



NINE

A NEW IDENTITY:

1990–1996



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The 1990s became a watershed period for the Commonwealth's car-with-driver service. The decade opened with the service operating largely in accordance with procedures established decades earlier, but with the challenge to become increasingly commercial under the threat of dismemberment if it failed to do so.

The decade began in a very positive fashion with COMCAR being challenged to increase its client base in order to provide greater certainty of work. Any euphoria did not last long, with the government being forced to take decisive steps to rein in the service's ballooning cost, in accordance with its own economic policies. There followed a restructuring of driver positions and casual drivers were introduced to provide greater flexibility in meeting the fluctuating demands on the service. The economy and business services – which had had been key elements of the service – ceased, leading to the need for additional economies. It was an unsettling time for many, with drivers no longer guaranteed a job for life.

Whilst some critics of COMCAR and its drivers emphasised the negative elements of the culture, many positive elements were also acknowledged. Drivers were proud to work for COMCAR. They considered it a prestigious position to drive their ministers and returned servicemen. They developed strong loyalties towards their ministers and they invariably performed heroically when challenged during the course of major visits.

The challenge for senior management was to address negative elements of the culture while preserving positive elements. Management did not have the option of replacing people and therefore had to concentrate on changing people's perceptions and the culture. It meant developing and promoting a broad range of initiatives to change the organisation's culture.



Shirley Yazid demonstrating use of the COMCAR telephone at the Perth domestic airport, 1992.



Radio operator Barry Holmes in the Perth communication centre. The white board shows distribution of vehicles and indicates the importance of Repatriation Department work.

COMCAR 1990

COMCAR's top ten customers in terms of revenue in financial year 1990-91 were: the Department of Administrative Service's Ministerial and Parliamentary Services (\$7.458m); Department of Veteran's Affairs (\$6.408m); Special Services Unit (\$1.162m); Australian Taxation Office (\$0.936m); Social Security Department (\$0.921m); Australian Industrial Registry (\$0.914m); Attorney-General's Department (\$0.887m); Family Court of Australia (\$0.830); Defence (\$0.799m); and Department of Employment, Education and Training (\$0.745m).¹

This period represented the highpoint of the Commonwealth car service when measured by the services it provided, though driver numbers had already begun a steady decline since the amalgamation of the state and federal capital operations.

COMCAR remained a decentralised national organisation with a national office of 20 staff in Canberra and offices and depots in each capital. Cathi Moore transferred to Darwin in June 1990 and was succeeded by Mike Nelson as national manager. The capital city offices remained responsible for service delivery apart from conduct of special visits. The latter were managed by officers within the Prime Minister's Department who liaised with personnel within the national office concerning transport requirements. At this time, Dan Costello was the COMCAR liaison officer responsible for special services.

COMCAR had formalised a system of three levels of charges, appropriate to the three levels of service of cars with drivers it provided: VIP, business and economy. The costs of the VIP service were largely borne by the Prime Minister's Department and depended on the type and number of vehicles required. It included special visits, government ministers, chief justices and members of parliament and the judiciary. The business class service for senior public servants was a specialised transport service with costs comparable to those of hire cars that were borne by the appropriate department. The economy class service for other public servants and other users, such as clients of the Department of Veterans Affairs, was charged to departments at rates comparable to those of taxi services. The year 1990-91 was the first when the costs of these services were made common throughout Australia.

COMCAR now had about 400 full-time drivers, about 7.5 per cent of whom were women. There was a full-time national office staff of 20 with operational staff at offices and depots in all state capitals and Townsville.² Senior management changed again in 1991 when Peter Dawson became manager, with Mike Nelson becoming national operations manager, Ken Free the policy and development director and Les Brennan the finance and systems director. State managers who provided the interface with drivers were Bob Collins (ACT), Fulyana Orsborn (NSW), Lesley Fisk (Vic), Jeff Coppi (SA), Geoff Dowley (Qld), Maurice Carruthers (WA), Rob Clarke (Tas), and Rick Harlock (NT).³

An early Dawson initiative was to begin a newsletter *Drive for Success* to improve communication between management and staff; the first issue appeared in September 1991. Peter Dawson considered his period as a "time of challenge" for all within COMCAR.



The challenge to be commercial

COMCAR management enthusiastically embarked on the quest for new clients, even looking beyond the Commonwealth sector. Vic Adams became responsible for marketing and sales, with the brief to sell COMCAR's VIP and business-class work in off-peak periods, in accordance with directives for COMCAR to become more entrepreneurial.

The Marketing Working Group, which had its first meeting on 25 September 1991, met with some success. COMCAR in Western Australia secured two new clients in 1991: the Vietnam Veterans Association and the Western Australian Tourism Bureau. In addition the Bureau of Meteorology and the Department of Primary Industry had returned to the service.⁴ COMCAR in South Australia secured a contract with the University of South Australia to provide taxi services between its several campuses. COMCAR in Brisbane established a shuttle service to operate between the airport and the central business district using two Tarago buses with trailers. It even considered entering the wedding market for a time.

COMCAR accepted CABCHARGE from 1 June 1992 in a bid to make its services more attractive to clients and created its own COMCARD to provide clients with corporate billing facilities.

However, this new commercial push fell foul of private sector competitors, who complained bitterly that COMCAR had a significant economic advantage because it was not required to pay a range of government charges and taxes. This prompted the New South Wales Government to take action in the High Court against COMCAR to prevent it operating beyond the Commonwealth sector. The matter was settled out of court with COMCAR agreeing to operate only for Commonwealth clients.⁵ The Brisbane airport shuttle service ceased without having attracted significant patronage.

COMCAR could not hope to operate on a fully commercial basis if it could not extend its client base. The government finally recognised this and returned COMCAR to the Government Services Program in October 1991.





From left:

A COMCAR desk at Melbourne airport, 1992.

Linda Barnes, Melbourne reservations allocations centre, 1992.

Inherent inefficiencies

The Commonwealth car service continued to struggle to achieve financial efficiency – particularly in Canberra – regardless of the push for a greater commercial focus. The need to service members of parliament meant that drivers could be on call at any time within a 24 hour period; it certainly meant a great deal of work late at night. This meant that many drivers became eligible for ‘no 10-hour break’ penalty payments, costing \$90.00 per driver per shift; there might have been as many as 35 instances of this per day in Canberra.⁶

The close association with parliamentary requirements meant that there were peaks and troughs in demand for the service that were exacerbated by the seasonal nature of parliamentary sittings. Inefficiencies and high overhead costs were aggravated by the need to structure vehicle and driver numbers in accordance with the periods of peak demand.

The practice of ministers having dedicated drivers was also expensive. Drivers often considered they worked for their minister rather than their department. They often made themselves unavailable for other work during a shift which meant they worked at a 40 per cent productivity level, where a 60 per cent level was required in order to break even. Their regard for their ministers may also have meant that some drivers failed to bill their clients for waiting time or for small trips, to keep billed costs as low as possible.

COMCAR’s focus on provision of high quality services for visiting dignitaries and special visits was good for driver morale. Costs were met by the government, so this was not a loss-making service for COMCAR. However, this focus also led to the development of an attitude that COMCAR knew best as far as the level of car services on offer was concerned, regardless of the actual needs of clients. This lay at the heart of criticism by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs and made COMCAR seem complacent – even arrogant – and reluctant to change.

Inefficient work practices and inflexible award conditions had long characterised the Commonwealth car service. There was little of the routine parliamentary work in Canberra when parliament was not sitting. This became a particularly lengthy period before and after federal elections when members of parliament remained in their electorates. Shift arrangements were not always conducive to efficient pool work, particularly in Sydney, where the volume of traffic meant that drivers required for morning tasks had little opportunity for multiple jobs, with the result that most did little until the end of their shift. This situation and other demands meant that drivers were able to attract large amounts of overtime which made the position of a Commonwealth car driver a financially attractive proposition.

The base wage for a driver was less than \$30,000 a year in 1991 but, with overtime provisions, a driver could earn up to \$70,000 a year.⁷ Consequently, drivers were reluctant to relinquish their positions and vacancies that occurred were quickly filled, largely by word of mouth, and sometimes by members of drivers' families. Chris Carberry, who became a driver in 1972, followed his father who worked for the Commonwealth car service from 1952 to 1985. Jules de Smet who began driving in Canberra in 1984 also followed his father. Indeed, his great aunt Alma (his father's aunt) had also worked for the car service taking bookings, along with his great uncle Eugene who had driven cars in the 1920s. John McCleer in Sydney followed his father Norm.

Drivers were expected to be members of the TWU which traditionally was a strong union. Industrial action was often the first resort to address drivers' grievances rather than the last. In August 1991, for instance, the Prime Minister's office sought to arrange transport for the Prime Minister and three staff in Hobart. The office ordered a COMCAR for the Prime Minister and a taxi for the staff. COMCAR's TWU delegate insisted that a second COMCAR be used for the staff, otherwise drivers would provide no car for the Prime Minister. COMCAR management had little time to react and agreed to provide a second car though this meant making a loss on the job. Neither the Prime Minister's office nor General Manager Peter Dawson were impressed.⁸

Whilst the TWU's position in this instance painted the service in a bad light, union delegates could also be positive contributors to COMCAR's reputation. For instance John Gray received commendation for activities that had attracted favourable publicity. Earlier in 1991 he had received the Australia Day Medal of the Returned and Services League for "outstanding service to the ex-Services community". The commendation indicated that "Apart from his normal duties, Mr. Gray had also transported many sick and handicapped veterans from their homes to various hospitals, often over considerable distances".⁹

Restructuring

COMCAR drivers took pride in what they did and they celebrated their achievements. In 1988, Grahame McLennan and Brian Jones had established a museum at their Batman Street depot in Melbourne. It included items from 1914, with more than 900 photographs, documents, uniforms, license plates and other memorabilia.¹⁰ Sydney drivers continued to support their museum at their Woolloomooloo depot, while Eddie Carnall was responsible for establishing a transport museum in Canberra.

Drivers proud of the service remained reluctant to change long established work practices, though it was evident to those in senior management that change was necessary if the service was to survive.

The earlier attempts at commercialisation had been unsuccessful, failing to provide an answer to inefficiencies implicit in the 'peak and trough' nature of the business in the states, but particularly in Canberra. Moreover, the functional separation of the passenger car operation from other operations traditionally part of the Transport and Stores Group meant there was no longer the possibility of using drivers from these other groups to assist at times of peak demand. There was little option but for management to turn to restructuring driver positions to provide the necessary flexibility.



The need for greater flexibility and efficiency led to renewed and sustained negotiations between management and the TWU to implement more flexible working arrangements. Negotiations with the union broached several issues including the idea of sessional drivers, but little of significance eventuated. Initial proposals to government simply addressed changes to the charging regime for services to ministers and efficiency improvements to the Parliamentary Shuttle.

Nevertheless, some change followed the department's offer of redundancy packages in 1990. These proved so attractive that more drivers in all states elected to retire than had been anticipated. This necessitated recruiting new drivers. Many of these new recruits, such as Claire Robinson in Adelaide, one of six recruited at the time, were of a younger generation than the majority of drivers and brought different attitudes to the service. New drivers were required in all depots. Five new drivers were recruited in Sydney in March 1991. A sister of Hank Jansen, Wilhelmina Davey, joined in Canberra. John Collins, retired from the Army, was recruited in Brisbane during this period.

Those new drivers recruited in 1990 and 1991 were the last to be offered full-time positions. Negotiations between the department and the TWU had finally produced an agreement that permitted the introduction of casual drivers, a departure from the strict seniority system, and creation of a career structure for drivers.¹¹ Implementation of the agreement, endorsed by the Industrial Relations Commission with effect from 18 October 1991, became the management's core strategy to ensure the survival of COMCAR.

The new structure for drivers was a more simple one that provided for four levels of drivers. The highest level was to be Level 6 and be confined to drivers for the Governor-General, prime ministers and protected vehicles. Level 5 drivers were to be designated ministerial drivers. Level 4 included pool drivers employed prior to the retrenchments of late 1990. Level 3, included casual and trainee drivers and others appointed since the late 1990 retrenchments. All existing drivers were required to complete satisfactorily the training courses appropriate to the level to which they were to be translated at the inauguration of the new scheme; access to initial training courses was to be in accordance with seniority.

The new arrangement formally eliminated the previous seniority rules, though the translation to the various levels was initially based on seniority and the effect of this remained for some time. Accreditation was to be gained by successful completion of approved courses, with promotion to be in accordance with merit as vacancies in pools occurred and accreditation of the skills required at the higher level. Those drivers undertaking higher duties to which they were accredited would be paid at the rate appropriate to the higher level. The numbers of positions at each level were to be determined by the demands on the service. The agreement also provided for the transition from weekly to fortnightly pay by June 1991.

Perth drivers, 1993. Left to right: Jim Cross, Robert Stack, Kevern Brace, Trixie Lindsay, Mal Holmes, Maurice Borg, Mike Hamilton, Maggi Marchioli, Lindsay Darch, Geoff Burke, Pat Mulligan, Val Wiffen, Harold Knox.

Casual drivers

The key element of the new agreement was the introduction of casual drivers, with the first 100 joining the organisation in 1992. The first advertisement in Canberra attracted almost 500 enquiries, with 70 firm applicants for 30 positions. There were 10 casual drivers recruited in South Australia, six of whom were women. Indeed, 30 per cent of casual drivers employed were women.

The COMCAR Workplace Bargaining Agreement clearly spelled out the role of casuals:

Casual drivers are employed primarily to cover peak periods of work when client demands are likely to result in too much work being given to contractors or the imposition of excessive overtime loads on full time drivers; including the inability to take a 10 hour break. Casual drivers will not be used to lock full time drivers out of reasonable overtime.¹²

Casuals were to be engaged for a minimum of four hours per day, and in Sydney no more than 20 were to be engaged in any one day unless full-time drivers were required for special visits. They were not to be promoted above Level 3 while remaining a casual and were not to be eligible for the home garaging policy.

The new initiatives were fundamental in starting to change the culture that had thrived within COMCAR which was so resistant to change. Cultural change was not immediate, with vestiges of the old culture evident in a reluctance of full-time drivers to talk or mix with casuals.

However, the radical new initiatives were not sufficient to stem the financial difficulties faced by the service and COMCAR struggled to meet its budgets. In 1990-91, for example, it sustained a deficit of \$10.6 million when the budgeted deficit had been only \$1.4 million.¹³ The shortfall was largely due to the very nature of COMCAR, where there was a need to retain a fleet and staff of a particular size when demand for its services for key clients – ministers and parliamentarians – varied widely. In this instance there was a lower than expected demand for its services.

The loss of business and the need to create a more efficient agency meant a reduction in the number of full-time drivers was virtually inevitable or there was a threat that the service would be discontinued altogether. The restructuring of the driver levels and the offer of redundancy packages went some way to rectifying matters, but it was not enough.

Drivers' room,
Melbourne depot.



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and Administra

DAS FILE

... customer driver

Repatriation driving,
Rosemount, Rowland Hill.



ICAR
Personal Transportation

DAS Removals



Pressure for change

COMCAR had failed to find new clients for its services, though the government provided it with a new class of entitlees in September 1991 when Minister for Administrative Services Nick Bolkus extended COMCAR travel entitlements to former parliamentarians who had served 20 or more years. The new arrangement simply added an additional uneconomic commitment to COMCAR when it was being required to operate commercially.

The entitlement to travel at Commonwealth expense for former members of parliament had originally been granted to Life Gold Pass holders by executive decision, but since 1976 by determination of the Remuneration Tribunal. The new arrangement enabled all existing 108 Life Gold Pass holders to have access to Commonwealth cars with drivers to take them to and from their homes to airports and from airports to their destinations; or to have the government meet parking costs if pass holders drove their own cars.¹⁴

The move attracted press criticism. Parliamentary travel entitlements were always considered fair game for criticism by the press and often by the opposition. Indeed, later in 1991 the Coalition announced its intention – should it gain government – to halve the Commonwealth car fleet and restrict the use of COMCAR to the Prime Minister, ministers, High Court judges, parliamentary office holders and others where there were security concerns. Other users, including members of parliament and their staff, and public servants, would be expected to use taxis.¹⁵ The commitment should have sounded a warning to drivers.

Opposition Leader John Hewson attacked the apparent profligacy associated with COMCAR entitlements and insisted that he would refuse to use his entitlement to a car with driver unless this was required for protocol purposes.¹⁶ The question of the profligate use – even misuse – of Commonwealth cars and other perquisites gained currency in mid-1992 following

the resignation from Cabinet of Senator Graham Richardson, Minister for Transport and Communications, over his relationship with businessman Greg Symons. The issue sparked a cover story in Time magazine, 'The Spoils of Power', which featured photographs of a Commonwealth car in front of a theatre, though otherwise did not elaborate on COMCAR.¹⁷

There was certainly opportunity for criticism of use of the privilege of a car with driver, particularly for ministers who had designated drivers. At that time there were no formal guidelines concerning the use of Commonwealth vehicles by ministers. And there were times when they took advantage of this, and used the car and driver simply 'as directed', which meant that few details appeared on job sheets.

Some ministers were known to take advantage of their drivers for purposes other than driving, even having them undertake tasks about their home such as cleaning swimming pools or mowing lawns. It was not uncommon, for those ministerial drivers in Canberra who had keys to their ministers' residences, to stock refrigerators and turn on heating or air conditioning before picking up their charges and taking them to their residence at the beginning of a parliamentary session.

There were occasions, too, when drivers were asked to undertake errands for ministers' wives, even taking them to a hairdresser or shopping. "If you want to drive a minister, that's the sort of thing you do", said Chris Carberry. He added:

You do personal errands for them too – delivering papers. Sometimes it might be to pick up the morning papers and deliver them to him before he leaves for the airport of a morning, so that he can have a skim through the papers before he leaves ... It might be to drop his kids at school while the minister is away and he can't do it himself.¹⁸

Such a relationship created difficulties for those allocating jobs when ministerial drivers were reluctant to undertake pool work lest they be required by their ministers.

Eddie Carnall compared the role of a minister's driver to that of a service officer's batman. There were innumerable tales of Commonwealth cars seen waiting outside restaurants while clients dined inside, particularly in Canberra. Indeed, for a time, Sydney radio personality John Laws conducted a campaign against such use of Commonwealth cars and urged listeners to call in with sightings of idle Commonwealth cars. The criticism was an easy one to make in ignorance of circumstances. Indeed, the dilemma concerning the extent to which Commonwealth cars could be used had existed since 1910, when Attorney-General Billy Hughes had sought to use the Prime Minister's car to collect his daughter from the wharf.

In circumstances where guidelines were few, ministers and their drivers developed very close relationships. John Corkhill was a long-time driver in Canberra. He had joined the Public Service in 1957, working with road-construction machinery before becoming a truck driver and following a familiar career path by moving to buses and finally Commonwealth cars. He later became the dedicated driver to Paul Keating at the express wish of the then Treasurer:

The Treasurer's lot is not an easy one at the best of times and Mr Keating was perhaps not always the most widely popular incumbent. But, however much the popularity polls might have been against Mr Keating, John Corkhill always stuck up for him, in any forum. Perhaps unknown to his passenger, John received much questioning about, and criticism of, his boss, but always deflected it gracefully.¹⁹



Repatriation driving, 1992.

John Corkhill also drove Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke and John Howard, all of whom became prime ministers. He also acted as driver to Sir William Deane when the latter was a High Court judge. The relationship with Sir William Deane extended back a long way, with both having been in the same class at St Christopher's school at Manuka.

Jim 'Chookie' Warner, who began driving for the Commonwealth in 1969, had an even closer relationship with Paul Keating after having driven him for 14 years as a backbencher, Treasurer, Prime Minister and former Prime Minister.

When Mr Keating successfully challenged for the leadership, Mr Warner found himself with the job of driver to a prime minister.

Mr Keating had not changed with his new role, Mr Warner said. He had remained warm, friendly and always interested in Mr Warner's family. On a whim, he had attended Mr Warner's daughter's 16th birthday party, and had attended the weddings of Mr Warner's two daughters and son ...

He had opened the door for Mr Keating the first time he drove him, in 1983. It was the last time for such formalities. Mr Keating's response was 'Don't open the so-and-so door for me', Mr Warner said.²⁰

The close relationships between drivers and politicians created a dilemma often leading to divided loyalties, with some drivers opting to follow the directions of their passengers rather than those of their managers.



The challenge

Still, the need for efficiencies remained. In late 1991, Price Waterhouse Urwick was appointed to review the extent to which recommendations of an earlier report into the management structure and the ratio of driving to non-driving staff had been implemented. The major achievements had been implementation of a systems modernisation process that enabled service and support staff to be reduced by 50 – from 136 to 86 – while extending the reservation service to a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week, operation. The new review recommended restructuring COMCAR with a strong focus on customer service and the introduction of more efficient operating systems.

In accordance with the initiative, Rob Pocknee of Price Waterhouse Urwick, and one of the consultants, was appointed COMCAR general manager from 6 January 1992 for a six month period to implement recommendations of the review. An early move was the inauguration of the COMCAR National Consultative Council, which held its first meeting in Adelaide on 23 April 1992 as an essential part of an industrial democracy initiative.

Consultation did not progress very far before there were moves in August 1992 to abolish the practice of home garaging. The TWU opposed the initiative and took it before the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, which ultimately enshrined the home garaging provisions in a new award on 25 May 1993 – the Home Garaging Allowance (COMCAR) Award, 1993. This award applied only to full-time drivers.

A key feature of Pocknee's time was his appearance before a lengthy Senate Estimates hearing in September 1992 at which he argued for significant expenditure on new technology. Pocknee proposed that it would enable a restructuring of COMCAR's administration and operations.

Pocknee remained COMCAR general manager until the end of October 1992. He was succeeded in an acting capacity by Tony Robinson, previously COMCAR's national manager.

Implementation of the new national reservations system was led by National Systems Manager Nic van den Berg and supported by information technology specialists within the department. This was to be the key to the rationalisation of operations with consequent economies.

The new system had become possible with advances in communications technologies and desirable as a means of creating greater efficiencies. It involved the introduction of mobile data units in cars, a central telephone number for reservations, and paging units and mobile phones for drivers.

The system was first trialled in Adelaide from 21 September 1991 because of the limited size of the operation there and the willingness of drivers to be involved. Les Collins, a driver for 27 years and personal driver for the Minister for Social Security, Dr Neal Blewitt, was initially skeptical about the system. He became totally confused during a five hour training session, but was converted to the utility of the system after becoming familiar with it over a few days.²¹

The central reservation, allocation and dispatch system was gradually extended as issues were overcome, with clients able to reserve a car from anywhere in Australia by phoning a single 1300 number. Canberra joined the system on 16 November 1992, Brisbane on 14 December 1992, Sydney on 27 January 1993, Melbourne on 19 April 1993, followed by Hobart on 24 May 1993 and finally Perth on 31 May 1993. There occurred a rapid increase in central office allocations staff as all reservations were centralised. Two key people, of 14 who began in November 1993, were Stan Marsh, who had been the Australian Capital Territory Manager for Budget Rent a Car, and Daryl Chan, who had been Branch Manager of depots in Canberra and Melbourne for Mayne Nickless Courier Systems. These two, in particular, brought a broad experience in allocation and dispatch to the task – Stan Marsh became Allocations Supervisor in 1995.

Implementation of the new system was not without its difficulties and frustration among drivers, especially in the major capitals of Sydney and Melbourne. This was especially so when the Canberra allocators were unfamiliar with driving conditions and were unable to provide helpful hints to drivers about the best routes to take to destinations. The central allocators were also unaware of travelling times in the large cities and whether or not place names were suburbs or country towns. There was less angst in Canberra because allocators were generally local people who were familiar with locations and driving times.

Older drivers were reluctant to endorse the new system and often responded with an 'I told you so' when there was any problem. Nevertheless, the new system was implemented and major glitches eliminated as drivers became familiar with the new arrangements. Younger drivers considered the innovation a necessity and embraced it. The centralisation of the associated finance functions was completed in January 1994 and greatly facilitated accounting practices.

Mobile phones were introduced to enhance communications with drivers and restore personal contact with allocators. On occasions, though, phones with novel ringtones created some issues. Management attempted to have all phones with common ringtones, but these were sometimes changed by drivers. One Canberra driver had a phone with a musical ringtone. He returned to the depot on one occasion to be asked by his supervisor why he did not answer his phone. He avowed that he had received no calls. The supervisor took the driver's phone and rang the number from another phone to test whether or not it was working. The driver's phone rang and realisation dawned that the music the driver had heard from time to time indicated an incoming call rather than what he had believed was music from a faulty radio.

Efficiencies also extended to the relocation of depots out of city centres. On 2 December 1991 COMCAR in South Australia moved to a new depot at 99 Henley Beach Road, Mile End, in order to enhance efficiency. This followed separation of the four former Transport and Storage Group elements in Adelaide. Prior to this, the offices and drivers were located at different Department of Administrative Services depots around the city. COMCAR in Brisbane vacated the depot at McLachlan Street, Fortitude Valley, in November 1992 and moved to new premises at 12 Gordon Street, Newstead, which were officially opened on 3 February 1993 by Harvey Jacka, Executive General Manager of Government Services. The following month the Sydney depot at McElhone Street, Woolloomooloo, relocated to Pyrmont Street, Ultimo.

The first years of commercialisation were challenging enough for the infant business enterprises of the Department of Administrative Services, but they had not yet been exposed to the full rigours of commercial competition. COMCAR remained under threat because it had no tied customers. Some ministers preferred to use self-drive cars supplied by DASFLEET. Indeed, DASFLEET became a major competitor for business. Increasingly, Senior Executive Service car entitlements had decreased the demand for COMCAR services by providing departments with fleets of their own for daily use. During financial year 1992-93 COMCAR experienced a 10 per cent fall in revenue from VIP clients, a 28 per cent fall in the business sector (the service provided for senior public servants) and an 18 per cent fall in the economy sector (the service provided for general public servants and others).

The Government determined COMCAR's pricing policy and the basic cost of providing services with drivers employed on award wages meant that COMCAR charges did not cover the cost of the services, even after the VIP rate was increased from \$75 to \$80 per hour from 1 November 1993.

At the time, COMCAR had 75 vehicles in Canberra, 68 in Sydney, 66 in Melbourne, 25 in Brisbane, 22 in Adelaide, 17 in Perth and 4 in Hobart. In total market terms, COMCAR was only a significant operation in Canberra because of the needs to service Parliament House, but then only during parliamentary sitting times.

Training

COMCAR drivers were trained as required. Since 1987, all driver training provided for those in the Australian Capital Territory, and for Protected Vehicle Drivers nationally was undertaken by a team of senior drivers led by former Australian Federal Police Driving Instructor Chris Gabriel. VIP and motorcade drivers generally attended annual refresher courses of one or two days' duration. Drivers of protected vehicles – which had different handling characteristics to normal models vehicles – were expected to maintain their familiarity with their vehicles by driving them for two hours each fortnight.²²

COMCAR restructured its driver classification and skills levels and designed training courses to address the new career levels following recommendations of the Joint TWU/TSG Working Party in 1990. Increased security had become an issue and management considered it important that a small number of staff be trained to the level of instructor in anti-terrorist driving techniques.²³

As previously, all new drivers were to undertake an induction course which emphasised defensive driving and passenger comfort. Thereafter drivers were able to undertake a succession of courses in Pool Driving, Motorcade Driving, Ministerial and VIP Driving, Protected Vehicle Driving and, finally, Prime Minister and High Risk Driving. There was no necessity for drivers to undertake courses beyond the induction course unless they wanted to undertake higher duties. However, progression through the training regime to be able to drive protected vehicles was limited and restricted to drivers who met particular criteria, including a good level of physical fitness. Drivers for the prime minister and other high risk passengers were to be drawn from this pool. Agreement with the TWU included a 'grandfather' clause to recognise the skills of senior drivers already undertaking ministerial and VIP driving during the implementation of the new training scheme.



Skid car training, Bushmead Barracks, Western Australia, 1992.

Specific training courses were provided as required. Skid training using a skid control unit acquired in 1991 provided Skid Recognition and Control Training for all drivers. This unit was bolted beneath the car and enabled the instructor to simulate various conditions.²⁴ The majority of the training was conducted by Brian Cunningham from Victoria. The unit travelled to Perth by train, then to Adelaide and then to Sydney.

Training could not remove all risk. Staff throughout Australia were shocked to hear of one of the Perth drivers, Jim Cross, being involved in a fatal accident on 20 October 1992. The crash occurred on a left-hand sweeping bend about 6 km west of Toodyay in the early afternoon, when a vehicle crashed head on into Jim Cross' car. The two 70-year old women in the other vehicle died, while Jim and his passenger were taken to the Northam Hospital and then transferred to the Royal Perth Hospital.²⁵

Visits

Establishment of COMCAR as a separate business unit within the Department of Administrative Services had an impact on the unit responsible for coordinating special visits. Officers charged with coordinating the ground transport requirements of a visit could draw on all the services and personnel provided by the group. These included cars and drivers from the light transport fleet, baggage trucks and handlers from removals and other officers as required. Following the reorganisation there was a need for all requirements to be provided, or at least coordinated, by the Special Services Unit within COMCAR, with its more limited resources.

One of the early challenges for the new COMCAR was coordination of the visit, from 13 to 16 February 1990, of Nikolay Ryzhkov, Chairman of the Council of Ministers in the USSR Government. Fortunately, this visit had largely been already organised by the Transport and Stores Group, where Dan Costello was the Commonwealth Transport Liaison Officer. Still, COMCAR was required to provide vehicles and drivers in Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney. The official party comprised the Chairman and Mrs Ryzhkova, 37 officials and staff members, 24 USSR security officers, 21 media, the USSR Ambassador and his wife, two USSR embassy staff, the Australian Ambassador to the USSR and his wife, and 14 Australian officials. The party required an advance car, a protected car in Melbourne and Sydney, 16 other cars, two coaches for officials and two buses for the traveling media. Dan Costello acted as Transport Liaison Officer with Roy Galvin as Baggage Liaison Officer. The Russians were sufficiently impressed with the planning and execution of the visit that they sought details of the operation of the Special Visits Unit.²⁶

The Russian visit was the last to be organised within the larger Transport and Storage Group. Responsibility for future visits passed to COMCAR's Special Services Unit managed by Roy Galvin with a staff of two: Bridgitte Mortimer and Mick Ryan. The unit remained largely independent of the driver reforms and essentially responsible for co-ordinating those services required for a visit.

The visit of American President George Bush in early 1992, who arrived on New Year's Eve 1991, provided another challenge for the Special Services Unit because of the scale of the operation. President Bush had been invited to visit in 1989 by Bob Hawke when the Australian Prime Minister was visiting the United States, and he announced his intention to take up the invitation in November 1990, while Hawke was still Prime Minister. However, he arrived in Australia within two weeks of Paul Keating having replaced Hawke.

George Bush was the first American President to visit since Lyndon Johnson in 1967. Unlike the Johnson visit there was little fanfare. On the first night the official party travelled by a 50 car motorcade from Sydney airport to Rose Bay, where the President and his wife took a launch across the harbour to Admiralty House where they viewed the annual fireworks display. Afterwards they returned to their accommodation at Double Bay where the official party had booked all rooms at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel.²⁷ The roads to be travelled by the motorcade were sealed and all traffic lights were turned green to allow the motorcade to speed through Sydney streets, giving little opportunity for well-wishers to see the President.

This visit created something of a record with the need to organise a motorcade of 54 drivers, though the President travelled in his own armoured vehicle that had arrived in Australia aboard a United States C5 Galaxy aircraft the day before. Security was tight. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on the President's early morning jog on New year's Day:

Two police cars. Three big black limousines. Two regular white limousines. One black four-wheel drive Chevrolet van bristling with antennae. One intensive-care ambulance. Bomb-sniffer dogs commanded by the Australian Army. Twenty-five obviously armed men speaking into walkie-talkies or listening to them.

President Bush is going jogging.

Just before 8 am yesterday the strange convoy – equipped to launch a nuclear war or withstand a commando attack – left Double Bay’s Ritz Carton hotel for the Scots College, the exclusive boys’ private school at Bellevue Hill.

The school was circled twice by the convoy before word was passed from an unseen forward command post allowing Operation Jog to be executed.

The Presidential parade glided smoothly to its destination, the armed men scattered in all directions, and Mr Bush emerged in full jogging regalia.²⁸

The President travelled to Canberra later that day for a 40-hour visit to the capital where he stayed at the United States Embassy. Once again, there was little opportunity for people to see the President. The visit included a state dinner at Yarralumla and a presidential address to a joint sitting of the Houses of Parliament; Barbara Bush visited Glenloch Farm near Canberra.

The Bush visit was largely a good will visit while *en route* to trade talks in Japan. Journalists travelling with the party expected it to be a dull affair. However, angry farmers critical of United States’ agricultural policies conducted noisy demonstrations wherever George Bush went. Indeed, one of the most violent demonstrations in two decades occurred outside the World Congress Centre in Melbourne, where President Bush spent four hours before flying on to Japan.²⁹

The Special Service Unit was renamed the VIP Service Unit in the early 1990s to reflect its role more closely. It soon underwent a significant change in personnel when Roy Galvin and Mick Ryan left to establish a hire car business of their own. This provided the opportunity for Laurie Carbone to transfer to the unit on the suggestion of Bob Collins, formerly COMCAR’s ACT state manager, but since transferred to the national office. Bob Collins assumed the additional responsibility for coordinating special visits and sought the assistance of Laurie Carbone. Laurie had joined the Transport and Stores Group in the ACT in 1979 as a storeman. He became a driver in 1984, rising to a leading hand in 1989, before becoming a radio operator in 1990. The two were responsible for only one visit together, with Laurie Carbone effectively becoming the manager of the unit.

The nature of visits changed. Previously, visits from heads of states and other dignitaries were largely in the nature of goodwill visits. Increasingly, there were visits of senior bureaucrats to work with their Australian counterparts. At the same time Australia increasingly became a venue for regional conferences.

Decision time

Senior COMCAR management and the department had been unable to implement significant change within the organisation, at least at the rate sought by its political masters. Ultimately, the government insisted on further rationalisation.

The gravity of the situation became apparent to all following recommendations in 1993 that COMCAR should focus on its core customers and downsize to a VIP-only service by 1 July 1995. The threatened drastic change to the organisation succeeded in having the TWU and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) engage with management in intensive negotiations in an endeavour to meet the needs of government while protecting staff and drivers. Fundamental to the negotiations was the need to change many established inefficient work practices identified in successive reviews but never addressed, and to take advantage of new technologies.

COMCAR in 1993 employed about 500 drivers throughout Australia with most of them being in Canberra (130), New South Wales (140) and Victoria (105). This remained in excess of the numbers required to ensure high productivity. A second round of redundancy packages was offered to drivers in September 1993, with 146 drivers taking advantage of these. Twenty-three staff also took redundancy packages during financial year 1993-94, while another 19 were placed on the Staffing Adjustment Program; others transferred to positions in other government departments.³⁰

As a first stage in meeting the government's objectives, COMCAR withdrew from all non-Commonwealth work on 1 November 1993, except for a contract with the UniSA that was to run until July 1996, and charges were raised for VIP and business customers. COMCAR no longer accepted general public service work in Canberra at the economy level during parliamentary sittings.

In pursuit of additional economies, COMCAR aimed to end its 'economy' work on 1 July 1994, immediately bringing to an end the remaining work with the Department of Veterans' Affairs and associated hospitals in each state. There were few criticisms from veterans when hire cars and taxis completely replaced the white Commonwealth cars.

COMCAR also planned to withdraw from business bookings from 1 January 1995 and focus wholly on serving the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, other ministers, other members and Senators, the judiciary, statutory office holders and guests of government. As part of the new initiative, politicians were to be given the option of using self-drive vehicles.

The withdrawal from traditional services such as those provided to the Department of Veterans' Affairs, which provided much of the steady work for the service, could only be accomplished after extensive negotiations with the TWU because of the evident impact on its members.

The 1994 Budget reiterated the government's decision to rationalise COMCAR's services and focus on the operation of a secure, high quality car-with-driver service to the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, ministers, members of parliament and Senators, the judiciary and VIP guests of government.

Accordingly, arrangements were made for COMCAR to cease providing a business level service in all states other than Canberra from 1 March 1995. This change was in line with the target date of 1 July 1995 that would complete the transition to a 'VIP only' fleet. For a time, COMCAR provided a business level service – at business rates – but only in Canberra. The same accounts could be used in other states although VIP charge rates would apply there.³¹

Downsizing

The need for economies was department-wide and not specific to COMCAR. The Department of Administrative Services implemented a plan to contract its businesses. The plan included staffing re-adjustment and career transition programs to facilitate the change.

Minister McMullan announced a new scheme that abolished the 'public interest' element with its lack of a time limit. It also dropped the commitment not to enforce redundancies. Instead, it introduced the idea of a new Career Transition Program that was to be devolved to private enterprise and under which staff were given up to 12 months of new career training. The new scheme provided a measure of certainty where its predecessor had not. Provision for the new Career Transition Program was included in the 1994 Budget. New negotiations began immediately with the unions to facilitate its implementation.

Managing COMCAR during this period of contraction was the challenge confronting Mel Box, who succeeded Tony Robinson as Acting General Manager in March 1994. She came from Purchasing Australia, another part of the Department of Administrative Services, and brought with her the experience gained from a difficult task of overseeing a major acquisition for the Tax Office. Her new challenge was to address the direction that COMCAR should operate on business lines, though with driver numbers reduced from 380 to 150 full-time driver equivalents. The reduction was to be made by declaring excess staff numbers under the Australian Public Service Redeployment and Retirement (Redundancy) Award and, if necessary, use involuntary redundancy as a means of reducing numbers. It was agreed that 1 July 1995 should be the target date for proposed staff reductions.

Negotiations with the TWU concerning the changes to COMCAR's driver structure were intense. Finally, the COMCAR Workplace Bargaining Agreement 1994 was signed by all parties and certified by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission on 25 May 1994. This was the first enterprise agreement for the Department of Administrative Services and only the fourth signed in the Australian Public Service.³² One of its key elements was provision for standardisation and flexibility of operational procedures in all states and implementation of identified productivity measures. Another feature was a provision for COMCAR to enter a new agreement at some time to ensure flexible hours.

There were another two major issues involved with implementation of the agreement, the first being to determine the numbers of drivers required. This was a complex task. Nevertheless, target numbers for the drivers were redefined in August 1994 in order for COMCAR to serve as a VIP fleet:

COMCAR Drivers³³

ACT	49 full-time	22 casuals
VIC	17 full-time	9 casuals
NSW	30 full-time	9 casuals
QLD	10 full-time	1 casual
SA	7 full-time	3 casuals
WA	8 full-time	3 casuals

There followed the human side of the issue in preparing drivers for the inevitable cuts that were to be made. All drivers were required to apply for their positions, except Level 6 drivers, Leading Hands, ministerial drivers and driving instructors. This came as a shock to many who had considered their positions to be permanent and the decision theirs as to when they would retire.

Preparations extended over 12 months in an endeavour to minimise trauma. Drivers were provided with the list of criteria by which they were to be assessed: they were given access to advice and assistance in writing resumes; they were provided with coaching in interview situations; they were told what was required if they were not successful and were provided with counselling advice.

Despite the intense preparations, there were aspects of the exercise that were not handled well. Two independent officers were appointed to the interviewing panel in each state, one of them from the Merit Protection Review Agency. But these also included the state supervisor, which made some interviewees uncomfortable, though the criteria and manner in which applications were to be assessed minimised the risk of them being determined by personal judgments. The exemption of ministerial drivers rankled with many. Also, the heavy emphasis on the application and interview process unduly stressed many of those who had limited experience in applying for a public service job or undergoing an interview.

No amount of careful planning could prepare all of those wanting to remain and who were not successful. The angst was greatest in the large depots, particularly in Melbourne where cuts went deepest. Two drivers were lost in Adelaide; there was no need for cuts in Canberra.

By the end of June 1995 the number of full-time drivers stood at 140, down from 200 a year before. But drivers were not the only ones to bear the brunt of the downsizing. The number of full-time administrative staff reduced by 29 to an equivalent full-time staff of 55 in the year to 30 June 1995. State responsibility for depots in South Australia and Western Australia was initially assumed by Linda Cannon in Victoria, though transferred to Daryl Chan, Queensland state manager in 1996. Leading hands Claire Robinson in Adelaide and Ross Bennet in Perth assumed additional administration work.



Motorcade training, Melbourne, 1990.

Downsizing COMCAR was a major issue in itself, but it had to be accomplished while maintaining ordinary services and undertaking special visits when required. The general manager also had to contend with disgruntled clients. Mel Box recalled one occasion when a family court judge refused to go into court until he had a chance to speak with her directly and learn why he had been allocated a hire car rather than the usual COMCAR. He was only slightly mollified to learn that the demands of a major visit had first call on available fleet vehicles.

There was also a need to address COMCAR's future operations. To this end, Mel Box established a proactive Customer Services Marketing and Liaison Unit under Laurene Patat from on 30 December 1994. The brief was to establish and maintain close personal relations with COMCAR's remaining clients to minimise complaints and to market services.³⁴ Meanwhile, Mel Box persisted with endeavours to break down barriers between drivers and management.

All the while, COMCAR's preferred place within the department remained an issue. COMCAR was the only service within the division that operated with a trust account. It had become evident that COMCAR could never hope to be profitable in the sense that other department businesses could. Consequently, COMCAR was transferred to Ministerial and Parliamentary Services under general manager Graham Semmens within the Government Services Division of the Department of Administrative Services during financial year 1994-95. Under the new arrangements, COMCAR's mission became one of providing "a safe, secure and high-quality transport service for VIP customers, namely the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, other ministers, other members and senators, judges and major guests of Government".³⁵

Having managed the downsizing of the staff and driver numbers, Mel Box was keen to consolidate changes and applied for the job in which she had been acting when it was advertised. She was unsuccessful and left COMCAR in late 1995, taking a position in the property area of the department before transferring to the Taxation Office. She was succeeded by Phil Gouldson.

A lean organisation

COMCAR in late 1995 was a far leaner organisation than it had ever been for much of its history. But it remained a fragile one, with a lack of trust between management and drivers and with both having been in a constant state of uncertainty for several years.

Phil Gouldson visited all depots in an endeavour to become familiar with the organisation and returned to Canberra somewhat daunted. Gouldson believed the fundamental issues concerning COMCAR to be about "culture and leadership". A key element in his strategy was to bring together driver representatives and administration personnel in a series of national consultative committees. The first of these was held on 19-20 September 1995 to discuss issues associated with the use of casuals. A second was held on 30 October and 1 November 1995 to encourage better relations between drivers, allocators and reservation staff. He also visited all state offices during November 1995 to involve drivers in the development of an appropriate business plan.

Gouldson remained confident that the strategies he had identified would assist in building bridges between drivers and management and secure the future of the car-with-driver service. It remained to be seen how successful these strategies would be, particularly when the return of a Coalition government brought into question any future for the service.



Perth drivers and staff mark the retirement of Jim Anderson. Left to right: Alan Mackenzie, Trixie Lindsay, Max Flanagan, Jim Anderson, Shirley Yazid, Roy Burgess.