

# 1932 A COATHANGER FOR SYDNEY & A PREMIER IS SACKED

## *Contents*

Sydney Harbour Bridge's controversial opening .....	2
The 'Big Fella' is sacked .....	10

## **Sydney Harbour Bridge's controversial opening**

Not even the magnificent engineering feat that is the Sydney Harbour Bridge could escape the bitter political feuds spawned by the Depression.

After nearly ten years of construction at a cost of more than £9 million and thirteen lives, the 'coathanger' bridge was finally opened on 19 March 1932 in sensational fashion: first by a mounted right-wing extremist wielding a sword, followed minutes later by Labor Premier Jack Lang using a pair of gold scissors.

The first opening was a cheap political stunt by a member of the Fascist-inspired New Guard movement, but it succeeded in poaching the headlines which by rights should have paid tribute to those who built the 'Colossus of the Southern Hemisphere'.

Spanning the harbour had been a dream almost as old as the settlement of Australia. Less than thirty years after the First Fleet planted the seed of a settlement in the shadow of the Rocks, the convict architect Francis Greenway was proposing a bridge to link the embryo city with the North Shore.

No details of his plans have survived, but in the years that followed, he inspired many others, ranging from a floating bridge between Dawes Point and Milsons Point, to a seven-span truss bridge, and a variety of subways.

Both private enterprise and government agencies were involved in these proposals, which by 1903 were far enough advanced for the New South Wales Government to consider — but not accept — a £1.9 million tender for a bridge.

Ten years later the real breakthrough came from a brilliant government engineer named John Job Crew Bradfield, who convinced the State's Public Works Committee to recommend the construction of a cantilever bridge, without piers, from Dawes Point to McMahons Point.

Opposition in the Legislative Council and the outbreak of the first World War brought the project to a temporary halt, but Dr Bradfield used the nine years until 1922 preparing specifications for both a cantilever and an arch bridge.

In November of that year, the State Government finally gave the go-ahead and called for tenders, accepting the one from the British firm Dorman, Long and Company which quoted more than four million pounds to erect an arch bridge.

Although the final design and erection scheme was prepared by Dorman, Long's Sir Ralph Freeman, it was based on the specifications laid down by Bradfield, who also approved the final concept.

The rare talent which had won Bradfield the University Medal for Engineering when he graduated from Sydney University at the age of twenty-two, ensured that the bridge was built wide enough to cope with the traffic demands of future generations, at a time when few people could foresee the extent of the transport revolution that would be brought about by the internal combustion engine.

Excavation for the foundations of the main bearings and the approach span piers began in January 1925. Known as 'skewbacks', the foundations were dug to a depth of 12.2 metres and filled with concrete laid in hexagonal

design to provide sufficient strength to carry the full weight of the main span.

A mini-town sprang up on the construction site. Dorman, Long and Company erected sprawling workshops at the site now occupied by Luna Park. Here all the thousands of parts of the bridge were manufactured by a huge workforce of skilled tradesmen.

To avoid the creation of shipping hazards and vast additional cost, the contractors decided not to construct temporary supports for the bridge in the harbour itself, but rather to build the arch in two halves, each anchored to rock by huge steel cables. To hold the 128 cables, each 366 metres long and weighing 8.5 tonnes, large horseshoe-shaped tunnels were dug into the rock on either shore.

Work on the arch itself began on October 26, 1928, after the approach spans had been constructed and the abutment towers completed to deck level. Two gigantic creeper cranes, one on each side of the harbour, were built to travel along the top of the arch while building it in front of them as they went. Electrically operated, each creeper crane weighed 580 tonnes and could lift 123 tonnes.

Units of steelwork for the arch were manufactured in the workshops, then taken by barge to underneath the creeper cranes where they were lifted into position. Slowly the two silicon steel arches crept towards each other until, on August 4, 1930, the gap between them was a mere 1.07 metres.

Now the cables were slowly and carefully slackened. But there was still a gap when, on August 13, a severe windstorm hit Sydney. Gales gushing at

110 kilometres an hour buffeted the two parts of the arch, each weighing 15,000 tonnes. They moved less than 10 centimetres, defying doubters who all along had predicted the bridge would fall into the harbour before being completed.

It was a dramatic moment when, at 4.15 on the afternoon of August 19, the two halves touched for the very first time. As night fell, contraction of the steel caused the gap to open again, but at 10 p.m. the two sides were finally bolted together. Sydney Harbour no longer divided north and south.

The Australian flag and the Union Jack fluttering proudly from the creeper cranes the next morning brought home the news to jubilant Sydneysiders. Ships sounded their horns in salute and ferry passengers cheered. Bridge workers were given a half-day holiday and, in those halcyon days of cheap beer, each received two shillings with which to toast the bridge.

The next step was to hang the deck from the arch. Since the creeper cranes were already in the centre, the deck was erected from the centre out.

The hangers, huge steel girders varying in length from 58.8 metres in the centre to 7.3 metres at each end, were attached to the arch. Crossbeams which carry the deck were linked to the bottom ends of the hangers. Once the crossbeams were all linked together, the deck was built and completed in May 1931.

Now the creeper cranes were dismantled, the deck asphalted, and tracks for trams and trains laid. To test the strength of the bridge — and to convince doubters afraid of ever crossing it — 72 steam locomotives were

shunted onto the bridge, filling the four rail tracks buffer to buffer. Then some engines were removed from first one side and the other to test the effect of such weight disparity. But the bridge passed every test.

When, early in 1932, the 'coathanger' bridge was finally completed, it consisted of a main span 503 metres long, with ten steel approach spans adding another 646 metres, and a deck 49 metres wide.

The final cost was £9 577 507 — more than double the original estimate — but still, in the words of Premier Lang, probably 'the bargain of the century'. Said the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

*Across Sydney has been thrown the greatest arch bridge of the age, a commanding structure with stately towers that stand like the Pillars of Hercules bestriding the tide. The Bridge is finished. And, by no matter what standards of comparison we measure it, its place is assured as one of the greatest of its age throughout the world.*

By 1932, unemployment was biting deep in New South Wales, bringing with it angry political divisions between supporters of socialist Lang's State Government and right-wing organisations, many of them backed by the capitalist establishment and leading newspapers.

One was the New Guard, formed in Sydney in 1931 by a group of ex-officers dedicated to the destruction of communism, but which by the following year was shown to exist mainly to stamp out 'the bushfire of Langism'.

Lieutenant-Colonel Eric Walker, leader of the New Guard, claimed to have over 100 000 followers, all opposed to being 'under the domination of a

band of imported agitators of low type, openly professing the revolutionary principles of Karl Marx’.

To Walker, ‘the quality of our legislators proves to demonstrate the inability of the people to select the best rulers or to choose the wisest policies’. The opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge provided the New Guard with a platform from which to show their contempt for such rulers.

Premier Lang was scheduled to cut the ribbon and open the bridge on Saturday, March 19, 1932. The New Guard decided to forestall him. The man they chose was a suburban antique dealer and former Hussar, Captain F.E. de Groot.

Tens of thousands of people crammed into Observatory Park, on the southern approach to the bridge, to see the opening ceremony. Mounted police escorted the Governor of New South Wales, Sir Philip Game, to the dais, where he read a special message from King George V.

Such was the interest that the opening proceedings were broadcast live throughout Australia, as well as Great Britain and the United States. And what a sensational ceremony it turned out to be.

Reported one journalist on the spot: ‘Police, fearing some kind of disturbance, held a strong guard around the ribbon stretched across the bridge and warned everyone away. Riding in alone at the end of the Governor-General’s guard, de Groot, dressed in the uniform of a captain, galloped down through the crowd with his sword at the ‘present’.

Looking neither left nor right, he halted in front of the official dais where

stood the Premier, and not a hand was laid on him...

'The Minister for Works (Mr Davidson) was speaking when a terrific hubbub arose around the ribbon. De Groot attempted to charge through the silken barrier, but the animal shied and reared back on its haunches, as the police rushed to the scene.

'Drawing his sword, de Groot lunged at the ribbon. He failed to sever it completely at the first blow. His sword flashed in the sunlight again and again and the ribbon fell to the road...'

As police rushed the horseman, he exclaimed: 'Hand's off! I am an officer of the King. You can't touch me.' The police answer was to pull him from the horse and he landed heavily on the road. Police lined up in a cordon to check the rushing crowds. With a constable on either arm, de Groot was hurried away.

The ribbon was tied together and, minutes later, was cut by Premier Lang with a pair of golden scissors now on display in the library of the New South Wales State Parliament.

The ceremony was followed by a procession, more than two kilometres long and including decorative floats, contingents of bridge workers, school-children, armed forces, returned servicemen, surf life savers and Aborigines.

All vehicular traffic was prohibited until midnight, allowing members of the public a rare opportunity to walk across the bridge, which they did in their thousands.



An aerial display by the Royal Australian Air Force thrilled the crowd as planes swooped over the bridge. That evening they were treated to a Venetian Carnival and a special fireworks display on the Harbour, while throughout the city balls and dinners were held.

Sporting events on the day included a sailing regatta, surf carnival, race meeting, athletic meeting, cricket match and tennis exhibition.

Souvenir hunters were catered for in every way imaginable: everything from commemorative stamps to ashtrays, postcards, cigarette cases and special railway tickets. Today, these are valuable collector's items.

De Groot was examined at a psychiatric hospital and declared sane. For his action on the bridge he was convicted of offensive behavior and fined five pounds (with four pounds costs).

Less than two months after the bridge opening, Jack Lang was sacked by the Governor with whom he had shared the dais. The New Guard did not survive much longer: without Lang to fight, it gradually disbanded, and by 1935 had ceased to exist as a political force.

Of all the main actors on that momentous day, only the Bridge remains, crouching aloof over Sydney and seemingly indestructable, as a constant reminder of what man can achieve despite himself.

## **The 'Big Fella' is sacked**

'Big Fella' J. T. Lang met his match on 13 May 1932 in the person of Sir Philip Game, the British Governor of New South Wales. That afternoon, for the first time in modern Australian history, the King's representative dismissed from office a popularly-elected political leader who still enjoyed the full support of Parliament.

An obviously surprised Premier Lang told reporters: 'Well, gentlemen, I'm sacked — dismissed from office. I am a free man.'

Like so many millions throughout the world, Jack Lang was a victim of the drawn-out Depression, which by 1932 saw over 673 000 Australians receiving 'sustenance' from the Government.

The country was hard put to meet interest payments on foreign loans, mainly to British bankers. In 1930 Prime Minister J. H. Scullin invited a Bank of England mission to advise on economic measures which would help his country overcome its financial problems.

One of the suggestions of the mission's leader, Sir Otto Niemeyer, was that the States should balance their budgets and continue repaying foreign debts, even if this meant reducing social services. Lang, then leading the Opposition in the New South Wales Parliament, disagreed strongly and forced an election on the issue, which swept Labor into power.

Lang moved quickly to keep his election promises to the workers. With unemployment in the State already exceeding 100 000, he introduced a Moratorium Act extending repayments on mortgages and hire purchase, and pro-

vided badly-needed additional funds for hospitals by introducing a State Lottery.

But it was his so-called 'Lang Plan' which created most controversy. At a meeting of State Premiers, chaired by the Prime Minister, Lang pointed out that Britain had decided to suspend interest payments on her war debts for three years, following an agreement by the United States to fund these debts by reducing the interest rate and extending the term.

Lang proposed that 'the government of Australia pay no further interest to British bondholders until Britain had dealt with the Australian overseas debt in the same manner as she had settled her own foreign debt with America'; that interest on government borrowings in Australia be reduced to 3 per cent; and that the Commonwealth Government abolish the gold standard and substitute a currency 'based on the wealth of the country'.

The meeting of Premiers considered Lang's plan as 'repudiation' which, it feared, would lead to trade retaliation by Britain. So the Premiers refused — probably wisely — even to consider his suggestions.

Soon, however, varying support for the proposal split the A.L.P., with the supporters of Prime Minister Scullin forming a Federal Labor Party in New South Wales to counter the 'Lang Labor Party' in the State. In Canberra, too, there was suddenly a Lang Party active in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

When a New South Wales loan repayment of nearly a million dollars became due to the Westminster Bank in London, the stubborn Premier bluntly

announced that the State Treasury did not have the required funds. So the Federal Government, in terms of an earlier undertaking, was forced to pay up and then attempt to recover the money from New South Wales.

But, while the Scullin Government was trying to do so through a High Court action, the financial situation in New South Wales continued to worsen.

A rush on the State Savings Bank forced it to close its doors on 22 April 1931, leaving thousands of small investors, many out of work, with no ready cash and at the mercy of money-lenders who bought up savings books for as little as eight shillings in the pound.

Lang's rank-and-file supporters were becoming restless. As the New Guard became stronger, so did demands that 'Lang must go!'

By February 1932 the financial situation in New South Wales was desperate. The State was already £2 million behind in foreign loan repayments, and the Federal Government, now led by Joseph Lyons, introduced legislation to confiscate all monies in the State's bank accounts.

'It meant', wrote Lang later in his autobiography, *The Turbulent Years*:

*that we would no longer have the money required to meet the salaries and wages of government employees, no money to pay pensions or child endowment, and no money to meet the cost of providing the unemployed with the minimum of food essential to carry on their bare existence. It meant that there would be no money to keep the hospitals open, no money to maintain law and order...*

*It would mean the complete stoppage of all government transport services, the cessation of water and sewerage services, the closure of all mental institutions and the breakdown of education...*

Undaunted by an unsuccessful appeal to the High Court, Lang issued instructions to all State government departments to accept payments only in cash or in uncrossed cheques which could immediately be cashed.

The State Treasury in Macquarie Street overnight became the unofficial State Bank, with public servants receiving their wages from its vaults in cash. The most populated State in Australia was being run from hand to mouth.

On 12 May, in a last attempt to raise funds to pay the loans and so end the stalemate, a Mortgages Taxation Bill, which would tax banks and other financial institutions on mortgages they held, was rammed through Parliament and sent to the Governor for his signature. But it was one Bill he never signed.

Earlier that day Sir Philip Game had asked for, and received, a copy of the circular instructing State government departments on how to collect funds in cash or uncrossed cheques.

He now informed Lang that he considered these orders to be a direct breach of Federal law and asked for their withdrawal. Lang refused in a letter written on the morning of 13 May.

The Governor's reply, after a personal interview with Lang, was brief and to the point: he dismissed the Premier and his Government. B. Stevens took over the Premiership, and early the following month went to the polls, where

the people of New South Wales endorsed the Governor's action by reducing Labor's representation in the Legislative Assembly from 55 to 25 seats. The revolt had been quashed.

Lang never again regained political eminence, although he did serve one term as an independent member of the Federal Parliament immediately after the second World War.

He was expelled from the Labor Party in 1943, but re-admitted twenty-eight years later at the age of ninety-five.

Irrepressible, the 'Big Fella' was still expounding socialist views in his newspaper, the *Century*, when he died four days before Christmas 1976, bringing to a final close one of the most colourful chapters in Australian political history.