7. Passenger complement

When the new Parliament House opened in Canberra in 1927 many departmental offices remained in Melbourne. Ministers and their staffs had quarters in both cities. They trekked up and down for parliamentary sittings, changing trains at the Victoria/New South Wales border or Goulburn, regularly reminded of the colonial folly of non-standard rail gauges as they transferred four to six steel cases of classified papers from one train to the other.1 As commercial air services improved in reliability, the journey would sometimes be made by air. Regular schedules with DH-86s were inaugurated by Ivan Holyman’s Australian National Airways in 1936. In 1940 there was one flight daily. Douglas airliners left Melbourne at 3.00 p.m., arriving in Canberra two hours later. An 11.45 a.m. flight from Canberra reached Melbourne at 1.50 p.m. Ministers living in Melbourne increasingly patronised these services: Dick Casey, Jim Fairbairn, Harold Holt, even the Prime Minister would be caught by photographers at Essendon airport striding across the tarmac, brief cases and portmanteaux in hand. As The Argus had commented in May 1939: ‘If the new Cabinet is not airminded it will not be the fault of the Victorian members.’2

Passionate private airmen like Jim Fairbairn and Dick Casey would, when they could, fly themselves. Colin Moodie, Dick Casey’s private secretary, recalled several occasions late in 1938 and early 1939 when the Treasurer asked if he would like to fly down to Melbourne with him. Moodie, who much preferred the train, was relieved when bad weather kept them on the ground. Casey had disturbed Moodie by the casual revelation that on a previous trip he had almost hit a hill. ‘He told me he was a bit shaken. He said “I almost did it.”’3 Early in March 1939 Dick and Maie Casey had twice been forced down on a trip from Canberra to Melbourne, reportedly rather enjoying ‘the thrill’. Casey’s interest in flying and aviation safety was long standing. He had flown before 1914 and as a passenger during the European war. After an Imperial Airways Handley Page W10 had come down in the English Channel in June 1929, leading to the drowning of seven men, he had told the Prime Minister Stanley Bruce that he had refused for two years to fly in the old two-engined Handley Pages. Casey had by then flown across the Channel about 20 times and confessed that he had been ‘considerably scared at times’, mostly by low flying.4 A decade later, after

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2 *The Argus*, 2 May 1939.
successfully completing flying training, he and his wife had flown to central Australia in mid-1938, prudently accompanied by P. G. ‘Bill’ Taylor of trans-Pacific fame.\(^5\) In later years he had taken a keen interest in aviation policy. As Minister for Supply and Development his portfolio included the Department of Aircraft Production; it was he who had given the belated go-ahead to Lawrence Wackett to expand production of the Wirraway after war began. In September 1939, he had consulted Fred Scherger secretly about the proposed Empire Air Training Scheme and was drawn by Scherger into a desperate bid to stop the planned air expeditionary force.\(^6\) In the USA he was featuring in cinema newsreels as ‘the flying diplomat’, and had made headlines by having his wife and children come by air to join him in Washington a few weeks after his own arrival.\(^7\)

If there were more convenient commercial flights even the most dedicated of private flyers would take them. But there was no doubting their preference for the air. An emphatic reminder of Jim Fairbairn’s commitment to flying had found its way into the newspapers in August 1939 when he publicly apologised for having taken a train to get to a morning meeting in Sydney with the Prime Minister and senior colleagues. ‘I personally do not use the railways,’ he had once averred.\(^8\) But on this occasion there was no scheduled flight that would get there in time. A picture in next morning’s *Sun* of Defence Minister Geoff Street posed on the steps of the afternoon mail plane explained Fairbairn’s sensitivity. His friend had made a 900-mile round trip to the conference — eight hours in the air — by Avro Anson ‘bomber’ and Douglas airliner. The story in the *Herald* later in the day rubbed it in: ‘Snow in the cockpit and blind flying in bad weather’, swooping low to pick up the railway line to Cootamundra, had made the flight from Melbourne one of the most exciting in Street’s experience.\(^9\)

There were good reasons to be worried about the danger of air travel. Newspapers were frequently telling of hazardous bad weather, abandoned flights, fatal accidents, and of the inquiries that followed. The RAAF was just emerging from a distressing phase of fatal crashes and a severely critical report on their training and procedures by a British Air Marshal. The death of the MP and former minister Charles Hawker late in 1938 had occasioned a shake-up of civil aviation. Ministers had frightening experiences of their own to tell: in Geoff Street’s case, not only persevering through zero visibility, but the forced landing of an Anson in northern New South Wales. He had also been with Jim Fairbairn over rugged mountains in May 1938 when a plug in one of the engines of Fairbairn’s

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6 ACM Sir Frederick Scherger, interview, 2 Sept. 1978.
Dragonfly blew out and they had been forced to return to Canberra on one motor. Six weeks later, this time on the way back from Melbourne, Fairbairn was forced to detour far to the west to dodge electrical storms, and fly through hail in sight of the ground to avoid collision with the hills around Canberra.\(^{10}\) In 1936 Billy Hughes, Minister for Health in the Lyons government, had been a passenger in an airliner that crash-landed near Beaudesert en route to Brisbane. Unfazed by the experience and the consequential broken collar bone, Hughes continued to fly around the country when speed was essential.\(^{11}\) At least one of Hughes’s colleagues owed his life to the skill of an RAAF pilot. Vic Thorby, then Minister for Defence, en route from Canberra to Melbourne on 9 May 1938 had the courageous 23-year-old Flying Officer Harry Durant to thank for his. Durant, less than 18 months from earning his wings, had managed to bring their Anson down safely near Albury when disaster threatened. He was soon a flying instructor and was awarded the AFC in the 1939 New Year’s Honours List.

If it was not an Australian story of tragedy or providential escapes it was one involving friends or colleagues overseas. In June 1940, Norman Rogers, Canadian Minister of National Defence, had been killed in a crash of a Defence Department aircraft on a flight from Ottawa to Toronto. Jim Fairbairn, who had met Rogers just six months before, had cabled the Canadian Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, expressing his shock and sympathy. Mackenzie King, who had never flown, had long been apprehensive about air travel and had advised his ministers against it.\(^{12}\) In Europe there were no such inhibitions. Newsreels of the 1930s memorably showed Adolf Hitler campaigning and the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain embarking on successive peace missions by air.

Australian cinema audiences too had seen Joe Lyons becoming a regular aircraft passenger. ‘Without the assistance of air travel I would not have been able to cover so much ground or to have kept so fit,’ he told an Adelaide audience in 1937.\(^{13}\) He had flown several times during the 1931 election campaign. Facing his first election as Prime Minister in 1934 he travelled extensively in a private plane provided and co-piloted by Charles Ulm. Irvine Douglas, then Commonwealth Government Publicity Officer accompanying the Prime Minister’s party, recorded that there was a leaflet drop over Lyons’ electorate. A sofa had been installed in the aircraft for Lyons’ comfort. The Prime Minister had insisted that Ulm fly the plane. Unwilling to admit that he was a little

unreliable on landings and take-offs, Ulm had brought along another pilot. The following year, in Britain for the King’s Silver Jubilee, Lyons and his wife flew from London to Brussels. It was Enid Lyons’ first flight. Thereafter the couple would frequently take to the air as they made their way around Australia to public functions. Six of his family flew around Tasmania in 1935.

By the beginning of the 1937 federal election campaign Lyons was described as a ‘thoroughly seasoned air traveller’ with almost as many flying hours as a qualified pilot. ‘Of course,’ electors were reassured, ‘he does not handle the controls himself.’ Seventeen-year-old Sheila Lyons was soon announcing her ambition to be an air hostess; and her brother Desmond was to join the Air Force in October 1939. On the Sydney to Melbourne route, the Lyons entourage would fly in an Australian National Airways DH-86. A regular pilot of these 12-seater fabric-covered bi-planes was Harry Purvis. Purvis, whose expertise the RAAF was to call upon in March 1940 as a Hudson instructor, was always uneasy in a DH-86. So too were other pilots. Lawrence Wackett believed the machines had structural flaws. But after a series of crashes and disappearances, the temporary grounding of all of them, and exhaustive flight tests, they were declared airworthy by the Department of Civil Aviation. Dick Casey and Harry Gullett, as well as Lyons, continued to use them until they were superseded by DC-2s.

Joe Lyons had said at the beginning of July 1936 that an aeroplane for the exclusive use of Cabinet ministers was inevitable but not imminent. Such an exclusive machine might have been even less imminent if the Prime Minister or his colleagues had taken seriously the announcement of a Mr Penny of Auckland that he had developed a ray that could stop aeroplane engines. When controversy erupted following a Demon accident in which the son of a Labor MP was killed, various ministers had made a show of travelling in Service aircraft. The Chief of the Air Staff expressed his gratitude to the newly licensed Dick Casey: ‘however confident one is in one’s organization, these incidents have their moral effect on all members of the Service.’ Frequent patronage of ANA’s Melbourne–Sydney route demonstrated the ‘air-mindedness’ of the Victorian members of the government. On at least one occasion the flight made

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15 Sunday Times (Perth), 19 Sept. 1937.
7. Passenger complement

a special stop at Canberra to disembark Menzies, Casey, Fairbairn, Street, Holt and several secretarial staff. By August 1940 ANA’s 3.00 p.m. weekday service to Sydney was via Canberra.20

No dedicated aircraft had been allocated for ministerial use by 1940. When Geoff Street had to be in Sydney on January 18 for a conference with the New Zealand Defence Minister he was forced to borrow BHP’s Lockheed 12A, Silver City, for the day. Repeated requests had been made unavailingly by Jim Fairbairn while still a backbencher, for the creation of a travel allowance ‘to enable Ministers and members to travel by air, or to utilize other forms of transport which may suit them better than the railways’. Even an appeal to the ‘100 per cent air-minded’ Treasurer Dick Casey — he had flown his dog, reportedly yawning with boredom, to Canberra in November 1938 — had brought no joy. There were reports in mid-1939 that the government had ordered an aeroplane with a seating capacity of six for ministers travelling to and from Canberra. The Civil Aviation Board had recommended the purchase of a Lockheed machine in 1938 but the government insisted on a British plane.21 Shortly before the outbreak of war, Geoff Street as Defence Minister had foreshadowed that for ‘transport of Ministers and senior officials between Canberra and Melbourne, special flying arrangements might be necessary for urgent movements which do not fit in with the timetable of the air services. This could be decided by the demands of experience.’22

The demands of experience, confirming his own predilections, soon convinced Jim Fairbairn that ‘special flying arrangements’ were necessary. The Civil Aviation Board’s Percival Q6, operational from August 1939, was inadequate for the purpose, too small and under-powered.23 He had determined that some of the RAAF’s new Hudsons would be fitted out and reserved for use as required for ministerial transport. In its original civil configuration the Lockheed 14 offered a comfortable insulated cabin with five rows of reclining and swivelling passenger chairs, reading lights, ‘ash receptacles’, and safety belts. An attractive interior trim with the promise of a low sound level was important. With Seapak flame-proofed sound absorption, and air introduced and exhausted from the cabin through sound traps, Lockheed boasted that the noise level with full open throttle was maintained ‘lower than that of a railway sleeping coach’.24 It was as well that it should be so.

20 The Argus, 2 May 1939; The Age, 6 Aug. 1940.
For it was not fear alone — Mr Penny’s death ray, or just understandable anxiety about heavier-than-air machines staying in the sky — that kept people out of the air. For MPs, cost was a consideration. A proposal to allow airline travel concessions had been rejected in December 1938 ‘in view of the state of Commonwealth finances’; revived on a more modest scale by the Minister of the Interior in April 1940 it was still undecided. For the public servants whose job it was to ensure that the War Cabinet was able to function away from the Melbourne defence headquarters there was the regular chore of loading and accompanying secure containers of files by rail or road. For those less burdened, the railway had long been a preferred alternative to flying. Harry Gullett’s son Jo, who had made the journey with his father, and was to enter the House of Representatives in 1946, would say: ‘air services in those days were unreliable, often uncomfortable and every now and then unpleasantly rough’. By contrast, bad weather would rarely deflect a locomotive on Australian tracks. Noise and smells were at a more acceptable level. Since the launch in November 1937 of the streamlined and air-conditioned Art Deco express, the ‘Spirit of Progress’, there was a new level of comfort, a tinge of glamour. In mid-winter even the most passionate flyers like Jim Fairbairn, Geoff Street, Dick Casey, and Harry Holt might be happy to take the night train together.

The overnight journey to Canberra had become a kind of rolling social club, ‘the old train dining car network’ as one regular described it. Over dinner, between Melbourne and Albury, ministers, public servants, private office staff, and occasionally wives would while away the hours convivially. Drinks were available with the meal, and there was access to an observation or ‘parlor’ car by ministerial gold pass or a premium for others who were prepared to pay. For senior public servants, the capacity to pay was enhanced by a travel allowance of 10 pence an hour. (Colonel Harry Jones of the Intelligence Bureau, claiming at the rate of 20/- a day, could pocket over 13/- when the train ran late). Labor MPs and government supporters would suspend hostilities for the duration of the trip. Cards might be brought out. A War Cabinet minister might hand round cigars, more than likely ‘Admiral’ or ‘Cubanola Principes’ purloined from the box provided at meetings in the Defence Committee room at Victoria Barracks.

The powerful War Cabinet Secretary and head of the Department of Defence Co-ordination, Frederick Shedden, might unbend a little with his assistant Sam

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27 The Argus, 14, 21, 27 June 1939.
Landau. The reserved Shedden knew this was the not the time or place for business. Billy Hughes, a frequent traveller with his wife Dame Mary, would entertain with a stream of anecdotes.

Often Robert Menzies would also be there, not in Hughes’s orbit but exchanging mildly malicious banter with his private secretary, the brilliant but troubled Anglophile Catholic Theo Mathew, or later the bright, witty, eccentric Corby Tritton. A journey of up to 18 hours gave Menzies respite from the plague of advisers and supplicants that gathered outside the Prime Minister’s office. Distant from domestic cares as well, Menzies enjoyed train travel. The normally omnipresent Shedden, who had no small talk and who couldn’t take a ribbing, would retreat to avoid being teased. His chief would linger, the centre of an admiring circle of acolytes and ambitious colleagues, eager to please and exhibit their talent to amuse. The Monday night service from Melbourne departing at 6.24 p.m. was scheduled to arrive in Canberra conveniently just before nine the next morning. After alighting at Albury around 10.24 p.m. there was a half-hour wait to change trains. Then the possibility of retreat to a sleeping berth, sometimes shared with a colleague, in a through carriage on the Melbourne Express, time to digest the papers for meetings ahead, perhaps a soothing pipe or another cigar. The carriage would be detached at Goulburn to join a train from Sydney and complete the winding rattle to Canberra on the narrower gauge. The return journey could be just as diverting. Coming home to Melbourne as Prime Minister-designate in April 1939, Menzies was heard in earnest conversation with the Minister for Defence debating whether Ironmonger or Blackie was the better bowler.

Not everyone spent the trip so agreeably. The Country Party’s John McEwen, intermittently Minister for the Interior from late 1937 to March 1940 when he became External Affairs Minister, used the journey to catch up on accumulated work with his staff. It was not that McEwen had anything in principle against air travel. He had taken it up enthusiastically when he became a minister. Around a campfire in the Northern Territory in 1938 he had ‘sold’ Eddie Connellan on the notion of connecting remote outback stations by air. In July 1939 Connellan Airways had begun a subsidised airmail service between Alice Springs, Mount Doreen, Tanami, Victoria River Downs, and Wyndham with two Percival Gull
VIs. McEwen had been supported in encouraging Connellan by Jim Fairbairn whose influence as a director of the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney ensured the vital bank overdraft. Yet on the regular journeys between Canberra and Melbourne the train was McEwen’s chosen mode. With his two private secretaries, Roy Rowe and Fred Hill, and a stenographer in tow, he always ensured they had a compartment to themselves. ‘We carried a portable typewriter and virtually a portable filing system, set up an office in the compartment and worked all the way.’ The ambitious Jack McEwen, a self-made soldier-settler, who had been acting Minister for Air while Fairbairn was overseas, was a harder task master than the Western District gentleman graziers.

Whatever personal preferences or official priorities determined who was to fly to Canberra on August 13, by late on the previous day six men had been chosen to make the trip. The Minister for Air of course was at the top of the list. Jim Fairbairn’s friend Geoff Street, as Minister for the Army, was his almost inevitable companion. The government’s principal military adviser, General Sir Brudenell White, accompanied by his staff officer Lieutenant Colonel Frank Thornthwaite, was required along with the other Chiefs of Staff. Sir Harry Gullett, Vice-President of the Executive Council, his Cabinet experience stretching back to the late 1920s, had ministerial seniority. And the last seat would go to the man upon whom Fairbairn relied perhaps more than anyone else; his private secretary, Dick Elford. Together they would join the aircraft at Essendon when it arrived from Laverton after breakfast.

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