

A truly federal police

was a long time coming

“The citizens of Australia can now be proud that effective, federal policing is the order of the day.”



Assistant Commissioner J.D. (Don) Davies, QPM

The above statement is how former AFP Assistant Commissioner J.D. (Don) Davies, QPM, summed up 80 years of efforts to establish national policing in Australia.

Mr Davies retired in October 1980 after 26 years in federal police work.

His opening comment was prompted by an uncertain beginning for the various organisations which, over the years, periodically took up the role of federal law enforcement. This uncertainty came to an end with the formation of the AFP in 1979.

In the 70 years before the AFP decision, Mr Davies argues, successive Commonwealth Governments had from time to time created a number of organisations which might have blossomed into an effective Australia wide enforcement agency, but which, in the final analysis, didn't quite embrace genuine federal policing.

It was, he suggests, the late Lionel Murphy, as Attorney General, who rallied Government support for what he believed would be a truly effective system of federal policing in the shape of the 'Australia Police'.

"It involved amalgamating the Commonwealth,

Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory police forces (Mr Murphy did not like the word 'force' associated with police and omitted it from his chosen title) and the Federal Narcotics Bureau, then under the control of the Department of Police and Customs," Mr Davies said.

Investigation Bureau

"The Australia Police organisational structure would have included commissioners of the ACT, NT and the Narcotics Bureau, responsible to a Chief Commissioner, the late Jack Davis, whose appointment was actually gazetted, and to a Deputy Chief Commissioner. The latter was to have been charged with creating and controlling an 'Australian Bureau of Investigation' incorporating the detective groups of ACT, NT, the Commonwealth, and investigators of the Narcotics Bureau, as well as certain investigative functions performed by various Commonwealth departments," he said. The concept was abandoned with the demise of the Whitlam Government in 1975.

However, in October 1979, the then Fraser Liberal Government resurrected much of the framework of the Australia Police, amalgamating Commonwealth and ACT police forces, and later including the Federal Narcotics Bureau.

"Thus was created what has become our most effective and efficient national and international policing body the Australian Federal Police," Mr Davies said.

But it hadn't been easy. The beginnings of federal policing in this country were hardly encouraging.



A short-lived Commonwealth Police Force resulted from an egg being thrown at Prime Minister Billy Hughes during an anti-conscription protest at Queensland's Warwick Railway Station in 1917.

Prime Minister Hughes, incensed that local police would not arrest the man on jurisdictional grounds, set about creating the first Commonwealth Police Force on his return to Parliament.

The town invited John Davies to a re-enactment of the incident in 2002 and Mayor Ron Bellingham presented him with a commemorative plaque.

In about 1908, the Attorney General of the day appointed several members of his public service staff to investigate offences under Commonwealth law. They carried out their work for the benefit of Government departments, policing such things as tax evasion and offences under electoral law, and investigating the background of people seeking old age pensions.

Having been recruited from various departments, they had little investigative training.

"They made few arrests and normally produced reports for the respective Deputy Crown Solicitors to decide whether an offence was revealed," Mr Davies said. "A warrant or summons would then be issued against the alleged offender."

Things took a new turn in November 1917, amidst the divisive debate over conscription. The then Prime Minister, William Morris Hughes, while addressing a crowd during a train stop at Warwick in southern Queensland was hit by an egg thrown by a bystander.

The local police sergeant, requested by the Prime Minister to take action, pointed out that he worked for the Queensland Government, not the Commonwealth.

Plainclothes body

The incident incensed the Prime Minister and he promptly created a 'Commonwealth Police Force' to protect him and his Ministers against such abuses in the future. The new force operated mainly in Queensland to 'carry out the law of the Commonwealth in the State of Queensland', and historically became known as the Commonwealth Police (1917–19).

"I understand it ceased to exist in about 1919," Mr Davies said. "A plain clothes body known as the Investigation Branch was formed that year to take over the work of the Public Service investigators."

Then followed a succession of federal agencies formed for both investigative and guarding purposes.

A seamen's strike in 1925 led to the creation of yet another ill-defined body. When the NSW Government refused to allow NSW Police to serve process on the president and the secretary of the Seamen's Union, the Commonwealth created a body of Peace Officers to carry out the duty.

After the strike ended, the Peace Officers continued to serve Commonwealth process, carry out minor investigations and perform police functions for the Investigation Branch. They helped the Branch to check the backgrounds of people seeking old age pensions.

Guarding role

In 1927 the Commonwealth Police title resurfaced when eight NSW Police sergeants and constables serving at Acton were seconded to the Federal Government for the inauguration of Federal Parliament and were joined by 10 members of the Peace Officers in carrying out local policing. They took over the policing of the Federal Capital Territory from the NSW Police and became the Commonwealth Police (Federal Capital Territory).

During the early 1930s, with unrest growing, guards at Commonwealth departments such as Trade and Customs were sworn in as Special Peace Officers.

A strike by civil watchmen at the Maribyrnong munitions factory in 1935 prompted the formation of the Defence Establishments Guard to protect Commonwealth munitions factories and Commonwealth buildings in Sydney and Melbourne.

In a move to rationalise the situation, the Peace Officers and the Defence Guards were merged in 1940 to form the Peace Officer Guard (POG).

Throughout the war, its numbers swelled to more than 2000 and its members were principally concerned with protecting sensitive military targets such as ammunition factories.

“This was a role which translated into the functions of the latter day Commonwealth Police Force,” Mr Davies said.

In 1946, the Investigation Branch merged with the wartime military Security Service to become the Commonwealth Investigation Service (CIS) with offices in all States.

During the post-war years, the CIS and the POG found the going tough. For instance, the CIS spent considerable resources chasing tax defaulters for sums of less than five pounds. The POG arrested people on charges such as ‘smoking in a shed’ and ‘smoking on ship’.

In 1958, the POG provided members to keep an eye on students’ late night activities at University College, Canberra. The following year guards were patrolling Canberra High School to keep an eye on skylarking students.

The two forces were merged in 1960 to form the third organisation known as the Commonwealth Police (COMPOL).

COMPOL continued surveillance work. It pioneered anti-terrorist and atomic evaluation sections and in the late 1960s its members took over diplomatic and airport guarding.

High standard

“It achieved a high standard in both criminal investigation and crime intelligence gathering,” Mr Davies said. “It was responsible for the establishment of the Australian Police College, the first training source available in this country for overseas, State and Territorial potential officer students. There were also the international offices, such as Interpol in Paris and the ensuing creation of interesting and important overseas police postings in Cyprus and at strategic embassies.”

The fact that COMPOL maintained, at mundane posts such as the Lithgow Small Arms Factory, St. Mary’s Ammunition Factory and the Army Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, police whose principal task was patrolling the grounds and buildings and checking passes of employees and visitors, sometimes overshadowed the high quality of true police work members were undertaking very efficiently in the remaining areas of responsibility.

Newest federal body

COMPOL and the ACT Police merged to form the Australian Federal Police (AFP) in October 1979. The Federal Narcotics Bureau, a division of Customs since 1970, was absorbed into the AFP one month later.

In 1984, the newest federal investigative body, the National Crime Authority (NCA) was formed with investigators seconded from the AFP, State and Territory police forces, and investigators appointed from outside areas.

Also in that year the Australian Protective Service (APS) was formed to focus on the Commonwealth guarding role with many former COMPOL members exiting the AFP to pursue careers with APS.

Mr Davies looks back with interest on developments.

“As a dedicated professional police officer of some 45 years, 11 of them as an executive officer, I was delighted to end my career by becoming a serving member when the AFP was formed, and to be translated into it as Assistant Commissioner (Operations),” he said. “Former Commonwealth, ACT Police and Narcotics Bureau members have all benefited from this great alliance.

“The AFP Commissioner holds Public Service Permanent Head status, which, within my experience, is of enormous administrative importance.

“His team of Deputy and Assistant Commissioners consists of highly competent Australian police drawn from each category of the amalgamated bodies.

“The AFP can only rise to even greater heights in the fight against Australian and international crime,” he added.

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