In July 1920, Lieutenant-General John William Parnell took over as the Administrator and Murphy retired to his home, ‘Rhodesia’ in Lindfield, New South Wales. In August, following the annual elections for the Norfolk Island Executive Council, Nobbs was elected Council President.

The entries in the Administrator’s diary for the next three years provide more personal details regarding health problems and depression than Murphy, the ultimate public servant, would have seen as appropriate. Parnell took leave in April 1923, after a persistent eye infection threatened his sight. Later, he suffered two falls from ladders, which resulted in serious back injuries. Throughout his term, a number of entries also recorded Parnell’s concern over his wife’s health.¹

At the same time, during this Administrator’s term of office, Nobbs appeared accepting of his authority, sometimes even cordial. Although his term of President only lasted for one year, he remained a member of the Executive Council. A diary entry in September 1923 noted that Nobbs had lent a tennis net for a Government House function and as a member of the Council, was entertained by the Administrator. This was a period when financial worries over the failure of the lemon industry loomed large, and Nobbs was clearly

¹
preoccupied with saving his failing business interests. The record of attendance at the monthly meetings of the Executive Council for the year ending 31 July 1923 reflected his diminished involvement (whereas other councillors attended 10 or 12 meetings, Nobbs was recorded as being present on only 3 occasions).

The Administrator and his wife were later to be described by Islanders as pleasant, friendly, and without an undue sense of their position or status. However, the situation soon changed after the Parnells departed and Nobbs made an unsuccessful application for the Administrator’s post. It is reflective of the uncertain economic times that there were 115 applications for this position. Applicants included a large assortment of ex-colonial administrators, army officers and retired politicians, many of whom were supported by influential referees. Colonel Edward Leane was eventually appointed and was said to have good general knowledge of ordinances and regulations and to be a ‘tactful and strong character’. One glowing reference from a National Mutual Life Association official stated that: ‘He has the highest principles, is genial and large hearted, tactful, diplomatic and is able to handle other men to the best advantage’.2

In 1924, unlike 1914, the Administrator had only an official relationship with the Secretary and the Minister, rather than the personal, friendly support which Murphy had received from Hunt. What the Minister and Departmental Secretary who appointed him could not have foreseen was how Leane and his wife would react to the realities of exercising day-to-day authority over a small, isolated, and closely inter-related community.

Accompanied by his strong-minded wife Katie and two daughters, Leane took up his position in July 1924. At first, the tone of his reports was optimistic and reasonable, noting ways in which economic and social improvements could be made. His assessment of a complaint made by Nobbs against the resident medical officer, Dr A. Patton, was that Nobbs was probably correct in suggesting that a change was desirable, even if the complaint had been lodged incorrectly. He concluded that in order to counter the predilection
Nobbs had for complaining directly to the Minister, stronger action should be taken. 3

In my opinion, there is one way only to deal with his type. Send his letters back to him in a cover, without any comment. He has been informed so many times what is the correct channel of communication, that he simply takes no notice of it.

During the first half of 1925, Leane was seconded to the Northern Territory as Acting Administrator. This may have made him impatient to achieve tangible results on Norfolk Island as, on his return, he and his wife became more interventionist in community affairs. They were soon the subjects of a steady barrage of complaints against their high-handed and autocratic behaviour. Unlike Murphy and his successor Parnell, the Administrator literally demanded red carpet treatment at all functions, and Leane approached his role as Chief Magistrate with great zeal and increasing insensitivity. For their part, the Leanes seem to have been genuinely horrified by what they saw as the deceit, loose morals, and sexual promiscuity prevalent on the Island. They considered that the situation was a danger to their daughters and arranged for their eldest, and later their younger daughter, to return to Melbourne. They became increasingly isolated and embattled, and easy targets for Nobbs and others who now had numerous legitimate grievances about which to complain.

In January 1926, a Royal Commission was appointed, with Francis Whysall as Commissioner, to inquire into the complaints by residents and the general administration of Norfolk Island. The Commissioner spent three months on the Island, holding public meetings and taking evidence from over 80 witnesses. Evidence was also taken at later hearings in Sydney and Melbourne. Much of the evidence related to specific instances of legal or administrative decisions regarding often fairly petty matters.

One case involved the alleged theft of a Government House clothes basket, which had been taken without permission after a church
thanksgiving ceremony. A formal legal prosecution had been launched and several members of one family were found guilty. Their criminal records had damaging long-term implications for any chance of studying or obtaining employment outside Norfolk Island. The Commissioner found that there was a strong presumption of innocence and he recommended that the three accused should be pardoned and the convictions expunged from the Court records. On several other occasions, the Commissioner found that, even where there was some justification for their concern, actions taken by the Administrator or his wife had been vindictive and not conducive to good government. Referring to the lack of respect for residents which Leane had often shown, the Commissioner concluded that this had contributed to the general social unrest: ⁴

There are, no doubt, persons resident on the Island whose moral standards are in need of adjustment, but his treatment of the people generally as base and unworthy of respect, was certainly not calculated to improve the general tone of the community. … Previous Administrators evidently more correctly gauged the psychology of the islanders and were thus able to maintain official and social dignity without friction.

At the same time, the Commissioner acknowledged the energy and zeal with which the Administrator had applied himself to the improvement of agriculture, livestock production and commerce, and the development of markets for Island products. Yet despite these important achievements, the climate of hostility and conflict made it impossible for him to support Leane’s continuance in office. He recommended that the Administrator should be recalled without delay, cautioning that: ⁵

In future selections, due consideration to the psychology of the Norfolk Islanders should be given; the temperament of a prospective Administrator, if not compatible with, should be capable of ready adaptability to the social conditions of the Island. This applies with equal force to the appointee’s wife, who must necessarily at all times be in close association with the inhabitants, and whose moral
influence upon the lives of the people is a factor to be seriously considered.

One cannot help but feel sorry for Leane, now an extremely angry and embittered individual, who felt that the Islanders had deceived and hoodwinked the Commissioner into accepting their side of the story. On 22 April 1926, while the Commissioner was still on the Island, Leane wrote intemperately to the Secretary of the Department of Home and Territories complaining about ‘the degradation I have been subjected to as a result of the manner in which the Commission has been conducted’. He was asked to withdraw this statement, and reluctantly did so. However, after the report was presented he protesting again, threatening legal action. His most bitter complaint was included in a strongly worded attack on the credibility of Nobbs, describing him as a ‘person well known to your Departmental Officers as a trouble maker to all previous Administrators and to me’.6

Leane left Norfolk Island on 31 May 1926, with the public statement that he would clear his name and return. Simmering tensions between his supporters and detractors continued, and it became imperative that an interim Administrator be quickly appointed. It was hoped that this would bring a sense of stability and calm to the Island. Parnell’s health made it impossible for him to undertake the task and others were unwilling to do so. Finally, Murphy was approached and asked if he was willing to come out of retirement for six months, until a permanent appointment could be made. He agreed, provided his son and daughter-in-law could once again accompany him. In the meantime, a Cabinet decision recorded that: 7

After consideration of the Royal Commissioner’s Report and Mr. Leane’s comments — Decision that Mr. Leane’s services be terminated and be granted two months leave of absence.

On 12 August, accompanied by Claude, Edith and their two children, Murphy returned to Norfolk Island, and once again took

121
over the reins as Administrator and Chief Magistrate. It may well have been that Nobbs was now thoroughly exhausted from his efforts to remove Leane. At all events, there is no record that he lodged any complaints during Murphy’s term as Acting Administrator. Most of the Islanders were relieved and delighted that Murphy was once again in charge. Official correspondence suggests that his main efforts were directed at sorting out any lingering sense of injustice, in readiness for a smooth transition to the incoming Administrator.

Not everyone on the Island, or in the Australian Parliament, were satisfied that the Commission of Inquiry had been conducted fairly. Leane continued to demand that his suspension should be overturned, and some politicians supported the call for further investigations by a Committee of the Senate or House of Representatives. One letter of support, written to Senator H. E. Elliott and signed by F. E. Quintal, asserted that: 8

The Enquiry as conducted by the Commission was farcical in the extreme, and almost Gilbertian in its supineness, and has put the clock of progress in Norfolk Island back for years.

Finally, after the calls for a further inquiry were unsuccessful, Leane turned his attention to retrieving the considerable quantity of personal possessions and artefacts stored at Government House prior to his hurried departure. Murphy was now called upon to investigate claims by Leane that some of his curios and mementos had been stolen. Careful and painstaking investigations were undertaken. On 15 December 1926, Murphy reported to the Minister that ‘Colonel Leane’s assertion that the articles have been purloined and are still on the Island unfortunately lacks confirmation.’ In January 1927, a notation in Leane’s official departmental file stated he had received compensation for damage to furniture and effects. This was a tragic ending for a man whom many regarded as having been very badly treated, and who had attempted to develop the economic prospects of Norfolk Island.
In the meantime, Murphy’s more matter-of-fact acceptance of the community had had the desired effect. Much of the fury and distress of the preceding months appears to have been quickly forgotten. In November 1926, he submitted the annual report with the caveat that:

As I was not in the Territory during the period under review, the Report has been compiled from data prepared by the late Administrator, from official documents and from personal inquiries where the information could not be otherwise ascertained.

On 10 February 1927, Murphy presided over the Swearing in Ceremony of Major-General V. C. M. Sellheim as the new Administrator. A few days later, he left Norfolk Island for the last time. As a surveyor, government official, and administrator, he had weathered many political and community storms. Most members of the community would have echoed Gertrude Farr’s assessment that he was a practical man who was friendly and trustworthy, but had not become too mixed up with petty social issues. The appointment of a retired general as the new Administrator showed that there had been no change in the way Norfolk Island was viewed by the Australian Government. It was still seen as a post eminently suited for military men who were used to command, and Murphy’s appointment had always been considered as a special case.

Sellheim died at his post, less than a year into his term. His successor also died in office, so it was several years before stable administration returned to the Island. Over the next few years, while Administrators came and went, Nobbs continued to play a significant role as a businessman and the largest landowner on the Island. His position as a leading spokesman for Islander affairs meant that he was almost automatically one of the six Executive Councillors appointed by the Administrator. However, his penchant for becoming the less than loyal opposition again came to the fore when, in 1933, at the age of 74, he was elected to the Council and voted in as President. Captain C. R. Pinney was the current Administrator. In her history of his term as Administrator, Norfolk Island historian Merval Hoare noted that Pinney was described by contemporaries as ‘able, eminently fair, and tactful’. 
Nonetheless, tensions soon arose between Nobbs, the Administrator, and a number of other Council members. Pinney, using his powers as Administrator, called the special meeting at which Nobbs was removed from office by a vote of the majority of councillors. Nobbs took court action and successfully claimed seven pounds and ten shillings in lost entitlements. He was less successful in a claim for damages against the Administrator, receiving only two pounds in nominal damages, rather than the 5000 pounds he had sought.\footnote{11} However, although Pinney’s term had previously been extended for two years, a further renewal was not approved. He was the last Administrator to combine the position with that of Chief Magistrate, and Nobbs undoubtedly saw this as another success in his struggle for administrative reform.

Nobbs was the last of the major players concerned with the initial takeover of Norfolk Island by the Commonwealth, but he was undoubtedly the most passionate and involved. Other descendants of the original Pitcairn settlers have continued the struggle for greater autonomy. Few have been able to equal him for commitment, perseverance, and sheer audacity.


Endnotes

1 NAA: CP697/23, Administrator’s Diary 1923.
3 Ibid. Memo. from the Administrator to the Secretary, Department of Home Affairs, 31 October 1924, Norfolk Island.
4 Commonwealth of Australia, Report of the Royal Commission on Norfolk Island Affairs, Francis Whysall, Commissioner, presented on 14 July 1926, Melbourne, Government Printer, p.56. See also NAA: CP423/2 Exhibit 75. ‘1926 Royal Commission on Norfolk Island Affairs’.
6 NAA: CP637/1 71A, ‘Colonel Leane — Administrator Norfolk Island’, ‘Letter dated 3 August 1926,
7 NAA: A528 624/1/32 Part 2, ‘Norfolk Island — E.T. Leane Administrator, OBE (Colonel)’, Cabinet decision, signed by S.M. Bruce, 11 August 1926.
8 Ibid. Letter to General Elliott from Captain F.E. Quintal, dated 7 November 1926. Quintal had served in the Boer War and in the AIF and General Elliott, now a Senator, was also Leane’s lawyer.
Portrait of Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson
PIC/6690. By permission of the National Library of Australia

Insert: Norfolk Island Seal
Norfolk Island 994.82, plate no. 25114
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