



SIX

THE
PROSPEROUS
YEARS:

1968–1975



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The transfer of central administration of the Department of Supply to Canberra occurred during an economically buoyant time in Australia, apart from the brief credit squeeze in the mid-1960s, which had no effect on the Commonwealth's car-with-driver services – either in the states or in Canberra. The period of prosperity continued into the 1970s with the services being extended to such clients as the Commonwealth Railways and trade unions, indeed, any organisation with a federal association.

The Prime Minister's Department had also extended entitlements to a dedicated driver to the Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia. This was later extended to Chief Justices of the Federal Court and Family Court, with pool car services for other judges.¹ The notion of having a preferred driver for the Chief Justice of the High Court had developed in accordance with the broadening of the service “when COMCAR could afford to be more liberal with the services provided”.²

This was a time when the costs of the service seemed of little relevance. Sir Paul Hasluck, Governor-General from 30 April 1969 to 11 July 1974, indicated that he intended to visit his home in Perth every two or three months, and had his secretary request the location of a Rolls Royce there for his use. A 1969 Silver Wraith Rolls-Royce was transferred there prior to 10 June 1969.³

In early 1971 Cabinet approved the allocation of a car-with-driver in Victoria for former Prime Minister Sir John McEwen; elsewhere in Australia he had access to vehicles from the Commonwealth car pools. Gough Whitlam, Prime Minister from 3 December 1972, approved official car transport being

made available to Dame Patti Menzies in February 1974 as the wife of a former prime minister. When in Melbourne she was to have access to the car and driver dedicated to Sir Robert Menzies, though she could call upon a car from the transport pool if the other was not available. Billie Snedden, as a former leader of the opposition, gained unrestricted access to cars for official purposes from 30 June 1975, though with no special allocation of car or driver.⁴

The entitlements of ministers and members of parliament in Canberra proved a boon to local taxi owners, particularly during parliamentary sessions. According to Frank O'Keefe MHR, demands on the Commonwealth car pool in 1970 were such that local taxis were required to undertake much of the work when parliament was sitting. This evidently inconvenienced Canberra's non-parliamentary and public service population.⁵ The government engaged consultants Pak-Poy and Associates to monitor the situation and ultimately reported there was no undue inconvenience, adding that the government constantly monitored the number of taxi licences available in the city to ensure sufficient taxis for all requiring such services. The government did not consider the situation to be different to that in other cities at times of peak demand.⁶

There was a minor re-arrangement of responsibilities in 1971, when an administrative arrangement transferred responsibility for the Prime Minister's transport requirements in the Australian Capital Territory from the Department of Supply to the Department of the Interior. His car, a Bentley, had previously been on weekly hire from the New South Wales Stores and Transport Branch.⁷

Work practices

The culture of the services – in Canberra and the states – had become clearly established by this time, along with some ingrained work practices, such as the inviolability of access to overtime.

There was a definite class structure within each service based on seniority and guaranteed by a signed agreement with the TWU. Chris Carberry, who began driving in Sydney in 1972, quickly learned that Repatriation driving was considered much tougher than pool driving, and certainly inferior to driving ministers or distinguished visitors. Repatriation drivers generally travelled greater distances throughout the state than their colleagues and did so in manual Holden sedans with no air-conditioning, while pool drivers had automatic cars with air-conditioning.⁸



Prime Minister
Robert Menzies
with driver
Peter Paterson, 1970.



Visit to Perth of
United States
Apollo 11 astronauts,
Edwin 'Buzz' Aldrin,
Mike Collins and
Neil Armstrong, 31.9.1969.
The driver is Peter Signey.

Still, there was an attraction that appealed to many drivers about driving for the Repatriation Department and meeting old veterans who were grateful for the service and never took it for granted. Ted de Costa in Sydney began driving for the department when he joined the service on 21 January 1963. He had already been driving double-decker buses about Sydney and after joining the Stores and Transport Division worked for 11 years as a freight driver. He fondly remembered being called to the Sydney Hospital to take an old-timer to the Concord Repatriation General Hospital. The old-timer was down and out and had fallen down the steps of the Sydney Town Hall. He had been taken to Sydney Hospital where staff learned he was a returned serviceman:

Ted arrived in his smart uniform as they wheeled this shabby patient out. The sister looked at Ted and the Humber and said, 'Surely you can't put him in that?'

'No worries,' said Ted, 'That's what we are here for.'

He laid out some blankets in the back before they put the old man in. 'But he wasn't well enough to understand the luxury he was travelling in.'
[recalled Ted]⁹



Emperor of
Ethiopia
Haile Selassie,
Melbourne, 1968.

The Repatriation work continued to be important. It had many aspects and made special demands on drivers. Chris Carberry recalled:

Generally you start – for me – out in the West. You pick up four passengers at different suburbs and bring them to a hospital or to an appointment place. Once you’ve dropped them you then call in and you get another, up to four passengers heading out in another direction. So at any given time you have four passengers in your car, whereas in general pool work you generally have one passenger going to one location. It’s a lot more demanding. Because you are carrying the same people constantly you build up a close association with a lot of them. Some are kidney patients or people going for radiation therapy for cancer. They become very reliant on you, too, to show up on time. They start to panic if you’re not there. You’ve got to baby them along a bit, swallow a bit of garbage in the process, but it’s pretty good.¹⁰

John Chapman was another who drove Repatriation patients. Like many before him, he began working for the department in the Stores section at Botany driving a truck in April 1970, before transferring to cars in March 1974 and driving for the Repatriation Department.

Sydney drivers in particular did routine work for the Customs Department, with as many as six or seven drivers on a 24-hour rotating shift. Customs officials were required to check ships both arriving and departing. The drivers would take Customs officials onto the wharves and remain while the officials did their work.¹¹

There was also a gulf between pool drivers and ministerial drivers, with the latter issued with Ford LTD vehicles. Ian Laidler, who began as a pool driver in Adelaide in 1973, experienced the class division. He observed that ministerial drivers might often leave ashes in their ash tray, but expected pool drivers to empty and clean these and return cars full of petrol if ever they had cause to borrow a ministerial car.

Norm McCleer in Sydney graduated to the role of a ministerial driver in 1952, though first in a relief capacity rather than as the dedicated driver. He was later allocated to William McMahon (Member of the House of Representatives from 1949 to 1982, a minister from 1951, and Prime Minister from March 1971 to December 1972) and continued driving for him until he suffered a heart attack in 1972. McMahon became noted for using the telephone and canvassing widely before ever making a decision – his car became the first in Sydney to have a telephone installed. McCleer and McMahon became close friends. McCleer drove the wedding vehicle when McMahon married Sonia Rachel Hopkins in Sydney on 11 December 1965, and drove Sonia McMahon to the hospital for the birth of each child, Melinda (1966), Julian (1968) and Deborah (1971).



Royal Visit drivers on wharf at Melbourne, 1970.

The distinction between drivers was evident in a letter dated 3 March 1970 from drivers of the Sydney depot to the Regional Director of the Department of Supply. Thirteen ministerial drivers signed the letter in which they sought “sympathetic consideration to instituting a special loading for higher duties in respect of Commonwealth Ministerial Drivers”. They pointed out:

Certain special qualifications are required in a Ministerial Driver, namely complete trustworthiness, a realisation that all matters discussed in the car are to be treated as confidential, and an ability to do so, together with a willingness to be available at any time, day or night, as required by the Minister. Most Ministers require their drivers to be not only loyal and trustworthy but able to responsibly look after the Minister, his wife and family, and to carry out whatever duties are required of him.

We have been informed that it is the usual practice, when a Member becomes a Minister for his Electoral Secretary to be raised to the position of Assistant Private Secretary and to be paid an extra loading in recognition of the added responsibility. We would respectfully suggest that similar steps could be taken to create a position of ‘Ministerial Driver’ with a commensurate reimbursement.¹²

Ministerial drivers established close relationships with their passengers and often used them to further their aims, knowing that management found difficulty in opposing ministers’ wishes. Those drivers seeking a special loading because of the role indicated in their letter: “We have taken the liberty of acquainting our respective Ministers of the step we have taken in writing to you”.¹³

The letter writers evidently gained no immediate satisfaction from the department. A handwritten note on the letter indicates “Resubmit to Minister when House resumes on 7/4/70. Will speak with Senator Sir Kenneth Anderson”. Little was achieved immediately but the distinction was later made, with a separate level being established for drivers who had received particular training and were then considered ‘interstate’ or ministerial drivers.

All drivers – whether ministerial or pool drivers – took pride in their work and took very seriously the need to protect confidences learned during the course of their work. They had no need to be reminded of sections of the *Crimes Act 1914* that made it an offence to disclose information in certain circumstances, nor the regulations of Supply and Development and Public Service that stipulated that information acquired during the course of their duties could not be divulged except in the course of official duty. They did not speak to their passengers unless invited to do so.

Those who served long periods as drivers were invariably masters of discretion, after frequently having to contend with difficult clients. Paul Hasluck, when Minister for External Affairs, used official cars infrequently but had high expectations of the service. Indeed, in 1968 he expressed an opinion that there had been a “decline in the efficiency of the transport pool in Canberra”, and as apparent proof complained “in the strongest possible terms” of a situation in which he had found himself. He had ordered a car for 6.20 pm in order to attend a reception at the German Embassy. He went to the waiting car, but Driver L Drayton was unable to start it. A call to the depot indicated there was no replacement car available. Hasluck returned to his office, cancelled his appointment and immediately wrote to Peter Nixon, Minister for the Interior.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the driver found a loose lead to the battery, reattached it and started the car within 10 minutes of Hasluck returning to his office. Drayton reported to the minister’s secretary that the car was available, only to learn that the latter no longer had need of it.

The incident was indeed regrettable and the leading hand in charge of the allocation was chided for his lack of imagination. The manager later sent a message to allocators to ensure the incident was not repeated: “Should a similar incident occur in future, Leading Hands should make every effort to ensure that a Minister receives top priority, even if it is necessary to discreetly divert a car already allocated to other duties”.¹⁵

Many drivers felt that they were expected to belong to the TWU. The union was strong and militant and had little hesitation in taking industrial action to support members’ interests. Older Adelaide drivers recalled a major strike in the mid-1970s in support of a wage increase. Drivers were on strike for nearly two weeks, which created great concern for a new driver, who had recently married and was in the throes of building a house and required a regular cash flow.

Special services

The pride that drivers took in their work was no more evident than during special visits and they eagerly anticipated the Royal Visit of 1970 – organised as part of the Bicentenary celebrations to mark Captain Cook’s landing at Botany Bay on 29 April 1770. Preparation for the visit began in 1969 immediately after then Prime Minister John Gorton returned from London. The visit was the responsibility of the Ceremonial Section of the Prime Minister’s Department with Lieutenant-General Sir Reginald Pollard KBE, CB, DSC, appointed Australian Secretary to the Queen. Claude Owen, General Manager of Stores and Transport, was appointed Transport Officer; Kevin O’Brien had charge of the Special Services Section; and Keith Loffler, Stores and Transport manager in Adelaide, became manager of the Royal Visit Car Unit.

Each special visit had its unique challenge. The 1970 Royal Visit was complicated because the Queen and Duke were to be accompanied by their eldest children, Princess Anne and Prince Charles, for part of the visit. The Royal visitors were to spend 35 days in Australia, visit five states and 23 cities and towns. There were times when all four were to attend separate functions; they were frequently to be in two states on one day and often to be in several centres on particular days.



Fred Ashby at Cabramurra in the Snowy Mountains. With Colin Trinnick, he picked up overseas visitors in Canberra and traveled to Cooma and the Snowy Mountains, then to Yallourn in Victoria, and finally to Melbourne.

Drivers and baggage handlers were drawn from each state along with sufficient vehicles for all comprising the Royal Progress. There was a special need for both a closed and an open Rolls Royce to allow the Queen to make a choice; a second closed Rolls Royce as a reserve vehicle; and a Daimler for use by Sir Michael Adeane, the Queen's private secretary, and others in the Royal Progress.¹⁶

Commonwealth drivers and vehicles were required at all centres to be visited. This meant that drivers and vehicles had to be divided into teams that leap-frogged from one centre to another to ensure drivers and vehicles were available to greet the Queen. The Royal Rolls Royce and other key vehicles were flown around Australia by RAAF Hercules aircraft between Sydney, Hobart, Melbourne, Newcastle, Brisbane, Mount Isa, Townsville and Canberra, to ensure they were available when required.

The Royal couple arrived in Sydney from Auckland on 27 March 1970. The Queen's Rolls Royce, which had accompanied her aboard the *Britannia*, was flown from New Zealand to Australia by a RAAF C130 Hercules on 27 March to be available when she arrived.

The Royal Visit proved a triumph for all concerned. The Queen made Keith Loffler a Member of the Royal Victorian Order for his services and made awards of the Royal Victorian Medal to Bruce Tibbey of Canberra, who acted as baggage officer, driver Fred Farrar from Victoria and driver Mick Kitson from South Australia. Others received Bars to Royal Victorian Medals previously granted. They were: drivers Ray O'Toole from South Australia, Herb South from New South Wales, Ron Sayer from Victoria, who was Transport Officer on the *Britannia*, and Col Wilson from Victoria who acted as senior baggage handler.¹⁷

The year 1970 was a busy one for the Special Services Section, with Pope Paul VI undertaking the first papal visit to Australia in December 1970 as part of a visit to Asia and the Pacific. Highlights of the visit were the Mass at Randwick Racecourse on 1 December, and the ecumenical service in the Sydney Town Hall on 2 December. Herb South acted as the Pope's chauffeur while in Sydney.



From the top:

Cardinals Sheehan and Knox at the 1973 Eucharistic Congress, Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Princess Margaret introduced by manager Frank Boylan to drivers at Government House, Perth, 1972. Drivers from left to right: Don Scholefield, Les Cole, David Haddell, Roy Burgess, Mal Hamilton, Kevin Wilson, Alan Edwards, Pat Duffy.

Under Labor

A change of government in 1972 brought significant changes to the car-with-driver service. The Labor Party, led by Gough Whitlam, came to power on 2 December 1972 with the slogan 'It's time' [for a change]. The Commonwealth car service reflected the break with the past after Whitlam chose to dispose of the black Bentley C*1, acquired in 1963, that had served his predecessors, and chose instead to use a white Mercedes Benz 450 SEL, one of three acquired at the time.¹⁸ He signalled another break with the past with the sale of three Rolls Royce vehicles.

More significant organisational changes followed with abolition of the Department of the Interior in 1972, with the Canberra Transport Services becoming part of the Department of the Capital Territory, with no appreciable change to day-to-day operations.

Though, having changed departments, the car-with-driver service in Canberra remained distinct from that in the states, which also became caught up in departmental reorganisation. The Department of Supply was abolished on 11 June 1974, with its functions transferred to the Department of Manufacturing Industry along with those of the former Department of Secondary Industry. Administrative changes continued: a Department of Services and Property was established on 1 July 1975 and, in October of that year combined with the Department of Manufacturing Industry to form the Department of Administrative Services.

Though involved in the departmental restructuring – now being part of the Department of Administrative Services — the traditional arrangement of the Stores and Transport Branch continued, with the transport section focused on maintaining general hire vehicle pools to satisfy passenger and goods-carrying requirements supplemented by contractors' services for passenger and goods movements by road and by the

railways for goods movements. The branch also remained responsible for storage, engineering and furniture removals. Still, a more formal distinction was made between passenger and goods-carrying requirements.

Department of Supply statistics published in 1973 do not make it possible to distinguish drivers for one or other of the functions, or provide numbers of passenger vehicles. At that time, the branch operated a fleet of 4992 motor vehicles that included sedan cars, cars for distinguished people and passenger buses; trucks for movement of goods; four-wheeled drive vehicles and special purpose vehicles such as tankers. The department carried out 10,000 to 12,000 passenger movement jobs, with 97,032 passenger jobs undertaken by the branch in Victoria that year. Corresponding figures for other states were New South Wales, 77,528; South Australia, 44,736; Queensland, 33,209; and Western Australia, 32,526. W Grey-Reitz was the Director of Transport in Central Office.

Passenger vehicles provided services for: members of parliament, the judiciary and overseas dignitaries; employees of Australian Government departments and authorities; members of the public on boards and committees assisting government departments and authorities; paraplegics under treatment through the Department of Social Security; and ex-servicemen and their dependents entitled to treatment by the Repatriation Department.¹⁹

The department continued to maintain luxury vehicles around Australia used only for special occasions. For instance a Rolls Royce Silver Cloud was kept in the Commonwealth garage in Adelaide. Writing to the Prime Minister's Department on 6 February 1973, the South Australian Governor's secretary noted that the vehicle had last been used to collect the governor, Sir Mark Oliphant, from the airport for his inauguration on 1 December 1971, and had travelled only 15,600 kilometres in the previous seven years. The secretary wrote asking for permanent use of the Silver Cloud and offered

the South Australian 1963 Austin Princess, that had started to prove unreliable, as part of the exchange.²⁰ The Prime Minister's Department replied that the Silver Cloud was an open tourer and used only in fine weather for ceremonial occasions by a member of the royal family. For normal use by the Governor-General or distinguished people, a Daimler was available. The government was quite happy to continue the 'as required' arrangement with the South Australians.²¹

The main depots for light vehicles of the Stores and Transport Division remained close to the centre of the respective cities in 1973. These were at Batman Street in Melbourne; McEhlon Street in Sydney; Grote Street in Adelaide; McLachlan Street in Brisbane; Wellington Street in Perth and Elizabeth Street in Hobart. There were sub-depots established at various locations about the cities in order to improve efficiency. These sub-depots were at Maribyrnong and the Government Aircraft Factory in Melbourne (126 vehicles); Parramatta (8), St Mary's (2 pool, 3 hire), Phillip Street (2) and Portman Street, Zetland, in Sydney (4 pool, 2 ministerial); there were two casual drivers in Townsville in Queensland; and one at Floreat in Western Australia. These sub-depots with facilities for garaging and refuelling were primarily for cars for hire with or without drivers, to obviate the need for drivers to return to central depots.



Labor Minister Tom Uren speaking to drivers at the Melbourne depot.

There were also vehicles positioned at the Repatriation Hospitals at Concord, New South Wales (12 vehicles), Heidelberg, Victoria (24) and Springbank, South Australia, which were on hire with drivers to the Repatriation Department to carry out work exclusively for that department. There were also some light and heavy vehicles at Woomera at the Technical Area, the Village, and at Range E. The division also operated an extensive bus service for the Woomera Village and facilities at Island Lagoon, Woomera West, the Technical Area, Red Lake, Nurrungar, Mount Eba and Range E. There was also a Stores and Transport depot in Fyshwick in the Australian Capital Territory from which light vehicles operated that were on hire with and without drivers.

The Melbourne depot boasted a small gymnasium for a time established in the rear of a large garage. The initiative followed a doctor's examination of several of the light-transport drivers who tended to be overweight and have a tendency for raised blood pressure. This was blamed on the sedentary life-style of drivers. Management supported the concept of the gymnasium and assisted with the provision of basic equipment such as inclined boards, skipping ropes, a horizontal bar, two climbing ropes and two medicine balls. One of the drivers, Laurie Sullivan, was trained as an instructor and agreed to take classes, with courses in the 5BX system and other exercises. Eighty-seven drivers began the course with numbers peaking at 150.²²



Early manual allocation board used in the ACT depot.

Halcyon days

There were 78 Royal and guest-of-government visits to Australia during 1973-74. The most notable were: the visit of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh who returned to Australia to open the Sydney Opera House; the visit of The Duke of Edinburgh in relation to his Award Scheme; that of the Queen and the Duke for the Royal Visit of 1974; the visit of President Nyrere of Tanzania; that of President Ne Win of Burma; and that of Norman Kirk, Prime Minister of New Zealand.

The Whitlam years marked the high point of the service as far as driver numbers were concerned. Driver numbers increased during the early part of this period with upwards of 200 located in Sydney. Mario Bartolic was one of those recruited during this period and began driving Commonwealth cars on 12 February 1973. He had been driving Sydney buses, but became increasingly frustrated by the split shifts he was required to work and the long time away from home. He successfully applied for the position of a driver at a time when numbers were increasing and began driving for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Ron de Costa was one of five drivers recruited on 24 September 1973. Hank Jensen in Canberra joined the department on 5 November 1973 where he began driving buses, though graduated to cars 18 months later. Family connections remained strong, particularly in Canberra. Hank Jensen already had a brother-in-law working as a driver when he joined; this was Bevan Bryce, formerly a police officer, who had a second brother-in-law also working as a driver.

COMCAR also sadly lost many drivers. John Griffiths was one of these. He had joined Stores and Transport as a driver in Sydney in 1949. He became a purchasing officer, control officer, Workshops, and in 1961 became Assistant Manager (Light Transport) which meant that he became closely involved in arranging transport services for a host of distinguished visitors. This led to him joining the Special Services Section in Canberra in 1969 where he became involved with the planning of transport requirements for distinguished visitors. John died in office in July 1973.²³

Gerry Guilfoyle, a Melbourne driver, died in October 1973. Gerry was one of the returned servicemen who had joined the Victorian Stores and Transport Branch immediately after World War II. He was quickly promoted to Leading Hand in the Weekly Hire Section and became one of the Royal drivers when Stores and Transport became responsible for the transport requirements of Royal Visits.²⁴



From the top:

Motorcade for Apollo 11 Astronauts, Sydney, November 1969.

Commonwealth cars in Canberra awaiting delegates at the World Bankers' Conference, 1972.

Part of history

The Whitlam period was a tumultuous time in Australian politics, epitomised by the manner of the government's dismissal on 11 November 1975 by Governor-General Sir John Kerr, who had been appointed by Whitlam. Commonwealth drivers were closely associated with the event. One of them, Harry Rundle, Malcolm Fraser's driver later spoke of the event. He indicated that Government House staff had arranged for the Leader of the Opposition to arrive 15 minutes after Whitlam, but timing went awry and Fraser arrived first. Rundle added:

'I wasn't sent out the back. I was sent to the side, right by the office, which meant I had a good view of what was going on.'

After backing his car into position, he saw Mr Whitlam's Mercedes, with its C1 number plate arrive.

'I had been a Commonwealth driver for a long time and I knew some bloody thing was wrong when Fraser was inside and Whitlam arrived after him. It wasn't protocol for the Leader of the Opposition to go into Government House before the Prime Minister. So I twigged something was going on.'

Mr Rundle doubts whether Mr Whitlam would have seen his car but, even if he had, he says it would not have made a difference. His vehicle was from the Commonwealth car pool and there was nothing to indicate that it had carried Mr Fraser.

'He would not have realised. There were always Commonwealth cars out there, going to the (Government House) office for various reasons.'

Mr Rundle drove Mr Fraser back to Parliament House but they did not speak and he noticed nothing different about his behaviour.

*'He was not the sort of bloke who was going to talk to you anyway.'*²⁵

The Fraser-led Coalition decisively won the federal election on 13 December 1975 that followed the dismissal of the Whitlam Government, with more than a 50 seat majority in the Lower House and clear majority in the Senate; five former ministers were defeated. The advent of the new Coalition government was to usher in a prolonged period of change for the Commonwealth car service, culminating in the amalgamation of the state and territory passenger car services.



Caretaker Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser returning to his car, 11.11.1975.