

## **A SHORT HISTORY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR 1901-c1965**

(extracted from :

[https://www.archives.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/562561/Dept\\_Interior\\_History.pdf](https://www.archives.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/562561/Dept_Interior_History.pdf) )

The Department of the Interior is a composite department and has always been since its inception. It carries out Australia-wide functions such as elections, meteorology, land and property as well as local or municipal and State government functions in the Australian Capital Territory. Within this diverse group of functions lies the essence of the Department's role in the administration of Commonwealth government, though other activities have been added or deleted as circumstances have required from time to time. This paper is therefore primarily concerned with a summary of the growth and development of the various groups of activities which have shaped the character of the Department since federation and given it a major role in Commonwealth administration.

Created in 1901 as the Department of Home Affairs, subsequent developments have reflected the role originally given to it as a composite department by the first Prime Minister, Sir Edmund Barton. His unpublished private papers, which contain the only statement of functions for departments at Federation, allocate the following activities to Home Affairs : Elections, Inter-State Commission, Federal Capital, Census and Statistics, Astronomical Observations, Old Age Pensions, People of Special Races, Acquisition of Property (with State Consent), Acquisition of Railways (with State Consent), and Construction of Railways (with State Consent) (1). The first Gazette contained a paper on the Works function which said "The Public Works Branch was the main core of the Department (Home Affairs)" but that it was also responsible for : Management of Public Service, Astronomy, Census and Statistics, Elections, Franchise, Lands, Meteorology, Public Works, Railways; Rivers, Seat of Government, Surveys and Representation of the People. It continued, "A separate Public Works Department was not formed at the inception because Commonwealth works activities were not sufficiently large to engage one Minister's attention" (2).

In 1906, when the functions of the original departments. were first gazetted, the Department of Home Affairs had the following activities : Acquisition of lands, Census and Statistics, Elections, Franchise, Interstate Commission, Public Service Commissioner, Rivers, Public Works, Railways, Representation of the People, and Seat of Government (3). It should be noted that the Astronomy and Meteorology functions mentioned above were not undertaken by the Department of Home Affairs until 1912. Responsibilities for astronomical and meteorological observations under the Meteorology Act (1906) were carried out by the Postmaster-General's Department until transferred to Home Affairs in 1912 (4). The Public Service Commissioner and his staff from the Department of Home Affairs went to the newly created Prime Minister's Department on 1st July, 1912 (5).

When departments were re-organised in 1916, following Public Accounts Committee investigations (6), the original Department of Home Affairs was abolished and the related functions of Railways, Rivers and Public Works allocated to the newly created Department of Works and Railways (7).

The remaining functions, together with migration and territorial functions from the Department of External Affairs which was also abolished, were allocated to the newly created Department of Home and Territories (8). The functions taken over from Home Affairs were : Astronomy, Elections, Franchise, Lands and Surveys, Meteorology and Seat of Government. The functions taken over from External Affairs were : Immigration and Emigration, Influx of Criminals, Naturalisation and Aliens, Pearl Fishing and Trepang Fisheries in Australian Waters beyond Territorial Limits, People of Races (other than Aborigines in any State) for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws, and Territories forming part of the Commonwealth. (\*)

A restrictive migration policy was administered by the Department of Home and

Territories from 1918, when the Passports function from Prime Minister's Department was transferred (9). Naturalisation and immigration restriction functions were carried out until 1945, when the Department of Immigration was formed to encourage migration from overseas as a result of post-World War II employment policy (10). The Department's territorial function once included Ashmore, Cartier, Nauru and Norfolk Islands, Papua and New Guinea, Northern and Central Australia. In 1951, when the Department of Territories was created from the earlier Department of External Territories, the remaining Northern Territory, Ashmore and Cartier Islands group of functions was transferred from the Department of the Interior (11). The present administration of the Australian Capital Territory including Jervis Bay, other than the Naval Base, maintains the original territorial function given this Department in 1901 (12).

The economic boom after World War I wrought many changes which were reflected in departmental activities. Funds, now available to encourage prospecting for precious metals and minerals, were administered by the Department (13). In the Australian Capital Territory the construction of a Solar Observatory at Mount Stromlo, originally started in 1910, was completed and the War Museum started in 1924 (14). The former, renamed Commonwealth Observatory in 1945, when the Victorian Government closed down its Melbourne Observatory, was transferred to the Austrian National University as the Mt. Stromlo Observatory in 1957 (15). The War Museum, renamed the Australian War Memorial to commemorate the deeds of Australian servicemen and women in all hostilities, still forms a branch of the Department.

In November, 1924, a changed Government majority established the Federal Capital Commission on to develop Canberra and the Australian Capital Territory (16). Many buildings in Canberra today, including the present Parliament House, East and West Block, and Hotels Acton, Ainslie, Beauchamp, Brassey, Canberra, Gorman, Kurrajong and Wellington, are lasting memorials to this Commission which was abolished in 1930 (17). More will be said later about the Department's activities in the Australian Capital Territory. During this boom period, besides the migration and territorial functions mentioned above, the Department's functions also included Actuarial Matters, Cotton Research, Forestry (the Australian Forestry School was established in 1926 although it was not transferred from Adelaide University to its present site in Yarralumla, Australian Capital Territory until accommodation was ready in 1927 (18)), Geodesy and the National Museum of Zoology (19). The addition of these diverse activities provides further evidence of the composite nature and general role of the Department in the sphere of Commonwealth administration. It should be noted that during the years 1925-32 the Lands and Survey Branch of the Department of Home and Territories was transferred to the Department of Works and Railways (20).

In 1928 the Department of Home and Territories was abolished and the Department of Home Affairs recreated (21). Thus, when Depression economies merged the administration of departments in 1932, it was the three Departments of Home Affairs, Works and Railways, and Transport which formed the present Department of the Interior (22). The range of functions then carried out was : Alien's Registration, Astronomy, Australian War Memorial, Commonwealth Literary Fund, Elections and Franchise, Emigration of Children and Aborigines, Forestry, Immigration, Indentured coloured labour, Meteorology, Naturalisation, Northern Territory, Oil Investigation and prospecting, Passports, Prospecting for special metals, Pearl Shelling and Trepang Fisheries in Australian waters beyond territorial limits, Seat of Government, Solar Observatory, Conveyance of Members of Parliament and others, Geodesy (International map of the World and 129th meridian), Lands and Surveys, Properties (a) transferred, (b) acquired and (c) rented, Public Works and Services, co-ordination of Australian Transport Services, Federal Transport Council, Railways, and War Service Homes.

Few major functional changes occurred until after World War II, except for the war-time transfer of the Bureau of Meteorology to the Department of Air and brief separations of the Works function. However, local activity in Canberra greatly increased, as will be apparent by the number of boards and committees, mentioned later, dealing with the rationing of petrol and other fuels, rubber and tyres, manpower and coupons, salvage and

collection of materials and money, etc. A separate Department of Works was created for six months, from November 1938 to April 1939, when it was abolished (23) to become the Works and Services Branch whose activities were controlled by the Allied Works Council until 1945. Another Department of Works was created from this Branch for five months, from February to June 1945, when it was polished to form the Department of Works and Housing in July, 1945 (24).

This organisation lasted until 1952 when again, it was abolished to separate its basic functions (\*\*). Throughout this period of separations, Works' staff and personnel activities were carried out by the Department of the Interior.

Mention has previously been made of how the migration and territorial functions left Interior when separate Departments of Immigration and Territories were formed in 1946 and 1951 respectively. However, the post-World War II years brought other functional changes. The War Service Homes function, which had been transferred to the Department when the War Service Homes Commissioner, Mr. H.C. Brown, became Secretary in 1932 (25), left with the Work's function in 1945. In 1946 the Department of Home Security, which had been created in 1941 (26) was abolished (27). Some of the functions went to the Department of Defence, others to the Department of Immigration. However, the civil defence functions formed the present Directorate of Civil Defence, a branch of Interior which includes the Australian Civil Defence School at Mount Macedon, Victoria.

In 1949, the functions of War Service Lands Settlement and Rural Land Schemes, which had been with the Department of Post-War Reconstruction until that Department was abolished, were transferred to the Department of the Interior with the appointment of a new Secretary, Mr. W. A. McLaren. In 1956, this function was transferred to the newly formed Department of Primary industry (28). In the same year the National Mapping function, which had been with the Lands and Survey Branch, was transferred to the Department of National Development.

In 1950, the News and Information Bureau was established as a branch of the Department (29). The Bureau's present activities have grown from a 'Commonwealth publicity function' originally allocated to the Prime Minister's Department in 1923 (30). When this function was taken over by the newly formed Department of Markets and Transport in 1928 (31), it was defined as 'Trade publicity and advertising in the United Kingdom and overseas'; to which was added 'Collection and dissemination of commercial and industrial information' when the Department of Markets replaced the Department of Markets and Transport in 1930 (32). With the outbreak of war in 1939 these resources were absorbed into a newly created Department of Information whose primary function was : Information relating to war and War censorship of the press, broadcasting and cinemas (33). When this department was abolished in 1950, the News and Information Bureau was established as a branch of Interior, with the following functions; to make Australia more widely and favourably known throughout the world, administration of the National Film Board, Production of information and publicity material on important matters of national interest on the request of Ministers, and the supply of information services for overseas posts (34).

In 1950 the Commonwealth Railways, which had functioned under the direction of the Minister for the Interior since 1932, was transferred to the Department of Fuel, Shipping and Transport (35). The following year, Interior's administration of the Commonwealth Shipping Act, which began in 1936 was transferred to the Department of Shipping and Transport (36).

As mentioned above, the Mount Stromlo Observatory was transferred to the Australian National University in 1957. However, a part of this branch remained. The Ionospheric Prediction Service, which had its origins in the Radio Research Unit of the Council or Scientific and Industrial Research (now Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) in 1942 (37), was transferred to the Observatory in 1947 (38). When the latter left the Department, the Ionospheric Prediction Service remained as part of the Administration Branch. It remained with this branch until 1963 when a major reorganisation of the Department's top structure established it as a separate branch (39).

In 1964 the Forestry and Timber Bureau, which had been established in 1924 to assist the Australian timber industry, was transferred to the Department of National Development. This transfer appropriately allocated the Bureau's research function to a comparatively new department whose primary responsibility is to develop Australia's natural resources. However, when the Bureau left, the Australian Capital Territory Forestry Section remained in the Department. It was transferred to the Lands Branch (40).

The most recent statement of the Department of the Interior's functions is consistent with the role of a composite department in Commonwealth administration set by the first Prime Minister in 1901. The functions are : Administration of the Australian Capital Territory and Jervis Bay Territory, Acquisition and leasing of land and property for Commonwealth purposes, Management of Commonwealth property, Meteorology, Ionospheric Prediction Service, Civil Defence, Parliamentary elections and referendums, Publicity and information, and War Graves (41).

### Functional Organisation

The Department is primarily organised by function to carry out its diverse activities, with some branches further subdivided by region to provide common services throughout the Commonwealth. Thus the primary organisation comprises eight specialised branches and two divisions which include a further eleven branches, viz. –

#### **Divisions**

Australian Capital Territory Services Division  
Facilities Branch  
Housing Branch  
Lands & Policy Division  
Lands Branch  
Planning, Establishments & Finance Branch  
Property Branches (6 States plus Australian Capital Territory)

#### **Specialised Branches**

Bureau of Meteorology  
News & Information Bureau.  
Electoral Branch  
Survey Branch  
Ionospheric Prediction Service  
Australian War Memorial  
War History & Civil Defence

Departmental officers are located throughout Australia, nearby island and Antarctic weather stations, and at diplomatic missions overseas.

Matters dealt with by the Branches are :

#### Facilities Branch

Responsible for education, welfare and fire protection in the Australian Capital Territory (in collaboration with New South Wales authorities), rates and water charges, public transport, traffic problems, driving licences, motor vehicle and other registrations, Lake Burley Griffin, tourism, public halls, swimming pools and other community services. The Australian Capital Territory Police Force is attached for administrative purposes.

#### Housing Branch

Responsible for management and control of Government-owned houses and flats in Canberra and the sale of government houses. Administers fair-renting in the Australian Capital Territory, the Commissioner for Housing Loan Scheme and the provision of funds for co-operative building societies.

## Lands Branch

Responsible for general land administration in the Australian Capital Territory including agriculture and stock, forest plantations, supervision of non-governmental building, city and rural leases, special leases for churches and clubs, parks and gardens, and plan printing.

## Planning, Establishments and Finance Branch

Responsible for special investigations and forward planning for departmental activities, salaried and industrial personnel, allowances, leave and other conditions of service, establishment proposals, organisation and methods investigation, staff training and development, internal audit, estimates, accounting and financial control, compensation, security, travel and other facilities for Members of Parliament.

## Property Branches (6 States plus Australian Capital Territory)

Responsible for the acquisition, leasing, management and disposal of land and property for Commonwealth purposes. The Australian Capital Territory Branch is also responsible for co-ordinating policy and controlling the overall acquisition, repairs, maintenance and works programmes.

## Bureau of Meteorology

Provides meteorological services in Australia for the general public and for special needs by civil aviation, defence services, shipping, farming, engineering, commerce and science. Issues forecasts for gales, squalls, cyclones, rough seas, floods, heatwaves, bush fire dangers, frosts, hail and aviation hazards. Conducts research and liaison with overseas organisations for the advancement of the science of meteorology.

## News and Information Bureau

Makes Australia more favourably and widely known to the rest of the world. Produces factual information, films and publicity material on topics of national importance for dissemination at home and abroad. Provides Commonwealth departments and instrumentalities with a common service agency for film, literary, photographic and artwork publicity. Maintains offices in London and New York, and has press attaches with diplomatic and trade commissioner posts overseas.

## Electoral Branch

Administers the Commonwealth electoral and referendum laws. Responsibilities include keeping electoral rolls and habitation records up to date, divisional boundaries and redistribution reviews, polling facilities, and compulsory enrolment and voting provisions. Conducts Parliamentary elections and referendums elections for the Australian Capital Territory, Advisory Council and Hospital Board, the Northern Territory Legislative Council, and miscellaneous elections for the Superannuation Board, Divisional Representatives, Apple and Pear Board, etc. Conducts Union Ballots arranged by the Industrial Registrar.

## Survey Branch

Responsible for land, engineering and topographical surveys for Commonwealth purposes, including sub-divisions of Canberra and the Australian Capital Territory, State Property Branch requirements, navigational aids for civil aviation, levelling and detail surveys for national development, and instrumentation requirements for scientific research.

## Ionospheric Prediction Service

Forecasts maximum usable frequencies for short wave radio transmission, based on observations of ionospheric and related solar and geophysical phenomena. Issues warnings on conditions likely to interrupt radio transmission. Publishes bulletins and tables of predictions.

## Australian War Memorial

Provides a unique setting to commemorate the sacrifices and illustrate the deeds of Australian men and women who have served their country during wars. Displays dioramas, souvenirs, paintings, sculptures and other relics from the Sudan War to Malaya. Maintains records of military history and science, including war diaries, maps and films, etc. Overall management is vested in a Board of Trustees.

## War History

Organises the production of the Official War History of Australia in the Second World War, 1939-45. The History consists of twenty-two volumes and a concise volume, only three of which have not been published.

## Civil Defence

Responsible for Commonwealth programme to meet defence emergencies affecting the civilian population. Produces publications on the effects of nuclear and other weapons for public education. Provides various items of standard equipment for State authorities. Conducts the Australian Civil Defence School for members of Civil Defence units. Develops and implements plans for Commonwealth territories and special areas.

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1. The Barton Papers held in Commonwealth Archives.
  2. Commonwealth Gazette Number 1, 1901, page 4.
  3. Commonwealth Gazette Number 71 of 15th December, 1906.
  4. Commonwealth Gazette Number 26 of 13th April, 1912.
  5. Commonwealth Gazette Number 26 of 13th April, 1912.
  6. Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee Report Number 350 of 7th December, 1916.
  7. Commonwealth Gazette Number 172 of 1916 and Executive Council Minute Number 23/1917.  
\* The Gazette notification has been accepted although there is some doubt about this. Memorandum 16/10677 from Mr. H.A. Earl, Acting Secretary, Public Service Commission states that while the Department of Works and Railways was created, the Department of Home and Territories was not established, nor were the Departments of Home Affairs and External Affairs abolished. See Prime Minister's file 1918/2866.
  8. Commonwealth Gazette Number 188 of 21st December, 1916, page 360.
  9. Executive Council Minute Number 104 of 17th July, 1918, page 1519.
  10. Executive Council Minute Number 27 and Commonwealth Gazette Number 52 of 14th March, 1947.
  11. Executive Council Minute Number 46 of 2nd July, 1951.
  12. See above, paragraphs 2 and 3.
  13. Commonwealth Gazette Number 19 of 15th March, 1923, page 360.
  14. Public Service Board Circular Number 2.
  15. Mt. Stromlo Observatory Act, 1956 and agreement with Australian National University on interior file 56/208(96).
  16. Section 4, Seat of Government (Administration) Ordinance, 1930-55.
  17. Section 4, Seat of Government (Administration) Ordinance, 1930-55.
  18. Public Service Board 4 of 1926 and Interior file 64/15.
  19. Executive Council Minute No.8, 1925 & Commonwealth Gazette No.64, 30 Aug. 1925.
  20. Commonwealth Gazette Number 94 of 5th November, 1925, page 1687.

21. Gazette Number 139 of 5th December, 1928, page 3503.
22. Executive Council Minute 35/36 & Commonwealth Gazette No.35 of 14 April, 1932.
23. Commonwealth Gazette Number 25 of 26th April, 1939.
24. Executive Council Minute No.27 & Commonwealth Gazette No.52, 14 March, 1947.
- \*\* See other historical summaries for further information on Department of Works.
25. "The reason for this was doubtless that Mr. H.C. Brown was at the time War Service Homes Commissioner". See Prime Minister's Department file A.6/1/1 of 11th August, 1936.
26. Commonwealth Gazette Number 125 of 26th June, 1941.
27. Executive Council Minutes 7 and 65 and Commonwealth Gazette Number 239 of 1946.
28. Commonwealth Gazette Number 53 of 12th January, 1956.
29. Executive Council Minute No. 29 & Commonwealth Gazette No.15 of 17th March, 1950.
30. Commonwealth Gazette Number 19 of 15th March, 1923.
31. Commonwealth Gazette N0.129 of 15th December, 1928.
32. Executive Council Minute Number 16 of 1930.
33. Executive Council Minutes Nos.83, 123, 167 & Commonwealth Gazette No.153 of 30th November 1939.
34. Executive Council Minute No.29 & Commonwealth Gazette No.15 of 17th March 1950.
35. Executive Council Minute No.29 & Commonwealth Gazette No.15 of 17th March 1950.
36. Commonwealth Gazette Number 46 of 2nd July, 1951.
37. See Interior file 63/1017.
38. Executive Council Minute Number 14 of 20th March, 1947.
39. Public Service Board memorandum 63/3480 of 30th October, 1963 on G64/661(64).
40. Executive Council Minute No.26 of 25th May, 1964 & Public Service Board memorandum 63/2461(81) of 22nd April, 1964 on Interior file G64/42; also file G64/15.
41. Commonwealth Gazette Number 8 of 21st January, 1965.