

1911

A TERRITORY FOR THE COMMONWEALTH

The last major change to the political map of Australia was made on 2 January 1911 when the Northern Territory of South Australia — a mostly arid, uninhabited area the size of France, Spain, and Italy combined — was taken over by the Commonwealth at a wig-and-gown ceremony in sweltering Palmerston, the struggling ‘capital’ which the new administration soon re-named Darwin.

Port Darwin, the beautiful tropical bay in which the continent’s northernmost capital city would later arise, was discovered and named after Charles Darwin in 1839 by Lieutenant John Stokes of H.M.S. *Beagle*, on which the great naturalist had made many of his observations on the evolution of species during a voyage a few years earlier.

But it was only after four unsuccessful attempts to settle the northern shores of Australia, that Port Darwin was selected in 1868 as the site for a town by

the South Australian Government, which had been granted custody of the territory following John McDouall Stuart's pioneering south-north crossing.

Named Palmerston after a former British Prime Minister, the new settlement was assured of survival when it became the meeting place, in 1872, for the undersea cable from Java, which was connected to Britain and Europe, and the overland telegraph line which stretched for 3175 kilometres to Adelaide.

The telegraph line helped to open up the hitherto almost unknown interior, while some of its repeater stations, such as Alice Springs, eventually grew into towns.

The *Illustrated Sydney News* described Palmerston in 1872 as consisting of 'the police barracks, built palisade fashion of saplings roofed with iron; a log lock-up; the customs and telegraph offices; an unpretentious Government House; the cable company offices; a couple of weatherboard stores; a few log huts and some sly-grog shops.'

Drinking, it appears, was not all that sly, for one of the first Residents appointed to govern the territory, George Scott, soon complained that government employees 'consider that their only mission in life is to eat, drink and be merry, do no work, and plunder the government whenever they have the opportunity.'

Their attitude is not at all surprising when one considers the town's total isolation, illustrated by the fact that the *Northern Territory News and Gazette*, established as a weekly on 7 November 1873, had to pay stiff telegraph rates for overseas news to be transmitted to it from Adelaide - al-

though the original cables had passed through Palmerston a few days earlier!

The British-Australian Telegraph Company staff, living in comfortable quarters, kept their distance, and were forbidden to divulge one word in the cables which they relayed day after day between Australia and the rest of the world.

Gold was discovered in the Territory by workers planting telegraph poles for the overland line, and soon a mad rush was attracting men and machines from all over the continent, among them the Government Resident, Bloomfield Douglass, who granted himself and members of his staff leave of absence to go digging for gold.

A few Chinese labourers, imported to keep the mining companies going, but soon seeking and finding their own gold, were followed by thousands of their countrymen as word of the new strikes reached China. Some diggers found a 'pot of gold' at the end of the rainbow, in the form of rich reefs and individual nuggets, some weighing as much as 9 kilograms.

In 1886, gold worth more than £1 million was exported, which prompted the South Australian Government to invest an even greater amount to build a railway link between the Pine Creek diggings and Palmerston. Five years later production peaked at more than 1.2 million grams.

By 1896 most of the mines had been bought by an English company headed by Horatio Bottomley, founder of the London *Financial Times*, whose highly-inflated claims sent share prices rocketing and eventually cost speculators

millions of pounds in the crash that followed.

One British newspaper called Bottomley a 'barefaced swindler', and described his mining ventures as 'deliberately planned schemes to rob the public'. His greatly exaggerated claims made investors wary, and only in the 1930s did goldmining in the Territory again revive substantially.

Since then, however, production has risen to more than three times that achieved during the boom years of the nineteenth century.

The Crown had originally granted South Australia control over the Territory only 'until we think fit to make other disposition of any part or parts thereof, but by 1883 the colony was petitioning for permission to permanently annex the territory before investing large amounts in projects such as a railway line between Adelaide and Palmerston.

The Colonial Office, while rejecting the request, undertook not to make the Territory independent from South Australia without reimbursing the colony for any such expenditure.

Federation in 1901 sparked a move to transfer control of the Territory to the Commonwealth. Negotiations began in 1906. An agreement, reached by the end of the following year, stipulated that the Commonwealth would pay back to South Australia £2 748 062 it had spent on the Territory, as well as purchasing the railway line which had already been built from Port Augusta to Oodnadatta at a cost of £2 242 343.

The Federal Government, in addition, undertook to complete the railway line to link Oodnadatta and Pine Creek, a distance of 1700 kilometres.

Darwin, despite its new name, remained the wild town of Australia. Its 1182 Europeans did not take kindly to authority and twice forced the Administrators, appointed by the Federal Government, to leave town.

One, Dr J. A. Gilruth, had made the fatal error of trying to control the town's drinking habits by buying up its three hotels with government funds. When these pubs were boycotted by townsfolk to protest at the inferior quality of the liquor being served, the Administrator promptly halted the sale of all alcohol - which led to the death of several old-timers who could not survive without their daily bottle or two.

Eventually, after several other scandals over land deals and the treatment of Aborigines had come to light, Gilruth was forced to leave when more than a thousand angry men stormed Government House and burned him in effigy.

A year later, in 1919, his successor, together with the Territory's judge and the Government Secretary, were put on board a steamer bound for Adelaide by citizens incensed at alleged corruption.

A Royal Commission appointed to investigate the incidents, criticised the Commonwealth for not allowing the Territorians any parliamentary representation since the takeover from South Australia in 1911.

This was rectified in 1923 when a Commonwealth Act empowered the Territory to send a Member to the House of Representatives. He or she could take part in debates, but could vote only on certain matters affecting the Territory. In 1948 the first Members of the Northern Territory Legislative Council met in Darwin, heralding the first phase of self-government, which was

granted thirty years later.

Today, the Northern Territory is no longer the Commonwealth's costly and difficult foster child. Instead, it provides Australia with much of its beef, while mining and tourism bring in substantial amounts of foreign exchange.