Conclusion: Reluctant Governance in a Changing World

It is impossible to completely re-create the climate of the times in the early years of the Commonwealth. Nevertheless, the letters, reports, and contemporary accounts which are available do tell us a great deal about the personalities, ambitions, successes and disappointments of the four main players in this story — Glynn, Hunt, Murphy and Nobbs. Of the four, Murphy has remained the somewhat shadowy and less definite character, although his friendship with Hunt, his readiness to support his staff, and his sense of commitment to promote economic development and social stability on Norfolk Island, are well-documented.

There were inherent problems in being the immediate and public face of a distant but final authority. In carrying out this difficult task, Murphy received the sustained support of his departmental secretary, and was able to correspond with him in an open and often quite indiscreet way. In the same way, Hunt’s letters to Glynn, in support of Murphy’s appointment, reflect a particular style in official relationships, and a readiness to support a friend and colleague. Above all, the record of Murphy’s involvement with Norfolk Island shows a personal interest and commitment, which seems to belie any notion of a detached bureaucrat. Among the Pitcairn descendants, Nobbs appears to have been his most persistent critic. Probably, this
tells us more about internal divisions on the Island than the merits of any particular action on Murphy’s part.

When the first Commonwealth parliamentarians described their visit to Norfolk Island, a photograph of a magnificent avenue of pines was included in the report. After World War II, James Michener wrote a short story about how these famous Norfolk pines were destroyed, in order to build an air-strip. In this essentially true story, the Admiral advises on how to react to local opinion:\(^1\)

> Obviously we can ignore local opinion if we want to. The Australian government has placed responsibility for the protection of Norfolk squarely on us. We can do what we damn well want to. But it’s always wisest to exercise your power with judgment. Either you do what the local people want to do, or you jolly them into wanting to do what you’ve got to do anyway.

This story did not have a happy ending. The line of trees, described as ‘the cathedral of the spirit’, was destroyed and an old, useless bulldozer was blown up in protest. Power was not able to be exercised with judgment, but at least it was agreed that the destruction of the bulldozer would be covered up to protect those who had protested. One cannot but feel that Murphy was often put in similar situations. Sometimes, he was able to jolly the community into agreeing with a particular official policy directive. But, if unable to alter the commands from a distant authority, he may well have shared the view of Michener’s character that:

> I’m on their side. If blowing up a broken bulldozer helps keep the spirit alive, that’s O.K. with me.

In 1901, when the Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed, there was a sense of optimism that this would lead to opportunities for further political and economic expansion in the South-West Pacific. In order to gain support for their cause, many pro-federationists emphasised the great benefits that would inevitably, and almost immediately, result from unification. Yet, only a year later, Glynn, one of the most committed of federationists, wryly observed that:\(^2\)
Twelve months ago Australia was jubilant over the inauguration of Federation. Today it is more than possible that, were the question again submitted to the people, the vote would be against Union. This is due, partly to the reaction which inevitably follows public enthusiasm not produced by deep conviction, partly to the eagerness of people for immediate results, partly to the fact that the love of absolute state autonomy is deep-seated, and to the fear of extravagance and its sense of too much political machinery.

At the same time, despite the loss of uncritical support for what Glynn termed ‘the extra machinery of Federation’, there was still satisfaction that Australia was now an independent national entity. Vestiges of the old colonial relationships might remain, but these had only a limited and diminishing impact on an increasingly self-reliant nation-state. The argument, that reliance on the Empire would inevitably weaken had also been used to good advantage. This was seen as a compelling reason why reluctant colonies, such as Western Australia, should join the Commonwealth. Writing in the *Australian Star* on 18 February 1898, Glynn warned that:

> We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that the theatre of the world’s struggle is being shifted from West to East … the time may come when England will tell us that she has other duties to which she must subordinate the defence of Australia, and ask her to secure her standing in the counsels of Eastern Asia.

Even if Glynn considered that England’s decline as a world power was only a remote and distant possibility, this was a strong argument in favour of Australian unity and the value of territorial expansion. Thus, despite initial reservations and hesitation, Norfolk Island was finally accepted as a necessary responsibility which came with Federation. This approach was enthusiastically supported by Atlee Hunt, who saw Australia’s new role in the South-West Pacific as representing a ‘Changing of the Guard’, from the old Imperial order. However, these views were far from unanimous. Some politicians shared the prophetic view of Sir Henry Parkes, that this acquisition would prove to be a ‘white elephant’ and create nothing
but trouble in the future. Many of Australia’s future ‘subjects’ on Norfolk Island were also wary and unenthusiastic regarding their forced change of status. Yet, by the time the first Parliamentary visit took place, some six months after the Commonwealth had assumed control, it was already too late to retreat.

Since then, Norfolk Island and Australia have remained locked in an uneasy relationship, with calls for greater autonomy countered by demands that Norfolk Island should first provide evidence that it can support itself. Many of the most passionate arguments for self-determination have continued to rely upon the claim that Norfolk Island was given absolutely to the Pitcairners, so all subsequent administrations have been illegal.

The 1976 Report of the Royal Commission into matters relating to Norfolk Island illustrated the dilemmas that have continued to confront Australia in its relationship with Norfolk Island. The Commission had been triggered by concerns that Norfolk Island was becoming a tax haven for Australian and international companies and individuals. During the hearings on the Island, a number of Pitcairn descendants again demanded a greater degree of independence, claiming that Australia had done nothing for them and that they had been given Norfolk Island as their ancestral birthright. Their views echoed those of earlier members of the community who had protested, initially against control by New South Wales, and later against Commonwealth control. However, as Murphy had found during his term as Administrator, some of the most vociferous critics were those who saw less regulation and control as giving them greater economic opportunities and personal advantage. The Commissioner’s Report observed that:

It was obvious that the groups who were most critical of Australia’s government of the Island, and who were most clamorous in urging complete or near independence from Australia, were those who had moved to the Island in recent years predominantly to amass or retain wealth by avoiding revenue imposts, and by exploiting the Island’s commercial opportunities to the full. They went to considerable
lengths, including the use of small numbers of Pitcairn descendants as willing accomplices, to propound their points of view.

One gathered from the evidence of some of the Pitcairn descendants that they had been moved to support these groups because of exploitation of their fear of what the Commonwealth Government might do in the spheres of taxation and land control if it continued to govern the Island. Their evidence followed a clearly identifiable pattern.

Members of these groups made it abundantly clear that they not only wished to be independent of Australia and to be free from revenue imposts, but that they expected Australia to continue to provide existing benefits and to make even greater monetary grants without cost to them.

It was evident from the record of witness statements and written submissions received by Sir John Nimmo that, as Henry Wilkinson, Alexander Oliver, Francis Whysall and other official visitors had discovered before him, many complaints related to the distant past. At the same time, the current Administrator, Edward Thomas Pickerd, appeared to have approached his role in a manner very similar to the way Murphy had done. In evidence to the Commission, Pickerd noted that ‘many people on the Island themselves live in a form of ambivalence’. He described a number of situations when he had tried to resolve conflicting points of view, both as Administrator responsible to the Minister, and as Chairman of the Norfolk Island Council, and observed: 5

I must say, as would be expected as Administrator, there have been many occasions when I have not shared the view of the Department or the Minister, and on these occasions I attempt to resolve the point of view, the difference of point of view, before the matter goes to Council.

The final chapter of the report considered the questions of Norfolk Island’s future relationship with Australia. If he had had the benefit of Murphy’s experience and knowledge of the community, or taken more notice of the current Administrator’s comments, Nimmo might have found it easier to ignore what he saw as exaggerated and
somewhat irrational statements. With some asperity, the Report stated that:⁶

It was noticeable that those clamouring for independence attempted to cast Australia in the role of an oppressor trying to advance its own interests by imposing unwanted controls upon the islanders. Such unwarranted and emotional assertions brush aside patent truths such as the fact (now well documented) that the Island was never given to the Pitcairners in the first place, that Australia never sought responsibility for Norfolk Island but was induced by Britain to take it off her hands, and that the Australian Government has never gained financially from the Island, but, on the contrary, has contributed millions of dollars over the years toward sustaining the Island.

Despite his negative comments, Nimmo still felt that Australia had to approach any decision regarding its future relationship with Norfolk Island in a mature way. If it decided ‘to follow Britain’s example and abandon an obvious economic liability’, there should be careful forward planning to smooth the way for a transition to independence. On the other hand, if Australia remained in control, the conditions of this control should be reviewed as ‘it is for Australia to set down the terms under which it may be willing to continue to pay for the sustenance of Norfolk island.’⁷

As can be imagined, there was considerable antagonism towards the findings of this Royal Commission. However, as Australia was not willing to cast Norfolk Island adrift, alternative reforms had to be devised, with the aim of providing a greater degree of self-government. The Norfolk Island Act 1979 incorporated many of the Nimmo Report’s recommendations and a nine member Norfolk Island Assembly was established, with the Administrator taking on a more representative role.

In 1988, Treadgold concluded that, although the meaning of the concept of self-government might not be fully spelt out and could be understood very differently:⁸ ‘At present the policy of both the Australian and Norfolk governments is that the island should
continue to progress towards internal self-government’. Yet, progress towards self-government has also been criticised as being too slow, particularly by those Islanders seeking an even greater degree of autonomy. In 1994, the petitioners to the United Nations asserted that, as the indigenous people of the Island, they were entitled to a vote for self determination.

This uneasy relationship has continued, with economic development remaining a key issue in the ongoing debates on the degree of autonomy or self-government which would be advisable. In October 1996, The Commonwealth Minister for Administrative Services provided terms of reference for a Commonwealth Grants Commission inquiry into ways of increasing the economic capacity of Norfolk Island. The conclusions of this report were that change was needed, as although the Norfolk Island government had the financial capacity to meet its obligations, its revenue raising was deficient and its administrative capacity was below standard.9

The progress, and eventual defeat in the Senate, of the Norfolk Island Amendment Bill 1999, reflected, to quite an extraordinary degree, how historical events are often replicated. It was as if the Norfolk Island Bill 1913 was again being debated. The 1999 version sought to tighten electoral regulations so that candidates for the Norfolk Island Legislative Assembly would be required to hold Australian citizenship. It also proposed that the local residency requirement for enrolment on the electoral role would be brought into line with mainland states and territories. Those opposing the Bill saw it as another way of strengthening Australia’s grip on the Island. Following the defeat of the Bill in March 2000, the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories was requested to undertake a further Inquiry into Norfolk Island Electoral Matters. In May 2001, the Norfolk Islander published the submission presented to the inquiry on behalf of the Society of Pitcairn Descendants. This stated that:10

A major factor in the Bill’s defeat was the fact that the Federal Government’s level of consultation with the Norfolk Island community
on the proposed changes was defective: despite a Senate resolution on 25th May 1999 calling for formal negotiations with the Norfolk Island Government on this issues, no such negotiations occurred. As Senator Mackay said in the Bill’s second reading debate: “This Bill is a stark illustration of this Government’s reluctance to engage in genuine discussions with the community on Norfolk Island”.

This situation has not changed. We are unaware of any subsequent Federal Government discussions with the Norfolk Island Government on these issues. Certainly there has been no such discussions with the wider Norfolk Island community.

During the debate that ensued after the Minister for External Affairs introduced the Norfolk Island Bill 1913, very similar questions exercised the minds of opposition politicians. Had the Islanders been adequately consulted? Would they be able to vote in Australian elections? Was the Island to become a part of the Commonwealth, or was it to retain its separate and distinct status? Briefing papers prepared by Atlee Hunt had tended to emphasise problems, which arose in negotiations with the New South Wales Governor and his Ministers. There was no real warning to Glynn, or his colleagues in Government, that future Australian Parliaments would be called on again and again to reconsider, in a more fundamental way, the future status of this small distant territory in the South-West Pacific.

During Murphy’s term as the first Commonwealth Administrator, attacks on the legitimacy of his decisions were often a desperate rearguard action fought by Nobbs and others to defend Islander rights. As a member and sometime President of the Legislative Council, this grandson of George Hunn Nobbs saw himself as a patriot continuing the struggle for that degree of autonomy and self-determination, which Denison had seemed to promise in 1856. At times, attacks on the administration seemed to be directed at individuals, rather than the system of governance. However, the way these events were played out must be seen in the context of a small, tightly-knit, but still divided community.
With hindsight, one wonders whether those who worked so hard to implement the goals of the 1913 Norfolk Island Act would now consider that it had really been worthwhile. Given their belief in the future destiny of the Commonwealth of Australia, it was understandable that Glynn and Hunt, who had been so closely involved in the federal struggle, would reject any thought of surrendering what was part of Australia’s domain. But, if there had ever been any political expectation of glory to be gained from imperial-style expansion, this had quickly vanished, even before Murphy’s first term in office ended.

In February 2000, another descendant of George Hunn Nobbs became the Chief Minister of the Norfolk Island Assembly. On 21 April 2001, the Norfolk Islander reported that the then Chief Minister Ron Nobbs was not happy with the progress of the Joint Standing Committee’s Inquiry. Although he did not propose complete independence, he rejected any suggestion that Norfolk Island was an integral part of Australia. In his view, the Cook Islands’ special relationship with New Zealand was the preferred model which should be pursued. After elections in December 2001, a new Chief Minister took office and the official local viewpoint seemed to have moved towards an emphasis on improving administrative efficiency as a way of achieving greater autonomy.

**Where past and present meet**

In 1996, Sir William Deane, then Governor-General of Australia, gave a lecture in honour of another patriot, Vincent Lingiari. He cautioned that, if there is to be any real understanding of present actions and situations, we need to have an understanding of individual and collective pasts. This is because:

> The past is never full gone. It is absorbed into the present and the future. It stays to shape what we are and what we do.
This study of one aspect of our collective past illustrates how earlier decisions still influence relationships between Australia and Norfolk Island. Many of the current debates over the status of Norfolk Island can only be understood within this historical context. These debates are continuing, with some Norfolk Islanders accepting that a greater identification with Australia is inevitable and desirable. But for others, it is the historical sense of belonging and ownership, which continues to transcend all other political and economic realities, and legal niceties. As one contributor to the *Norfolk Islander* pointed out: 13

Nor do I care about the legalities of whether the Pitcairners were or were not ceded the island. They believed it was and that is what matters. A homeland is what people feel in their souls. It is not determined by law but by a belief. Norfolk is my homeland because that is what I was raised to believe as was my father, as were his parents, and their parents and so on.

One wonders how those four actors from our collective past would have responded to this statement. The Minister and the Secretary might have been somewhat alarmed by the writer’s rejection of the legal ‘correctness’ of Australian authority. The Administrator would have accepted the underlying reality of community sentiment, which meant that a careful and sensitive response was required. Whatever else, it is certain that the Patriot would have applauded.
Endnotes

2 NLA: MS4653, Glynn diaries, entry for New Year’s Day, 1902.
3 P. McM. Glynn, 18 February 1898, Australian Star, Sydney.
7 Ibid., pp. 339–340.
11 ‘Chief Minister says JSC inquiry is not going well for Norfolk, looks to Cook Islands as political model’, The Norfolk Islander, Saturday 21st April, 2001.
13 Letter to the Editor, signed ‘Criticus’, The Norfolk Islander, 15 April 2000.
Location Map of Norfolk Island