had personally appointed Murphy to his position, ‘subject to disallowance or confirmation’. The inclusion of this provision had not been authorised by the British authorities. Murphy’s appointment would lapse on 30th June, unless the Governor-General approved his continuance under the new Act. On 29th June, after an exchange of telegrams between the Governor and the Governor-General on how to resolve this awkward situation, Hunt sent Glynn a telegram, which copied Strickland’s advice to the Governor-General that:

It appears inequitable to prolong this condition’ [of uncertainty]. Mr. Dicketts [OIC Cable station] is now acting on Norfolk Island under a dormant commission. If you are unable to legalise Mr. Murphy’s position by first July it is open to you as a temporary expedient to authorise me to administer Norfolk Island [and] act as your deputy in which capacity. I would willingly carry out instructions of federal ministers conveyed through their permanent officials.

Hunt added that he had informed Strickland that Cabinet had considered the matter, but no decision had been made. The Fifth
Parliament adjourned on 26th June and was formally dissolved on 30th June, with elections scheduled for 5 September. Although his election campaign was about to begin, and other politicians were on the move, Glynn returned to Melbourne. The Prime Minister was preparing to leave for Sydney and had not yet been convinced by earlier representations. A more persuasive approach was needed. Making extensive use of Hunt’s briefing memoranda, and the other information he had obtained, Glynn wrote to Cook.  

Melbourne, 30th June 1914

My dear Prime Minister

I am just back from Adelaide and find that you will not remain in Melbourne today so desire to submit for your consideration some grounds upon which I recommend the present Administrator Mr. M. V. Murphy for appointment as Administrator of Norfolk Island.

He has acted as Norfolk island Surveyor since 1896 and was appointed such officially in 1899.

He has surveyed all land on the Island and compiled the official map, for the purpose making frequent visits in some cases for a period of six months.

In 1905 he was appointed officer in charge of Norfolk Island affairs acting from Sydney and in September 1913 was appointed Administrator of the Island. The salary was P450 received from New South Wales Government, being his salary as a State official and P150 from the Norfolk Island Fund, a total of P600 [sic] with an allowance of P207/3/9.

At my interview with Mr. Murphy on the affairs of the Island some months ago I found that only one additional officer would be required. He would be a sort of Secretary to the Administrator and should have some knowledge of surveying.

I find that small but intricate land disputes are constantly arising in Norfolk Island between various families. Mr. Murphy having a thorough knowledge of the customs and feelings of the inhabitants
has had and must of course continue to have a distinct advantage in dealing with these matters as he has surveyed practically every square foot of the island and the inhabitants knowing this look on his decision with respect.

The Secretary whose services are necessary for correspondence and accountancy will also act as Assistant Surveyor, and can undertake plain survey work with less cost than would be occasioned with the appointment of a licensed surveyor: his work can be checked by Mr. Murphy.

Some months ago when Mr. Murphy arrived here I went through the affairs of the Island at length with him. He had been appointed on the 10th September 1913 as Administrator by the Government of New South Wales. This Government by letter saw no objection to the appointment which if course is subject to disallowance if it is decided to supersede him. Since his appointment he has displayed considerable activity in promoting the welfare of the island and in conjunction with the New South Wales Agricultural Department has inaugurated a series of experimental plots. He has adjusted several land disputes: attended to a number of surveys which have been long delayed and has otherwise generally put many matters straight.

From what I saw of him personally I think he is a class of man suited to the peculiar condition of the place. Though not in the ornamental sense showy or imposing he has a commercial and business knowledge and apparently the zeal and energy required for the purposes, in the beginning of our connection, we must have in view. I have no hesitation in saying that such a man would be more adapted to the conditions than either a ex-Naval or an ex-Military officer. I say this well recognising the humane desire to help at least one of those officers at the end of his term.

Now my information is based not only from official sources but from private. Shortly after the Norfolk Island Bill was introduced the then Bishop of Melanesia, Bishop Wilson, and the Bishop of Adelaide, called on me at my private residence. The impression left by that
interview was that they looked with considerable favour upon the appointment of Mr. Murphy.

I have read several letters from people in the Island addressed to a lady who spent 14 years there and upon whom I called yesterday to borrow these letters: One is from Mr. A.C.R. Nobbs [actually C.C.R. Nobbs], a highly educated and intelligent islander of Pitcairn descent, and the most influential of the inhabitants, in which he views with interest if not with pleasure the taking over of the island by the Commonwealth, and another, which I hope will be forwarded to me by this mail, speaks in favorable terms of the present Administrator. The same views have been expressed to Mr. Hunt when on the Island by Dr Patton, the Government Medical Officer, Archdeacon Uthwatt of the Melanesia Mission and representatives of the Methodist and other Churches. The same Mr. Nobbs expressed to Mr. Hunt the very favourable opinion of Mr. Murphy. Mr. Pearce an ex-banker of Sydney and Mr. Pinkerton both storekeepers of European blood, as well as Messrs. Waterhouse, planters and traders of Sydney, independently confirm these statements.

There are many other matters with which I will not bother you at the moment but it is my duty to put on record the impressions I formed that the present man is suitable for the position. There may be little opportunity of doing so before you leave for Sydney tomorrow.

You ask whether the appointment is really pressing at the present moment. It is possible to leave it over for some time, but the effect will be that under Section 7 of the Norfolk Island Act which provides that Judges and Magistrates and other public officers for Norfolk Island shall continue in office as if appointed under this Act, Mr. Murphy can continue at present but can subsequently be removed if necessary by an Order-in-Council.

With best regards,

Sincerely yours,

P. McM. Glynn
This last minute appeal succeeded and the Prime Minister agreed that Murphy should continue as the Acting-Administrator. The appointment was approved by the Governor-General and the Order in Council was duly proclaimed on 1st July. Although he was disappointed not to be confirmed in his position, Murphy was busy at the State Government Office in Sydney, finalising the transfer of files, accounts, and other official records. Hunt was far from satisfied, feeling defeated and very apologetic that he had been unable to gain full confirmation. On 2 July, in a letter marked ‘Strictly Private & Confidential’, he conveyed these feelings.17

My dear Murphy

I have not replied to your last 2 or 3 letters because I simply did not know what to say. I was in hopes that the matter might be definitely terminated, but that has unfortunately not happened. I can give you two assurances - Firstly, that I have done everything in my power to supply the Minister with reasons why you should be appointed. I have done what I have never done in the case of any departmental appointment before; I have put a memorandum officially on the file stating the reasons why I think you should be made Administrator, and, further, I have supplied informally to the Minister a long series of arguments to the same effect. Secondly, I believe that Mr. Glynn has done all he could do so far, and that it is not his intention to relax any of his efforts on your behalf. Of course I do not know what takes place in the Cabinet, and can only surmise that there must be opposition from some quarter or another. If I did know that, I might be able to prepare special arguments to meet it, but I do not, and of course in a departmental matter I cannot discuss things with any other minister than my own.

Strictly between ourselves, Sir Gerald Strickland is not very popular with our Government, and the fact that he has championed your cause strongly counts rather against than for you. It is quite wrong that such should be the case, and I think Mr. Glynn has pointed out that because Sir Gerald has done some foolish things, it does not always follow that he is always doing them, and that he may be
occasionally right, and that this is one of the occasions on which he is certainly right. However, the matter remains undecided so far as Cabinet is concerned, but I want to ascertain if I can from our legal officers what your right status is under the provisions of section 7 of the Norfolk Island Act, of which I think you have copies. In order to raise that question in a formal and definite way, I think it would be well if you would write me an official letter asking for your position to be defined, and stating exactly what your present position is, or rather what your position has been up to the 30th June, in regard to the N.S.W. Public service and in regard to the Island. Mention in the course of your letter the salary and allowances that you have received, and by whom they were paid. Of course there is no question about your pay continuing until the matter is decided, but we would like to get a formal ruling from our Law Department on the whole subject.

I should not be at all surprised now that cabinet has separated if the decision were deferred until after the elections. It is quite likely that Mr. Glynn will be in Sydney about next Wednesday week, when of course it will be open for you to see him.

Will you be so good as to let me have the letter I ask for as soon as possible.

You might send us a few copies of the map of the Island, as we are short of these. Half a dozen will suffice.

With best regards and assurances that nothing I can do will be left undone,

Yours very truly,

Atlee Hunt

Perhaps due to Murphy’s calm acceptance of the vagaries of political decision-making, Sir Gerald Strickland also realised that it was time to achieve closure. In an official despatch to the Governor-General, while noting his displeasure at the way the situation had been handled by the Commonwealth, he expressed appreciation that a decision had been made.18
State Government House Sydney

2nd July 1914

Sir

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of a telegram from Your Excellency, dated yesterday, having reference to the post of Administrator of Norfolk Island, and to express my thanks for a decision which justifies my handing over official records to Mr. Murphy, who has now been recognised by the Government of the Commonwealth as administering Norfolk Island under Section 7 of the Norfolk Island Act during the pleasure of Your Excellency.

2. This places Mr. Murphy in a correct legal position, as contrasted with his tenure of office under a commission subject to disallowance or confirmation by one of His Majesty's Secretaries of State, which was reported by me to the Colonial Department in a despatch, No 159, of the 30th September 1913.

3. Your Excellency will observe that the power conferred upon the Governor to appoint Public Officers by the 3rd clause of the Norfolk Island Order-in-Council of the 18th October, 1900, does not require that the appointment should be made subject to disallowance or confirmation. The insertion of that provision by me in the commission to Mr. Murphy was therefore a step unauthorised by the Imperial Authorities, and that condition became bereft of the support of my own personal authority when my authority over Norfolk Island came to an end on the 30th June.

4. If it had been the desire of your Government to make the commission of Mr. Murphy void, or voidable, before 1st July, the Government of the Commonwealth might have moved the Secretary of State before that date to direct me to cancel the commission which I issued to Mr. Murphy and substitute therefor some other instrument.

5. Although Mr. Murphy appeared to me the most suitable appointment, I was careful from the outset not to force the choice...
of Mr. Murphy on the Federal authorities, as I felt it my duty to avoid action in the period of transition which might hamper the Federal authorities, and so leave them free to choose any other Administrator the commission was so worded; and Mr. Murphy was instructed so as to prevent him from acquiring vested rights.

6. But this position was fundamentally altered when Lord Denman informed me that it had been decided to continue the appointment of Mr. Murphy; thereupon my action became co-ordinated with the latter decision.

7. I am no longer concerned with Mr. Murphy’s acquired rights, if any, but in order that his severance from the Public service of New South Wales may be on lines clearly defined, it may be useful that the circumstances in connection with his leaving it should be considered by the Federal Law Officers as well as by those of New South Wales.

8. The notice calling for applications for the appointment held by him was made the subject of public advertisement without any intimation to me, or without obtaining the disallowance of Mr. Murphy’s commission through the Secretary of State. If such disallowance had been sought in time, I could have taken steps to provide for compensation from Norfolk Island funds, and I duly intimated to Your Excellency a desire to have sufficient notice to enable me to do so.

9. It is for your legal advisers to determine whether Mr. Murphy’s commission is any longer open to defeasance, either legally or equitably.

10. If Mr. Murphy is now a Federal Officer, taken over under Section 84 of the Federal Constitution as your telegram of yesterday appears to convey, all question would seem to be at an end, except such as may arise with third parties.

I have the honour to be.

(SGD)          G. Strickland

Governor
A notation on the margin of paragraph 6, ‘Get file re this’, suggested that there were still some complicated legal questions to be clarified. Nonetheless, it appeared that both Glynn and Hunt had been able to use the possible legal difficulties inherent in ‘disallowing’ Murphy’s appointment to confirm his continuance in office, at least until the question of a permanent appointment was decided. The public advertisement for the position continued to attract a steady stream of applications and representations for different candidates. Some applied pressure on the Prime Minister and the Minister for External Affairs. Others, as evident from this letter from Hunt to Glynn, went straight to the Secretary. 19

Melbourne, 2 July 1914

Dear Mr. Glynn.

I had a visit this morning from Colonel Stanley, who is an old friend of mine. He told me that he had received a very strong hint yesterday that it would be worth his while to apply for the position of Administrator of Norfolk Island. He said that it came from a member of the Ministry. It was not Senator Millen, because he said that before doing anything he would have to consult Millen. I think it is probably Mr. Kelly [Acting Minister of Home Affairs], as Stanley knows him very well and is extremely intimate with Kelly’s brother in Sydney. Stanley asked me the position with respect to Murphy. I told him that, so far as I was concerned, I considered that Murphy ought to have the position, and had done everything I could think of to get it for him, and that you were of the same way of thinking, but that there seemed to be a good deal of opposition to Murphy, and it appeared by no means certain that he would be eventually appointed, although the position was somewhat different now since the 1st July from what it was before.

Stanley left me with the intention of speaking to Senator Millen on the subject, and he thought that it might be worth his while to apply in case the opposition to Murphy proved successful.
Now, while Stanley is an old and intimate friend of mine, I cannot think that he is by any means an ideal man for the position. He is a man with a very good record in the service, but he is now old — 62 or 63 — and is not at all the man he was. He is growing deaf, and is at times extremely irritable and easily put out. He, of course, is accustomed to the handling of men, but knows nothing of agricultural development or the commercial side of life.

On what I told him he agreed that Murphy was apparently quite the best man for the post, but saw no reason why, if there is a dead set made against Murphy, he should not be in the running, so I expect it is possible that he will apply.

Murphy has sent me a testimonial which he received some time ago from Lord Chelmsford. He says he has also one from Sir Henry Rawson, and I have advised him to put it in.

Yours very truly

Atlee Hunt

Glynn remained in Adelaide during July, but Hunt used several briefing letters to remind him of the good work which Murphy was doing. One letter on 13th July began with an apology: that ‘I am afraid I am rather pestering you with letters today; there seem to be such a lot of things turning up’. He then mentioned a wide range of issues, from the presence in Darwin of some undesirable Armenian priests, to a discussion with ‘Mr. Deakin on the requirements of the American people respecting the dipping of sheep’, concluding:20

I had a long interview with Mr. Murphy this morning and he submitted about 30 matters wanting attention. Many of these were of considerable detail and we settled what ought to be done in each case, that is to say where they were of any importance we settled that he was to submit a memorandum for your decision. I may say I shall be sorry for any outsider taking the job without the assistance of Murphy. The work has been too much centralised in the past with a result that practically he is the only one who knows anything at all on a lot of important questions. One of the objects of my discussion
with him was to make such arrangements as will ensure some other permanent officials becoming au courant with the general business of the island.

A few days later, Hunt reported to Glynn that:

We have arranged with Murphy to see Mr. Waterhouse on his return to Sydney whither he proceeds today and see if he could get him accepted as a witness before the Interstate Commissions so as to put the position of the Norfolk Island Coffee planters before them. If they are not to be assisted by the duty I am afraid prospects for the Island are seriously affected. It has been of the greatest value having Murphy here. He has got in touch with the Treasury and understands all the requirements both in regard to that department and our own.

As Glynn was now in the midst of his election campaign, Hunt came across from Melbourne and wrote to Murphy on 24 July.

I have just come back from Adelaide where I had a busy time with the Minister… I thought it was a proper thing to put you on the strict official rate of pay from 1st July. It looks remarkably like taking it for granted that you will be confirmed in your position… Mr. Glynn is going to have a talk with Mr. Cook on the quiet when he gets him in Adelaide the week after next. He seemed very impressed by your papers and has asked me to let him have copies specially to show Mr. Cook. The address from the Executive Council particularly appealed to him.

Having completed his work in the State Governor’s Office in Sydney, Murphy prepared to leave for Norfolk Island. He appreciated Hunt’s sustained friendly interest and knew that he was doing all that he could, but was aware that it was essentially a political decision. However, he was concerned that the appointment of a military or naval officer might result in a person who did not know how to work with the Islanders. This was a particular problem, as many of the experienced government officers, who could have provided support and advice, had now left. In a letter to Hunt, he pointed out that:
This leaves the island officially weak, and if it had not been so, I shouldn’t have been sent down, for I told the Governor I was not a candidate for the job, but Sir Gerald told me that he was sending me down at the suggestion of Lord Chelmsford who recognised the position.

On 5th August, Prime Minister Cook informed Glynn by telegram that Britain was at war with Germany. Murphy had returned to Norfolk Island and it was clear that no further decisions would be made until after the September elections. At the same time, his earlier concerns that the publication of details of the Administrator’s salary and conditions would create some problems were now justified. In a letter dated 15th August to Gertrude Farr, initially offering condolences on the death of her Mother, Nobbs wrote that:

Our present position is as follows, viz. The affairs of the island are now controlled by the Governor-General and Parliament of the Commonwealth, through an Administrator who resides on the island; all customs duties on articles produced or manufactured here are removed and therefore we have a free market in the Commonwealth. Nothing further has so far been done, but it is presumed that other necessary matters will be attended to, as soon as the new Parliament gets to work. Mr. Murphy has been reappointed Administrator by the Federal Government at a salary of 700 (pounds) per annum with 100 (pounds) allowance & a free house. I mention this because I think that this is wasting a good deal of money which might be diverted to other necessary matters. I think 400 (pounds) to 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.

There have been no changes in the laws & regulations since the new order of things, but I have no doubt but that changes will follow, & in this respect I strongly think that before any action is taken by the
Federal Government, the opinion of the local Executive Council should be ascertained on any contemplated change, this I think is only fair to us. We who live on the spot know better than any one else what is best for the Community. As you know our community has lived under peculiar circumstances and enormous drawbacks, it would not be fair to expect an instantaneous change to complete up to date methods, these will no doubt follow gradually & if we are given a fair chance, I have not the slightest doubt that a proper response will be made & that we would ere long be a self supporting and prosperous community.

Miss Farr passed on this letter to Glynn and he seems to have taken note of the comments Nobbs made about higher salaries being a waste of money. While still in office he was asked by Hunt to approve a recommendation from Murphy for an increase in the salary of the Court Registrar, Ernest Stephenson. The argument was that Stephenson was only paid part-time but the work was closer to full-time, and his salary should be raised from 70 pounds to 150 pounds. Glynn's notation queried the reasonableness of more than doubling the salary and asked for more details as to comparative salaries paid to other officers. It was perhaps as well that the official record did not contain the information that Stephenson and his family were currently staying with Murphy at Government House because he could not afford to maintain his own household.25

Although Glynn was returned by his electorate, the Cook Government was defeated. Andrew Fisher became the new Prime Minister and John Andrew Arthur took over the External Affairs portfolio. When Parliament convened on 8th October, Hunt again turned his attention to the task of representing the case for Murphy’s confirmation as Administrator. He was well aware of the sectarian bias in some quarters, which — combined with antagonism towards the New South Wales Governor — had worked to counter his efforts. Certainly, if he had had access to the comments of the Governor-General, in a secret despatch to the Secretary of State, these would have come as no surprise. 26
As regards the transfer of Norfolk Island to which I referred in my Cable, I have only to say that towards the close of an interminable correspondence, over difficulties created by himself, Sir Gerald proposed to continue himself as Administrator under the Commonwealth Government. That offer being politely brushed aside, he then concentrated his effort on securing the post for another Catholic, which aroused a Protestant reaction. Mr Cook consulted me on the matter at Sydney, he being disposed to “turn it down”. And so, I am since informed, are the rest of the Cabinet, with the exception of the Minister for External Affairs, who is also a Catholic.

However, those who had actively opposed Murphy’s appointment were gone from the Cabinet, and the new Prime Minister and his colleagues were more likely to be influenced by Glynn’s earlier recommendation. An undated briefing paper, officially from the Assistant Minister for External Affairs, and initialed by Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, was presented to Cabinet. 27

Re: Norfolk Island

1. It is submitted that it is desirable to fill the position of administrator without further delay.

2. The present acting administrator, Mr. M. V. Murphy, was appointed in September 1913. He was selected as Surveyor of the Island in 1896 and in 1905 The Governor of New South Wales appointed him Officer in Charge of Norfolk Island Affairs.

3. Mr. Murphy was recommended by the late Minister, Mr. Glynn. The present Minister, Mr. Arthur, who has perused these papers, is, I understand, favourable to the appointment of Mr. Murphy.

4. The recommendation for appointment is endorsed by the Secretary, Mr. Atlee Hunt, whose personal acquaintance with Mr. Murphy extends over 35 years. Mr. Hunt visited the Island in January last and in addition to bearing high testimony to Mr. Murphy’s capacity adds that he is universally acceptable to the inhabitants.
5. Other applicants for the position are numerous and some of them are from persons who, if Mr. Murphy were not an applicant, would fill the position very well; but Mr. Murphy’s knowledge of the affairs of the Island and its people, his familiarity with the duties required, point to him as being the most suitable person for the position of Administrator.

The Cabinet was persuaded. On 13 November, the Prime Minister informed the New South Wales Premier that:

It has been decided to appoint Mr. M. V. Murphy as Administrator of the Island under the Commonwealth regime as from 1st July last. I shall be glad, therefore, if you will kindly obtain the approval of your Governor-in-Council to the transfer of Mr. Murphy under Section 54 of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia.

On the same day, Hunt cabled Murphy with the news and Murphy wrote to express his appreciation of how much work had gone into achieving finality. His unofficial letter acknowledged, in a typically understated way, this successful outcome to a very long campaign.28

Confirmation of Commission. I was pleased to get your cable stating that my matter had been fixed up. I can now go straight on with my work. I must take this opportunity, however, of conveying my thanks to you for the steadfast manner in which you have supported my claim throughout. I was resting quite satisfied that if my commission were not confirmed it would not be from lack of effort on your part. The residents here are good enough to seem pleased about it also.
Endnotes

2 NLA: MS52/28, Hunt papers, personal correspondence.
3 Parliamentary Debates, 24 October 1913: 2548–2549.
4 NLA: MS4653, Glynn Diaries, entry for 23 November 1913.
6 NLA: MS52/20, Hunt papers, personal correspondence.
7 NAA: CP697/41 1914/75. Official memo from Atlee Hunt, Secretary, Department of External Affairs, to M. V. Murphy, Acting Administrator, 21 May 1914.
8 NLA: MS52/20 Hunt papers. Letter from Murphy to Hunt, 12 June 1914.
9 NAA: A2/1 1918/1649, ’Norfolk Island. transfer to Commonwealth’.
10 Ibid. Memorandum from Hunt to Glynn, 18 June 1914.
11 Ibid. Memorandum from Hunt to Glynn, 23 June 1914.
12 NLA: MS 4653/16, Glynn papers. Letter from Gertrude M. Farr, 30 June 1914.
13 NLA: MS52/20, Hunt papers. Letter from Murphy to Hunt, 27 June 1914.
15 NLA: MS4653/16, Glynn papers. Urgent telegram from Hunt, 29 June 1914.
16 Ibid. Copy of letter from Glynn to Prime Minister Joseph Cook, 30 June 1914.
17 NLA: MS52/1188 Hunt papers. Copy of letter from Hunt to Murphy, 2 July 1914.
18 NAA: A2 1918/1649. Despatch from the Governor of New South Wales to the Governor-General, Commonwealth of Australia, 2 July 1914.
19 NLA: MS52/1406, Hunt papers. Copy of Hunt’s letter to Glynn, 2 July 1914.
20 NLA: MS52/1410, Hunt papers. Copy of Hunt’s letter to Glynn, 13 July 1914.
22 NLA: MS52, Hunt papers. Copy of letter to Murphy, 24 July 1914.
23 Ibid. Letter from Murphy to Hunt, 28 July 1914.
24 NLA: MS4563/16/253, Glynn papers. Letter from C. C. R. Nobbs to Gertrude Farr, 15 August 1914.
25 NAA: A518, 624/1/12 Part 1. ‘Norfolk Island — Staff — Stephenson, E.’. Official request, dated 17 August 1914 from the Acting Administrator to the Minister for External Affairs with a notation by the Minister, dated 4 September.
26 NAA. A11085, B10B/1. ‘Governor-General to Secretary of State for the Colonies — 8 August–15 December 1914 — General Affairs’. Report dated 25th August 1914. See also an earlier report dated 8 August 1914, which refers to the extreme antagonism between the New South Wales Governor and Federal authorities.
27 NAA: A2 1918/1649, NAA ‘Norfolk Island. Transfer to Commonwealth’ Undated memo with the heading ‘Re Norfolk Island’, from the Assistant Minister for External Affairs, with a notation that it was seen by Prime Minister Fisher.
28 NLA: MS52, Hunt papers. Letter marked ‘Not Official’ from Murphy to Hunt, 13 November 1914.

An Uneasy Relationship
Collecting War Funds
Norfolk Island A145 neg. no 25
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