



TWO

BETWEEN THE WARS: 1918–1929

Little changed as far as the Commonwealth's passenger car fleet was concerned in the period during World War I, as the government focused on helping to win the war. Still, the number of government ministerial cars increased to seven, with numerous other motor vehicles being acquired for use by individual departments and for transport of senior departmental officers.

Motor vehicles were no longer a novelty nor considered exclusively a luxury item after World War I. The war brought about a virtual revolution in the design and reliability of motor vehicles and greatly increased capacity for their manufacture. By the early 1920s the Ford Motor Company had opened factories in Britain and Europe. The impact of these developments quickly spread to Australia, particularly with the return of members of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), many of whom had worked as drivers during the war and had quickly appreciated the usefulness of the new motor vehicles. Numerous car rallies in Australia highlighted their increasing reliability and they were no longer considered to be horseless carriages, to be regulated by rules pertaining to horse-drawn vehicles.

The first attempt to regulate the use of official passenger vehicles occurred in early 1918 when Cabinet determined that all ministerial vehicles in Melbourne should be garaged in one location – 38-40 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy – and be under one control, that of the Prime Minister's Department. At the same time, Cabinet decided that no special car would be set aside for particular ministers or departments under the new arrangement, but that the requirements of each minister were to receive “the best attention possible”.¹

The ministerial fleet included a motley collection of vehicles. The intervention of World War I had meant that management of the fleet had not been a high priority, replacement vehicles became hard to procure and, consequently, cars were used until of little value. In February 1919, for instance, the departmental secretary referred to two old cars in the departmental garage, the “Renault” and the “Napier”, the first two vehicles to have been acquired. He indicated they were “very old and quite unfit for Ministerial use”.²

The cessation of the war permitted acquisition of new vehicles. In February 1919 Cabinet approved the sale of the two old cars and purchase of a new vehicle, with the body built locally on a Fiat Chassis.³ A returned soldier, Josiah Musk [Service No 2166] evidently heard about the Renault, was familiar with it before the war, and enquired whether or not the historic car was for sale; he entertained the idea of establishing a business as a hire car driver. The Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department suggested he would welcome a bid for the vehicle. Musk initially suggested he was prepared to offer £160 for the vehicle, but after seeing it withdrew his offer, suggesting that it would take another £100 to make it presentable.⁴ The car was later given to the Repatriation Department for use by students at the department's vocational training centre at the Ballarat School of Mines.⁵ Presumably, it was disposed of as scrap metal when no longer useful as a teaching aid.

The department sought to dispose of another three vehicles the following year. These too required a great deal of work to be made presentable once again. Yet, though no longer “useful for practical purpose” the head of the Melbourne Technical School considered them useful “for instructional purposes” and sought one of the vehicles. In support of his request, he emphasised that “this College sent over 1100 students to the War, and has taken a very active interest in Vocational Training”. His plea was successful and the department donated one of the cars to the school “to be used for instruction of returned soldiers in the class in motor mechanics”.⁶

The period after World War I also saw the introduction of uniforms for Commonwealth drivers. In August 1919 ministerial chauffeurs employed in the Commonwealth motor garage received an issue of clothing. This included boots, dust coats and great coats from the government clothing factory.⁷ Under these arrangements, drivers received a top coat every 12 months and a pair of boots every six months.⁸

Meanwhile other departments and agencies with transport requirements acquired their own vehicles. The Postmaster-General’s Department had a need for vehicles and its own garage. So too did the Department of Defence. In this manner Joe Johnson became one of the early Commonwealth car drivers after joining the Colonial Ammunition Factory in 1918 when aged 16 years. At that time the transport depot associated with the factory had three motor cars, though with horse-drawn vehicles doing much of the work.



Joe Johnson driving one of the Department of Defence vehicles, c1920.

Royal visitors

The official vehicle fleet and those responsible for managing it were handed a new challenge in 1920 when they became involved in the Royal Visit of Edward, Prince of Wales. The occasion has the distinction of being the first instance when the government was called upon to organise and provide a fleet of motor vehicles for a distinguished visitor and associated ceremonial occasions.

The various state governments had responsibility for transport of the Prince within their jurisdictions, but the Commonwealth was responsible for his visit to Canberra, where Edward was to lay the foundation stone of the capital at Kurrajong Hill on 21 June 1920 (the stone was to become the foundation stone of proposed national archives and mark the exact centre of the capital). Major-General Cyril BB White was appointed head of a special unit to prepare for the visit. These preparations extended over a lengthy period, with White arranging for acquisition of three Crossley limousines from the factory in England. The vehicles arrived just in time aboard the Commonwealth Government's Boorara. Additional vehicles and drivers were provided from the Brunswick Street garage in Melbourne and the Home and Territories garage in Canberra. These arrangements became the blueprint for later Royal Visits in the early automobile age.

These extensive preparations, which included more than the provision of motor vehicles, were required for an event of only a few hours duration. The Prince travelled overnight from Sydney to Canberra by rail to Queanbeyan and returned later the same day, after lunch in a marquee on Kurrajong Hill and the laying of the foundation stone. The motor vehicles were required to convey the Prince from the Queanbeyan railway station to Canberra via the Royal Military College at Duntroon and return after the ceremony. A reporter recorded the journey from Queanbeyan to Canberra:

The reception which the Prince received at Queanbeyan was characteristic of the cordiality of the country districts, and was set in typical surroundings. The stay there was less than a quarter of an hour, but it was sufficient to show the Prince that warmheartedness is far from being a monopoly of the city. In a cloud of dust, a long train of motor cars set out for Duntroon, followed by ringing cheers. The six miles or so over undulating country was in the teeth of a sharp, cold wind, but the sun was struggling bravely against rather heavy clouds. It was nearly 11 o'clock when the Royal car approached the cluster of buildings nestling among trees on a hillside, and received the enthusiastic welcome of the military students of Duntroon. The party remained there about an hour and a quarter, and when at 12.15 they set out for Canberra the hills were crested with mist, and a thin drizzle was falling. Happily, however, the rain passed off, and for most of the trip the countryside was bathed in sunshine. The distance is only about three miles from Duntroon to Canberra, but a detour was made in order to show the Prince more of the Federal territory ... On approaching Kurrajong Hill, where the capitol will stand, the notable absence of people along the roads was explained by the great gathering which was assembled before the large marquees to welcome the Prince.⁹

When not planning the pageantry of a Royal Visit, Commonwealth governments remained concerned with economies and the cost of maintaining the ministerial car service, which was in the order of £6000 in the financial years 1920-21 and 1921-22. This became the subject of an enquiry by accountants from the Treasury and Prime Minister's Department in 1922. Results of the investigation indicated that there were to be no significant savings in replacing the current system with one of private cars hired as required. They noted that there were only seven Commonwealth cars for ministerial use and it was not possible to allocate one to each minister and have their departments charged with the costs. The accountants did not recommend acquisition of additional vehicles to permit ministers to have exclusive use of a vehicle.¹⁰

The accountants indicated, however, that the cars might be used more economically. They suggested that four vehicles be replaced by others more suitable for city driving and that the two high-powered Hudson vehicles be confined to country touring, and not used in the city, and the Fiat Limousine be used only when there was a need for a closed car.¹¹

The accountants also recommended that the service be placed on a more commercial basis, under control of the Prime Minister's Department, but with costs charged to departments rather than shown under votes of the Prime Minister's Department as previously. These were to be 1s 2d per mile and 5s per hour at a time where private hire cars cost 1s 3d per mile and 6s per hour; the departments were to be charged for the travelling expenses of chauffeurs engaged for country work.¹²

In approving recommendations concerning the Commonwealth car fleet, Cabinet approved the purchase of four new Buick cars and the sale of five old vehicles – a Hudson, Wolseley, Napier, Fiat Limousine and a Fiat Tourer. This represented an early attempt to rationalise and standardise the fleet. The new Buicks were acquired from Lane's Motors Pty Ltd on 25 August 1922, with the other vehicles being sold by tender. Unfortunately, the price of second-hand cars was depressed because of reductions in those of new cars. Consequently the government did not enjoy the returns for which it had hoped.¹³

A lack of close control over the use of cars led to some abuses. Misuse by one driver came to light after he crashed into a tram at South Melbourne on 1 May 1920, when the car was not being used on official business. The driver was dismissed from the service.¹⁴ Driver Percy Fisk was embarrassed on the night of 25 September 1922 when the Buick he had been driving was stolen from the front of his home. He had evidently been driving the Attorney-General and was late in returning to the garage. Rather than miss his evening meal he returned home in East Melbourne. He found the car stolen when he came out to return it to the garage. The police later located the car in Fitzroy with one of the tyres blown but no other damage having been sustained. Fisk was mortified, suffered a reprimand, and the case was used to reinforce the prohibition on drivers taking cars to their homes.¹⁵

Commonwealth transport and storage

Despite recommendations from the 1922 review, the operation of the ministerial car fleet underwent a significant change on 1 March 1923 following the recommendations of a Cabinet sub-committee. Responsibility for the fleet and the Commonwealth motor garage passed to the Defence Department on that day, in accordance with the sub-committee's recommendations.

The Defence Department assumed control of the nine vehicles belonging to the Prime Minister's Department, two already belonging to the Defence Department, one from the Repatriation Department and another belonging to the Postmaster-General's Department.¹⁶

The new arrangement included disposal of the Brunswick Street garage and use of the Defence Department garage in Coventry Street which included workshop and repair facilities. Also five vehicles were identified for sale, leaving one Daimler Limousine, two Crossleys and four Buicks, along with the Postmaster-General's vehicle. The remaining cars were allocated to particular ministers. The Daimler was reserved for the Prime Minister's use with Henry George Cook as his driver. Other vehicles were to be allocated to the Treasurer (Driver Raymond John Tracy), Minister for Home and Territories (GW White), Attorney-General (J Clencie), Minister for Works and Railways (JP Bishop), Minister for Defence (James Ferguson), and Minister for Customs (H Montgomery). The private operator, City Motor Service, had recently offered its services at rates slightly below those set for operation of the ministerial fleet, but the Cabinet sub-committee believed the savings to be insignificant in view of the reorganisation of the garage and fleet.¹⁷

Under the new arrangement cars were hired from private garages when required for Sunday, holiday, and night work as a means of eliminating overtime payments.¹⁸

By April 1927, the Commonwealth garage in Melbourne managed by the Department of Defence included an assistant, a mechanic and eight chauffeurs. Some of the employees had already served as long as 15 years. A memo from the Department of Defence to the Department of Home Affairs raised the issue of some drivers being transferred to Canberra:

I may add that a decision has not yet been given as to whether or not any Motor Cars for the use of Ministers should be retained in Melbourne or provided in Sydney after the Commonwealth departments have been transferred to Canberra. In the event of it being decided to provide for one or more motor cars to be retained in Melbourne and Sydney this of course would absorb a few of the present staff.¹⁹



Staff and drivers at the Kingston transport depot, ACT, c1924.

Canberra transport services

Development of the national capital in Canberra raised the need for a transport service there, though not one given a high priority. Canberra's development had never had the universal endorsement and support of the nation's politicians – who were happy enough to meet in Melbourne. And even Canberra's most ardent supporters were aware that there were higher national priorities immediately after World War I, including repatriation of servicemen and their re-integration into civilian life. Still, governments finally returned to the task of building the nation's capital, though on a more modest scale than originally envisaged.

The government appointed the Federal Capital Advisory Committee on 22 January 1921 under chairman John Sulman, a consulting architect and town planner, and charged it with advising on works required to enable federal parliament to meet in Canberra at the earliest convenience and to centralise government administration there. Construction of the national capital and the transport needs of ministers and public servants when visiting from Melbourne prompted development of a government car service in Canberra as a function of the Department of Works and Railways, independent of the ministerial fleet in Melbourne managed by the Department of Defence.

Supporters of the idea of the national capital implemented various tactics to convince waverers of the merits of the Canberra choice. Federal parliament had determined in June 1923 to have the tenth parliament meet in the national capital in 1926, though the occasion was later deferred to 9 May 1927, to coincide with the anniversary of the opening of the first federal parliament. Accordingly, on 26 July 1923 the House of Representatives passed a resolution to commence construction of a provisional Parliament House. Work began in 1923 on a new construction program in Canberra that included

accommodation for members of parliament and offices and accommodation for public servants who were to be transferred to Canberra, swelling the population of the federal capital. Once again, tent towns sprang up near many of the major construction projects to accommodate workers.

Another tactic to draw attention to the new national capital was the government's decision to hold a Cabinet meeting in Canberra on 30 January 1924 at Yarralumla, which at that time was used as a guest house for visiting members of parliament, senior public servants and distinguished visitors.²⁰ The historic Cabinet meeting took place in the writing room of Yarralumla. "The occasion was historic, the setting was perfect", lauded a reporter.²¹

Ministers were encouraged to bring their wives in order to introduce them to Canberra. This complicated the issue of providing local transport for Cabinet ministers and officials and transporting them to and from railway stations, with those travelling to and from Melbourne requiring transport from Yass.

Rail travel to and from the national capital site was possible via Queanbeyan on the Cooma line, which branched off from the main Melbourne-Sydney line at Goulburn; a branch line from Queanbeyan to the Canberra suburb of Kingston was completed in May 1923. However, this was particularly tedious for travellers from Melbourne, who preferred to leave the train at Yass and travel by road to Canberra. There had been early ideas of connecting the capital with the main Melbourne-Sydney line at Yass, though this never eventuated and became increasingly unlikely once a good road was constructed between Canberra and Yass.



Charles Studdy Daley of the Public Works Branch, who acted as secretary to the Federal Capital Advisory Committee, travelled frequently between Melbourne and Canberra even after moving there permanently in August 1926. He recounted the rail travel experience:

The journey from Melbourne, leaving at 5p.m., took about 17 hours, with the change at Albury to a sleeper, if specially booked, otherwise to a seat. At Goulburn, the Canberra rail cars were unhitched and awaited a down train from Sydney to Bombala, that made long stops, for no apparent reason, at Tarago, Bungendore and Queanbeyan, where an indifferent standard of refreshments was available while waiting for the arbitrary signal for an engine to appear and pull the Canberra cars to Kingston, towards midday.²²

The timing of the arrival in Canberra was inconvenient for doing business so, once the coach road between Canberra and Yass had been upgraded, Daley and others made arrangements to have a car sent to Yass to meet the train at about 5.30 am, that enabled travellers to have breakfast in Canberra and be able to conduct a full day's work there and, if necessary return to Yass the same day at about 10.00 pm to catch the second division of the express to Albury at 1.00 am.²³

The inconvenience had soon become apparent and, as early as 13 February 1925, the Secretary of the Department of Home and Territories informed the Secretary of the Federal Capital Commission:

I am directed to inform you that the question of making the Government motor cars available to Members of the Federal parliament when visiting the Federal Capital Territory, has been considered by Cabinet, and that it has been decided that the cars are to be made available, free of charge, for the transport of Members to and from Yass and Queanbeyan Railway Stations and the Hostel.²⁴

Decisions such as this established the notion that parliamentarians visiting Canberra on official business should have personal transport provided for them.

The Federal Capital Advisory Committee remained Canberra's construction authority until 30 June 1925, though it ceased formal functions on 3 December 1924. Then, on 1 January 1925, the government appointed an independent Federal Capital Commission to assume responsibility for planning and development and local government type functions in the capital. The new commission, chaired by John Butters, became responsible for development but the Department of Works and Railways undertook design and construction work. The provision of transport services for parliamentarians and distinguished visitors became a function of the commission.

In October 1925, the Federal Capital Commission, when responding to the Department of Home and Territories, suggested there would be a requirement for seven to eight cars for ministerial purposes in Canberra and five to six cars for departmental purposes. The commission was about to advertise for tenders for taxi services and Chief Commissioner Butters wrote:

... it was considered, however, that it would be advisable for Ministerial motor cars to be handled entirely by the Commission, and arrangements have been made accordingly. A garage is in course of construction and it is now desired to proceed with the purchase of some additional motor cars, spare parts and general equipment.

The urgency at this particular moment is, that during the Royal Visit to Canberra whilst the Royal Party and suite are being dealt with by Crossley cars, arranged for elsewhere, there are a number of visiting Governors and twelve Ministers and their wives who will have to be adequately 'motored', and I certainly think that instead of relying upon hired vehicles of a nondescript character we should at any rate purchase at once the six or eight cars which it is proposed to provide as the standard equipment for Ministerial purposes.²⁵

The government approved the request for six cars that were to be available for ministers after the transfer of parliament to Canberra. In addition, the government decided in 1926 that the commission would be responsible for providing motor car services for all government departments located at Canberra.²⁶ The Secretary of the Department of Home and Territories indicated on 22 September 1926 that he and the minister had no objection to the Commission contracting with a private company to provide a motor car service for members and departments, but indicated that ministerial cars were a different matter, and these services were to be provided by the government using official vehicles.²⁷ At the time there were already private hire cars available and a motor bus service that operated three times weekly between Queanbeyan and Yass.



Drivers and vehicles at the Kingston depot, Canberra, c1924.

Royal Visit 1927

The adequacy of the official fleet in Canberra came under consideration again with the need for special arrangements for visitors to Canberra to attend the opening of the new Parliament House. The occasion became associated with another Royal Visit and the need to arrange travel to Canberra for the Duke and Duchess of York and distinguished guests. It was fitting that Prince Albert – later King George VI, father of Queen Elizabeth II – should be asked to open the new Parliament House, since his father had opened the first federal Parliament 26 years earlier.

The opening of Parliament House on 9 May 1927 by the Duke of York marked a milestone in the physical development of Canberra. Once again provision had to be made for the travel of the Royal guests of government, members of the government and distinguished visitors to Canberra. A crowd of 1500, many of them children, was drawn from Canberra, Queanbeyan and Yass to witness the arrival of the Duke and Duchess of York at the hastily constructed passenger railway station building at Kingston.

Arrangements for this Royal Visit were coordinated by the Commonwealth Director, Royal Visit, Major-General John Northcott, working with the Royal Visit Section of the Federal Capital Commission that had been established in the latter half of 1926. The section included 11 key appointees to oversee various features such as: Parliament House arrangements; Accommodation; Schools; Cinematography; Military arrangements; and Parking, Camping Traffic and Police arrangements.²⁸

Arrangements were made for special trains from Melbourne to Albury and Albury to Queanbeyan for the conveyance of state carriages, horses and personnel. Part of the arrangements included the need for a Royal Car to be in Sydney on 19 March and available for His Majesty until 27 March; it was to be garaged at Admiralty House.²⁹

The Commission's Assistant Chief Engineer, William Elmhurst Potts, and Industrial Officer J McDowell were responsible for arranging official cars. This involved housing of 12 Crossley cars, with Royal Australian Air Force chauffeurs brought to Canberra for transporting the Royal Party, including Their Excellencies the Governor-General and Lady Stonehouse and suite; hire of 12 Crossley cars for transport of state governors, their wives and suites and representatives of governments of overseas dominions; provision of eight Armstrong-Siddley cars for transport of Commonwealth ministers and wives, the President of the Senate and Lady Newlands, the Honourable Speaker of the House of Representatives and Lady Groom; provision of five commission buses and five hired buses for the transport of more than 500 guests; hire of 18 cars for transport of Naval, Military and Air Force units, Police and Press representatives; and provision of eight Commission cars for general work associated with the event.³⁰

Service personnel were provided with tented accommodation, while accommodation for chauffeurs of loan and hire cars was provided in cubicles at Eastlake and the Hotel Canberra. The latter became responsible for transporting the many guests who arrived at the Canberra Railway Station aboard special trains to their accommodation in the city, and later to official functions. The handling of the baggage of the Royal Party and of Commonwealth guests was organised under a baggage master and accomplished without a hitch.³¹



A Commonwealth car driver with two visitors to Mount Stromlo, south of Canberra.

The pageantry associated with the opening of the new Parliament House on 9 May was unprecedented in the bush capital. The Duke and Duchess of York and the Royal party stayed at Government House with the Governor-General for the short time they were in Canberra. On the day appointed for the opening, they began their journey from Government House by motor car, but near National Circuit the Royal visitors changed into an open carriage drawn by six immaculately groomed horses and completed the final part of the journey to the front of Parliament House “with all the pomp and ceremony of half a century ago”.³² The Royal couple returned to Parliament House in the evening for the reception provided by the Commonwealth Government for representatives of the governments of overseas dominions.

The Duke and Duchess of York toured Canberra by motor car the following day, though scant concern seems to have been taken of the crowds lining the route to see them. Arrangements had been made for the Royals to tour Eastlake and the Causeway in the morning, before a reception at Parliament House, and residents had erected decorations and prepared stands to enable good views of the Royal progress but; the route was changed the previous evening and Eastlake excluded from the tour. Those who lined the actual route of the tour were only a little more fortunate:

On the journey to Parliament House, the first strongpost passed was that at Westridge. At the corner of Adelaide Avenue and National Circuit was stationed the Westlake strongpost. At each the appearance of their Royal Highnesses was the signal for cheering and waving of flags, but it was all over in a flash.

The Royal car offended as it did in other cities by travelling at a rate of speed which did not permit of more than a passing glimpse of the Royal couple.

Moreover, the car did not arrive at the Westlake strongpost until nearly noon, although timed to pass at 10.30 o'clock. It is understood that the altered arrangements also included an alteration in the hour of departure from Government House. The general public, however, were not aware of this, and their wait of about an hour and a half was rewarded by a fleeting glimpse of the Duke and Duchess.³³

The Duke and Duchess and their party left Canberra by train that evening to resume their tour of Australia.

After parliament

Politicians, public servants and others travelling to and from the capital generally did so by rail. Travel by road was an alternative but was time-consuming and uncomfortable. Most parliamentarians were generally in no great hurry, but still had to be chauffeured from the railway station at Kingston to their accommodation near Parliament House at the Hotel Canberra, the Hotel Wellington, or the Hotel Kurrajong. The Department of Home and Territories became the Department of Home Affairs on 10 December 1928, but this had no effect on day-to-day operations of the passenger car services.

By this time, the Canberra transport service was already being called upon to provide transport services beyond those for ministerial and administration purposes. In 1928, for instance, the service provided transport by car for as many as 60 delegates to the Third British Empire Forestry Conference being held in the national capital from 26 September to 2 October. There was a need for transport for delegates and their luggage from the railway station to the Hotel Canberra, motor bus transport for delegates to and from the Forestry Schools, and for excursions around Canberra. Thirteen cars were required for the excursion with a luncheon hamper provided with each.³⁴

By early 1929 it became obvious that the ministerial cars which were placed into service in May 1927 at the time of the Royal Visit were running at a loss. As Chief Commissioner Butters elaborated:

The principal reasons for the losses are the exclusive service rendered and the irregular demand. When a number of Ministers are in Canberra, the cars must be available, with drivers, for their service. Owing to this, they cannot be used for other work. In any case, they are of a more expensive type than those used for general Commission purposes, and ordinary Commission requirements can be taken care of by the remaining cars of the fleet. When Parliament is in recess, and Ministers are absent from Canberra, the Ministerial cars are idle and are laid up, although they are accumulating standing charges for interest and depreciation. As an example, Car C16 has been wholly idle for four months out of twenty-two, and during the remaining eighteen months its mileage has varied from 42 to 1,566 per month.³⁵

The commissioner asked to be recouped for the total cost of running the cars. The arrangement agreed upon was that costs should be borne by the departments, similar to the arrangement adopted in Melbourne in connection with the Defence garage.

The onset of recession prompted caution and economy. The new circumstances were reinforced by the election of the Scullin Labor government in October 1929. It proved a landmark election, with Scullin being the first Australian-born Labor prime minister, and his predecessor, Stanley Bruce being the first incumbent prime minister to lose his seat at an election.

