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A NEED TO TRAVEL:

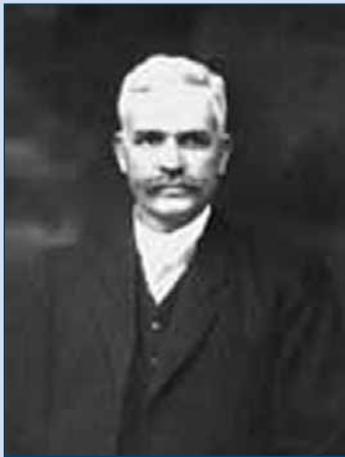
1901-1917



A NEED TO TRAVEL: 1901–1917

The history of the Commonwealth's car-with-driver fleet is almost as old as that of the Australian Government itself. In any event, the two histories have been inextricably intertwined, with Commonwealth drivers and their vehicles being associated with many key political milestones in the nation's history. Reliable transport is as fundamental to good government as it is to the efficient functioning of modern society. Consequently, a reliable passenger car service became important to the functioning of successive governments, parliaments and departments.

But government is not only about administrative efficiencies. It must also relate to other governments and project a favourable image of the nation to its own citizens and those of other nations. This sometimes calls for a measure of pomp and pageantry in the celebration of significant occasions and the welcoming of distinguished visitors. The Commonwealth car-with-driver fleet has often been a feature of this pageantry, the fundamental features of which were established long before the advent of motor vehicles, but adapted to the new age.



Prime Minister Andrew Fisher: leader of the federal parliamentary Labor Party, 1908–1916, Prime Minister, 1908–09, 1910–13, 1916, High Commissioner for Australia, London.

The tradition

The opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament in Melbourne on 9 May 1901 was an occasion of great pageantry, though this occurred at a time when motoring was in its infancy. At this time, motor cars were considered a fad and a luxury rather than an essential means of transport. Consequently, traditional horse-drawn vehicles provided the essential transport requirements associated with these early Commonwealth celebrations, though the pageantry that accompanied such occasions was to remain even when motor cars replaced horse-drawn vehicles.

At this time local travel requirements for members of federal parliament were minimal. Most members from New South Wales and South Australia travelled to Melbourne by train whilst those from Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania travelled by boat. They were met by cabbies at the railway station or wharf and paid for their own transport to and from their lodgings and Parliament House from the travel allowance provided. The provision of local transport for members in their home state or at the seat of parliament was not part of the established travel entitlement. Even so, the idea of personal transport for members was established early. Erratic sitting hours, especially those at the end of sittings that frequently extended late into the night or early the following morning, gave rise to the custom of the ministry providing funds for cabs to transport members and their luggage to the railway station or pier.

The early motor cars

There were few motor vehicles in Melbourne when the nation's federal parliamentarians gathered there for the first time. The first motor-car seen in Victoria was a two-seat, 4.5 horsepower, De Dion vehicle imported by the Dunlop Tyre Company in 1900. Charles Kellow, a motor industry pioneer in Melbourne imported a four-seat, 4-horsepower Darracq six months later. These vehicles, and others that followed, caused a sensation whenever they were on the road. The sight of Kellow driving Governor-General Lord Hopetoun around the Melbourne Cricket Club ground in the summer of 1901 was a major attraction at a cycle meeting there.¹

Automobiles remained experimental and unreliable, were treated as little more than a means of leisure activity, and were enjoyed as such by those who could afford them. Motoring enthusiasts established clubs to arrange meetings and excursions and provide a sense of camaraderie. The League of South Australian Wheelmen, the forerunner of the Royal Automobile Association, was formed in September 1903. The Automobile Club of Victoria was established at a meeting in December 1903 attended by 100 enthusiasts.

Attitudes changed as motor cars became larger, more powerful and increasingly reliable, and their usefulness became more apparent. Henry Ford (1863-1947) founded the Ford Motor Company in 1903 and only five years later designed his famous Model T, which made motoring cheaper and more accessible to more people.

These were exciting days when adventurous motorists captured the nation's attention with major feats of daring and endurance, or going where men in motor vehicles had never gone before, only to be followed by others trying to better each new record. Ben Thomson pioneered a route from Adelaide to Melbourne via the Coorong in 1903, taking almost four days for the journey; Richard Duncan soon lowered the time to less than three days. There was a reliability trial for cars between Melbourne and Sydney in November 1905. In 1908, Murray Aunger and Harry Dutton became the first to drive from Adelaide to Darwin. Murray Aunger and Albert Barr Smith claimed the record for the Adelaide to Melbourne journey of 22.5 hours in February 1909. Once they left the cities, these pioneers had to follow tracks cut by horse drawn wagons or blaze their own tracks.

As the price of motor vehicles declined, so their numbers on roads increased. The Victorian Government was evidently confident about the future of motor vehicles and acquired one for use by Premier Thomas Bent in 1905.² By 1910, there were 1590 motor cars registered in Victoria – another 1145 motor cycles – and there were 3204 people licensed to drive. The latter number included an estimated 1200 professional chauffeurs earning on average £2 5s 0d per week, and as many as 100 women.³ The Argus concluded an account of the burgeoning motor industry:

Motor traffic is only in its infancy. The popularity of the motor-car has never been so great as now, and every week sees the trade increasing. Those interested declare that the day is not far distant when the motor industry will be one of the most important in the State.⁴

The first Commonwealth ministerial car

The enormous development within the motor industry convinced Prime Minister Andrew Fisher that the work of his government would be improved if he and his ministers had access to a motor car for official business and “the means of moving about speedily”. To this end he had the government acquire a Renault motor car from the Kellow Motor Company in June 1910, soon after his Labor government had been returned to power on 13 April 1910. The Melbourne Argus described the vehicle that cost in the order of £850 as:

*the latest 1910 model, with Renault chassis and 4-cylinder engine of 14-20 horsepower. It is fitted with a special colonial model torpedo body painted in myrtle-green, picked out with fine red lines. The body is fitted with a special make of cape-cart hood, and wind screen, only the best material having been used. The car is capable of developing a speed of over 50 miles an hour.*⁵

Fisher had already been Prime Minister for a short time in 1908-1909. This first term was cut short because federal politics had been dominated by three reasonably evenly balanced groups; it was too early to call them parties, except for the Labor Party. Alfred Deakin, Australia’s second prime minister led the Protectionists; Joseph Cook had become leader of the Free Trade group; while Andrew Fisher had recently succeeded John Watson as leader of the Labor Party. The situation encouraged political volatility. Deakin likened it to a game of cricket where there were three elevens in the field, ‘with one playing sometimes with one side, sometimes with the other, and sometimes for itself’.⁶

Andrew Fisher, born in Scotland, a former coalminer and member of the Queensland Parliament prior to Federation, had been the federal member for the Queensland seat of Wide Bay since the first federal election. In 1907 he succeeded John Watson, Prime Minister from 27 April 1904 to 18 August 1904, as leader of the Labor Party. He withdrew his party’s support from Alfred Deakin and became Prime Minister of a minority Labor government on 13 November 1908. His action helped eliminate the unstable three-party system, but when parliament resumed in May 1909 after a long recess, the Labor government suffered immediate defeat. On 2 June 1909 it was replaced by the new ‘Fusion’ group of former Protectionists and Free Traders led by Deakin. The Fusion government remained in power until elections on 13 April 1910, when Labor won an absolute majority in both Houses of Parliament – the first Labor government to do so.

Although representing a Queensland seat in the House of Representatives, Fisher had acquired a home at Albert Park in suburban Melbourne in 1907 to make it easier to attend to parliamentary duties. He believed these would be further facilitated if he had access to a motor vehicle for travel to and from parliament and on official duties.

Fisher, who had begun his adult life as a coal miner, was a man of evident dignity. He also developed a taste for ‘having the best of everything’ as the representative of the Commonwealth, according to Malcolm Shepherd, whom Fisher appointed as his secretary. For instance, Fisher became dissatisfied with the lamps on his motor car after being told they were not the best, and immediately instructed Shepherd to “get the best” although this meant spending an additional £14.

Fisher, Treasurer as well as Prime Minister from 29 April 1910, was not the only government member to find the motor car a benefit. Shepherd recalled:

Mr Hughes [Attorney-General] would sometimes dash into the Prime Minister's room and ask for the car to go down and meet his daughter who would be arriving by steamer at an early hour in the morning or late at night. On one occasion, he was told that the driver had gone for the day and there was no way of getting in touch with him. 'Well, how am I going to get down to meet my daughter,' asked 'Billy' in a most aggrieved manner.

I could have suggested a cab or a taxi, but my desire to remain in the service imposed discretion of speech.⁷

The above reflected a feature of the Commonwealth car service which was to endure. Access to the service for ministers and other members later became more formalised, but it remained a privilege provided at the discretion of the prime minister until 1974, when it was confirmed as a parliamentary entitlement.

First flush

The first Commonwealth car was used above and beyond the immediate work of government. The *Argus* commented on the manner in which the handsome car soon lost its gloss:

'Dirty Number Three' is what the Commonwealth Government motor-car is called in the city. Perhaps it would be hard to pick a truer name for the car, for indeed it is one of the most untidy on the road. Everybody expects to see a car dusty and dirty at times, especially after a tour in the country, but No. 3 is in a state of perpetual grime and rust. The body is dull, the tires always appear the worst for wear, and the metalwork shows the ravages of rust. The lamps burn, and perhaps that is all that can be said in their favour.

The car has been running about two years. ... When it made its first appearance on the road it was a thing of beauty. It might be asked how is it that a Government car should so fall from its high estate, but those who know anything of the car's history will say that it is a wonderful machine or it would have been scrapped long ago because of the work it has been called upon to do. It is hardly ever out of commission. If the Prime Minister is not using it one of the other Ministers is, and if none of the Cabinet can get away for a run friends take a little motor jaunt into the country. When the car was new it was greatly used for these excursions, and many a crowd of joyful ladies and children was whirled through the districts round the metropolis. As nothing had to be paid for the car there was no compunction about loading it up. Some of the parties were so large that a hint was given that No. 3 was only a 14–20 h.p. and not a char-a-banc. The hint proved effective, and now it is rare that more than can comfortably sit in the tonneau go for picnics.

It is not only in respect of these picnics that the use of the car is abused. Mr. Fisher is very keen in riding in it. Last year he wanted to go to South Australia to take part in an election campaign. The trains did not suit his programme, so he and the Vice-president of the Executive Council (Senator M'Gregor) and a secretary journeyed overland and sent the car back by boat. Anybody who has undertaken this trip knows what it takes out of a car. Another little jaunt by the Prime Minister with No. 3 was through Tasmania early in the year, when the Labour Conference was sitting in Hobart. If Mr. Fisher cannot go out of the State he is content to spend the week-end touring round the beauty spots of Victoria. Mr. Hughes, when Acting Prime Minister, was also partial to motor trips. So constantly is the car used that apparently no time can be found to have it cleaned and overhauled.⁸

The trip to South Australia had certainly taken much out of the car – and the passengers. The purpose of the tour was to permit Fisher to argue the case for the referenda that his government put before the people: these were concerned with the federal government seeking control of trade and commerce, financial corporations, employment and monopolies, and the nationalisation of monopolies. Fisher travelled through western Victoria speaking to public meetings such as that at Warrnambool on 24 March 1911, and proceeded to Mount Gambier in South Australia where he spoke on 25 March. The trip was made at a time when there were few formed roads, with only coach and wagon tracks to follow. The trip was still a challenge to motorists. South Australian Senator Gregor McGregor spoke of the adventure after arriving in Adelaide on 27 March:

Twice we lost our way in the vicinity of the Coorong. Once at night Mr. Fisher and the chauffeur took one of the lamps and followed the tracks back to a neighbouring station to ask for instructions. They walked altogether 15 miles [25 km]. I remained in the car and had a sleep. The Prime Minister got back at 3 a.m. and was up again at 5 a.m. boiling the billy. We had two rolls of cocoanut matting and a shovel, or we would not have negotiated the Coorong sandhills. Once we got stuck in the mud, but, all things considered, the motor did splendidly.⁹

Fisher's rally at the Adelaide Town Hall on the evening of 27 March 1911 was the Prime Minister's first visit to Adelaide. He and McKenzie travelled to Port Pirie by car the following day, then motored to Moonta on the Yorke Peninsula for another rally, before returning to Adelaide on 29 March. They returned to Melbourne by train on 30 March, leaving the car to follow by ship. Neither of the referenda held on 26 April 1911 were successful.

Cabinet ministers and their families were not the only ones to take advantage of 'Number Three'. Indeed, there had been a measure of embarrassment in late September 1910 when the South Yarra police sought to summons the car's chauffeur for 'furious driving'. Commonwealth Attorney-General Hughes argued that the Victorian Motor-car Act did not apply to the Commonwealth. The issue led to discussion between the two governments to ensure Commonwealth drivers adhered to the state's road laws.¹⁰



The laying of the foundation stone for Canberra, 12 March 1913, showing, (l-r), Governor-General Lord Denman, Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, Lady Denman and King O'Malley, Minister for Home Affairs.

The demands on the Renault soon led to acquisition of a second vehicle, primarily for use by Minister of Defence Senator Pearce and Commander Pethebridge, Secretary of the Department. The argument for the new vehicle went along the lines that:

The Minister is often called upon to visit the Commonwealth Offices in Spring-street and the Navy Office in Lonsdale-street, and his departmental duties take him in many directions; while the secretary, who supervises the various Commonwealth factories scattered in the metropolitan area, finds the task too lengthy unless he travels in a motor-car.¹¹

The new vehicle was a 15 horsepower Napier, with the body built locally on an English-made chassis. It cost about £600. A third vehicle was acquired for ministerial use later the same year.¹²

The utility of motor vehicles had been amply demonstrated. Indeed, the Postmaster-General's Department soon had a small fleet to assist with mail collection and distribution. A 1910 report noted:

The system of clearing the city and suburban pillars by motor-car in Melbourne has proved a success, and the Postmaster-General has decided to put an amount on the Federal Estimates for the purpose of purchasing additional cars. At present the only city in which cars are used is Melbourne. It is understood that not only will more cars be secured for work here, but that Sydney, and afterwards, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart, will also be supplied.¹³

Deciding on the nation's capital

While closely identified with the history of the Commonwealth Government, the story of official car fleet is also intimately linked with that of Canberra and the siting of the national parliament there. Fisher's acquisition of an official motor vehicle occurred after the site for the capital had been established, but before the Commonwealth controlled the territory.

Debate on the location of the national capital had been a vexed question for several years after Federation. Members of parliament visited suggested sites in 1906 and 1907 and, after assessing sites at Albury, Tumut, Orange and Dalgety, ultimately agreed in 1908 to establish the capital in the vicinity of Yass in southern New South Wales, though the *Seat of Government (Yass-Canberra) Act 1908* was carried by only one vote in the lower house.

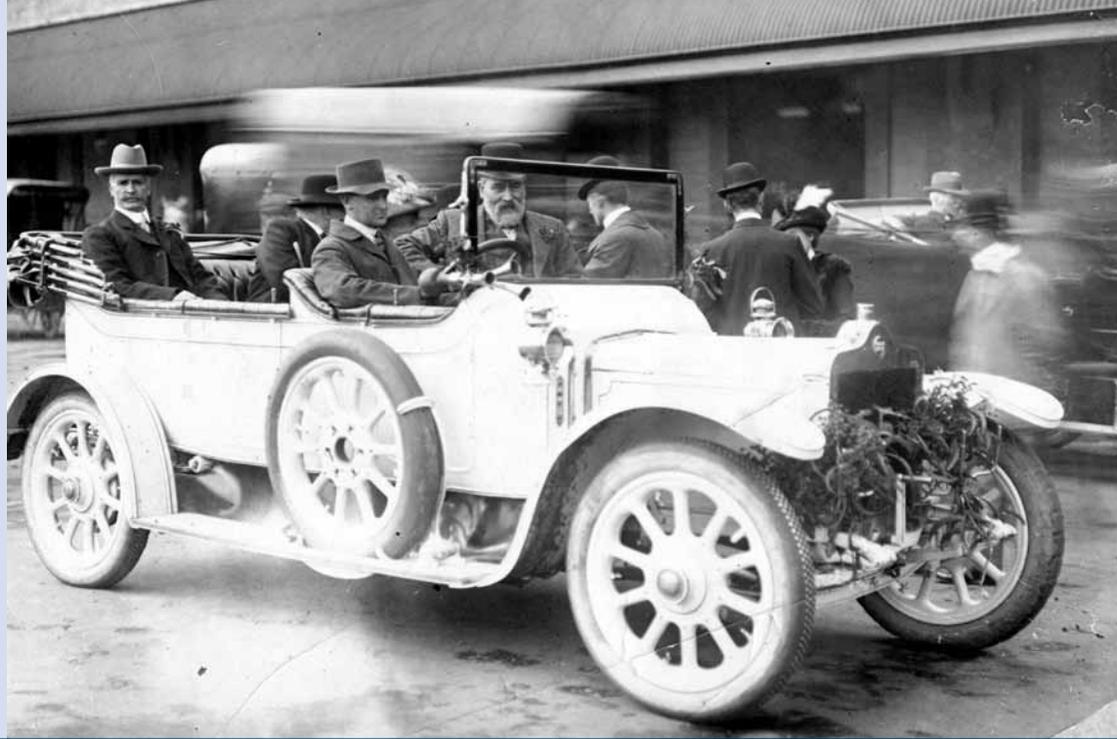
The Federal Capital Territory was formally established on 1 January 1911, when land was transferred from the state of New South Wales to Commonwealth Government control. Having selected and acquired the site, the government's attention turned to designing and building the new capital. Responsibility for the latter fell to the Department of Home Affairs, or more specifically David Miller the departmental secretary, who was appointed Administrator of the Federal Territory. Miller chose to live in the new capital to oversee its development and transferred there in 1912, leaving routine departmental matters to his chief clerk, Walter D Bingle, in Melbourne. The first buildings, completed on 22 August 1912, comprised simple timber barracks for single men and timber cottages for married staff who were able to obtain them. Miller, as resident administrator of the Territory, first lived in one of the married quarters built at Acton, but later moved into a large new house known as The Residency.

Development of the national capital occurred in accordance with the plan for a city for 25 000 people drawn by American architect Walter Burley Griffin. He was appointed Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction on 17 October 1913 to oversee implementation of his design and began detailed drawings early in 1914. However, even before Griffin commenced his detailed design work, King O'Malley, the flamboyant Minister for Home Affairs in Fisher's administration and the minister responsible for the Federal Capital Territory, arranged a ceremony to mark the site of the city and the inauguration of construction work when he drove in the first survey peg on Capital Hill on 20 February 1913.

A more historically significant event followed three weeks later, on 12 March 1913, when Governor-General Lord Denman, Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, other parliamentarians and distinguished guests gathered for a ceremony held to lay three foundation stones for the Commencement Column.

Planning for this most grand occasion in the embryonic national capital was a major logistical exercise. As many as 400 distinguished guests attended and there were about 700 troops to provide the pageantry. The Governor-General's party and many guests travelled from Sydney to Yass, where they were met by a fleet of cars and taken the 40 miles to the national capital.¹⁴ Other special guests from Sydney and Melbourne travelled to the ceremony by special trains via Queanbeyan, where they were met by a fleet of motor cars, "of which some forty or fifty have been engaged", evidently from hire companies.¹⁵ Guests were taken first to a hall in Queanbeyan where they had breakfast before being conveyed to the site for the ceremony, the first cars leaving at 8.20 am and returning for the remainder of the guests.

Prime Minister Andrew Fisher sitting in the rear of the Renault in front of the Adelaide Railway Station, March 1911.



The ceremony began at 11.00 am with the arrival of the Governor-General. Denman laid the first of the stones, followed by the Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs O'Malley, interspersed with appropriate speeches. At noon, Lady Denman, wife of the Governor-General, named the city 'Canberra', after which official guests retired to a large marquee for lunch and more speeches. The fleet of motor cars began returning guests to Queanbeyan at 4.30 pm.

The laying of the foundation stones on Kurrajong Hill was the last grand occasion in Canberra for several years. Soon, matters beyond the power and influence of politicians and public servants conspired to retard implementation of Burley Griffin's vision. The outbreak of World War I in August 1914 and the need to channel resources into the war effort became the government's chief priority. Little new construction took place during the war and in the period immediately afterwards. Meanwhile, responsibility for the capital's development passed to a new Department of Home and Territories created on 14 November 1916, though the actual construction authority became the Department of Works and Railways.

Apart from three vehicles comprising the ministerial fleet, and others acquired by the Postmaster-General's Department and the construction authority in Canberra, there were few motor cars owned by Commonwealth authorities and individual departments prior to World War I. There was certainly no central registry and no central control on their acquisition and use. Matters were to change rapidly following the war.