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THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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Clerk of the Senate
9-12-21

PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON
PUBLIC WORKS

REPORT

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

REMODELLING AND ADDITIONS, GENERAL
POST OFFICE, SYDNEY

Third Committee

The Honorable HENRY GREGORY, M.P., Chairman.

Senate.

Senator Hattil Spencer. Foll.*
 Senator George Henderson. †
 Senator John Newland, Vice-Chairman. ††
 Senator Edward Needham. §
 Senator William Plain. *

House of Representatives.

Llewelyn Atkinson, Esquire, M.P. ||
The Honorable Frederick William Bamford, M.P.
David Sydney Jackson, Esquire, M.P.**
George Hugh Mackay, Esquire, M.P.
James Mathews, Esquire, M.P.
Parker John Moloney, Esquire, M.P.

* Appointed 28th July, 1920. † Resigned 22nd July, 1920. ‡ Re-appointed 28th July, 1920.
 † Ceased to be a Member of the Senate, 30th June, 1920. ‡ Resigned 12th May, 1921. ** Appointed 19th May, 1921.

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EXTRACT FROM THE VOTES AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

No. 113 of 25th November, 1920.

8. PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE—REFERENCE OF WORK—SYDNEY GENERAL POST OFFICE—REMODELLING, ETC.—Mr. Groom moved, pursuant to notice, That, in accordance with the provisions of the *Commonwealth Public Works Committee Act 1913-1914*, the following work be referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works for its investigation and report thereon, viz.—Sydney—General Post Office—Remodelling and Additions.

* Mr. Groom having laid upon the Table plans, &c., in connexion with the proposed work—

Question—put and passed.

PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS.

SYDNEY GENERAL POST OFFICE, REMODELLING AND ADDITIONS. REPORT.

THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS, to which the House of Representatives referred for investigation and report thereon the question of Remodelling and Additions to the General Post Office, Sydney, has the honour to report as follows:—

INTRODUCTORY.

1. The General Post Office, Sydney, the first section of which was erected in 1867, is a freestone building of elaborate Italian renaissance design, forming a quadrangle occupied by minor erections, varying in style and character. The main building comprises basement, ground and four other floors, and has a frontage of about 355 feet to Martin-place and 110 feet to George and Pitt streets.

2. When, under Federation, the postal activities of the States were taken over by the Commonwealth, the Sydney General Post Office was included in the Schedule of Transferred Properties at a valuation of—building, £439,000; site, £298,000; total, £737,000.

3. Since the date of transfer from the State to the Commonwealth, the cost of alterations and additions, repairs, and maintenance have amounted to about £60,000, which sum covers additions in hand by the State Government at the date of Federation.

4. In 1910, the necessity for increased accommodation became very apparent, and a departmental committee was appointed to make investigations. This Committee recommends that the immediate requirements of the Department could best be met, both from an administrative and a financial point of view, by the acquisition of properties adjoining the existing structure, fronting both George and Pitt streets, and extending about 152 feet in a southerly direction. The purchase of this land would have permitted the erection of a well-lighted building on the central area, leaving the business frontages and tenancies in Pitt and George streets untouched and revenue-producing until required for postal extensions. The estimated expenditure for this property was £381,860, which amount included compensation for severance and disturbance of tenants and provision for compulsory sale. No action, however, was taken to give effect to this recommendation.

5. In 1915, the Mail and Parcels Branches were removed to a new building at Central-square, adjacent to the Railway Station, which was erected primarily for purposes of parcels post at a cost of £89,817'8s. 4d.

6. In 1917, plans for alterations and additions to the General Post Office, Sydney, were prepared by Mr. W. B. Griffin at the instance of the then Postmaster-General (The Honorable W. Webster), who approved of their adoption on the 14th December, 1918, the estimated cost being £132,000—apparently not including contingent engineering services. It was subsequently proposed that certain alterations on the eastern portions of the ground floor should be carried out at once in conformity with Mr. Griffin's plans at a cost not to exceed £22,000, but as the necessary funds were not made available these suggested alterations were not proceeded with.

7. In 1919, the Royal Commission on Federal Economics made inquiries into the working of the various Departments in Sydney with a view of ascertaining what alterations were necessary to the General Post Office to meet the requirements of the public and the growing needs of the Department. As a result of such investigations, plans for the alteration of the General Post Office were prepared by the Commonwealth Department of Works and Railways. After consideration of the official plans and those submitted by Mr. W. B. Griffin, the Economy Commission recommended the adoption of the former at an estimated cost of £160,000.

8. In 1920, revised plans were prepared by the Department of Works and Railways showing alterations and additions estimated to cost £268,807, which included engineering services, viz., ventilation, sprinklers, mail elevators and conveyors, and kitchen equipment—not covered by the previous estimate.

PRESENT PROPOSAL.

9. The reference to the Committee (the 1920 revised plans) provides for drastic alterations to the ground floor space with a view to coping with the expansion of postal activities and giving suitable accommodation for the needs of the public and the various sections of the service. The alterations and additions suggested will, while preserving the architectural features of the building, be mainly in the direction of securing extensive new areas of floor space with good natural lighting, well ventilated and reasonably fireproof, and with a minimum of structural interruption to the operations to be carried on within the General Post Office building.

The existing minor erections standing within the quadrangular space referred to are proposed to be demolished, and, in their stead, it is suggested to erect a reinforced concrete building with freestone facings and embellishments of a simple character to Martin-place, George and Pitt streets, in compact rectangular blocks divided by light areas, and comprising basement, ground, and nine upper floors, besides three mezzanine galleries—two on the ground floor and one on the first floor—providing a total available floor space, exclusive of stairs, corridors, latrines, &c., of 203,184 super. feet, which, it is estimated, will supply all requirements for the next fifteen to twenty years.

10. **Basement.**—In the basement of the new structure, proposed to be 15 ft. 5 in. high and 11 feet below the street level, will be located the cable assembling room, ventilation and mechanical plant, money order records, money order store, issue stores, mail platform, main switchboard room, cleaners' store, engine-room, transit mails, mail storage, and batteries and motors. From Pitt-street, there is an entrance 20 feet wide for motor lorries, &c., which will proceed down a slope to the level of this floor, and an outway by tunnel which is practically level with the basement floor under Martin-place to Ash-street. Provision is made for one-way traffic only.

11. **Ground Floor.**—The main hall on this floor is to be 26 feet high, and will be in the centre of the building facing Martin-place. Ample entrances from George and Pitt streets and Martin-place are to be provided. A public vestibule 15 feet wide is suggested to extend along the three frontages facing George-street, Pitt-street, and Martin-place, thus giving the public access from three streets to every office on the ground floor. Here it is proposed to locate the posts restante, telegraph, stamps, money order, parcels, bulk postage, private letter-boxes, and inquiry offices. Ample writing conveniences for the general public are to be provided, and telephone cabinets will be installed in convenient positions on this floor.

12. **Mezzanine Gallery.**—This gallery, which is proposed to be 31 ft. 6 in. wide, will give 5,000 super. feet of working space, and is to be devoted to the letter-carriers for the sorting of their rounds.

13. **Telegraph Despatch Gallery.**—On the same floor provision is also to be made for the introduction of a mezzanine gallery into the telegraph receiving chamber at the George-street end of the structure. For this purpose 1,090 square feet have been apportioned.

14. **First Floor.**—This, in unison with the main building, is designed to be 19 feet high, and is to be set aside for mail work. It will contain 27,096 square feet, which will be utilized for shipping and inland mails. On this floor will be another mezzanine gallery, which will be 24 feet wide, providing 4,524 square feet of space, where all mail bags will be opened and their contents distributed through chutes to the mail floor.

15. **Second Floor.**—This is proposed to have a height of 15 ft. 8 in., and a floor area of 25,136 super. feet. Space has been apportioned for a Board room and offices for the Minister and his Private Secretary, Deputy Postmaster-General, Chief Clerk, Senior Clerk, and Postal Inspectors. Accommodation is reserved for the records, correspondence, dead letter, and clerical sections. On this floor will be situated rooms for laboratory and testing, telephone equipment section, State engineers, wireless and telegraph engineer, supervising engineer, lines section branches, &c.

16. **Third Floor.**—The height of this as depicted in the plans is 13 ft. 2 in., and the floor space 28,356 super. feet. Here will be housed the telephone test room, monitors' and operators' retiring rooms, special inquiry officers, medical branch, institute class, telegraph stores, and despatch rooms.

17. **Fourth Floor.**—This floor is to be 12 ft. 6 in. high, and its area will be 28,916 super. feet. Provision is made for telegraph operating and a telephone exchange on this story, including the telephone clerical section.

18. **Fifth Floor.**—It is suggested this shall be 12 ft. 6 in. high, with an area of 10,790 super. feet of space. The proposition is that the George-street side shall be reserved for the telegraph accounts section, and the Pitt-street end for the telephone accounts branch. A break, in the southern portion of the building, is made at this point to enable more efficient lighting of the lower floors.

19. **Sixth Floor.**—The height of this floor, as designed, will be 12 ft. 6 in., and the area 8,824 super. feet. This will be given up to accounts work and the provision of accommodation for the Chief Accountant. The George-street end of the building will be for expenditure accounts, while the Pitt-street side will be devoted to the Cashier's branch.

20. **Seventh Floor.**—This is to be exactly similar to the sixth, and the whole of the space will be allocated to the Accounts Branch.

21. **Eighth Floor.** This is to be 12 ft. 6 in. high, and contain a floor area of 8,230 super. feet. On the George-street side of the main entrance is to be a dining-room 52 ft. 6 in. by 14 ft. 6 in., with an area of 2,770 super. feet, where employees will be able to purchase their luncheon. Adjoining will be a servery and scullery 44 ft. 6 in. by 25 feet, containing 750 super. feet. On the Pitt-street side there will be a recreation room 69 feet by 50 ft. 6 in., comprising a space of 3,810 super. feet.

22. **Ninth Floor.**—It is proposed that the height of this floor shall be 9 ft. 6 in., and the area 8,230 super. feet. It is to be set back from the alignment of the eighth floor. On the George-street side there will be a kitchen 56 feet by 30 feet, with a floor space of 1,650 super. feet, a boiler room, refrigerating room, cool store, larder, and store room. On the Pitt street end there will be a dining room 61 feet by 41 feet, with an area of 2,750 super. feet, which will be at the disposal of officers providing their own luncheon. A promenade is also available on this floor.

23. **Lifts.**—Three electrically-driven fast-travelling passenger lifts, measuring 6 ft. 6 in. by 5 feet, are provided for adjoining the main entrance, a similar lift, 7 ft. 6 in. by 6 feet, at the staff entrance, Pitt-street, and another, 6 ft. 6 in. by 5 ft. 6 in., at the staff entrance, George-street. Two goods lifts, each 12 feet by 8 feet, and an elevator, occupying a central position to the rear of the structure, are also included.

24. **Ventilation.**—Fresh air will be drawn in from the top of the building, carried down ducts into the fan chambers in the basement, and mechanically discharged. Renewal of the air will take place about three times per hour.

25. **Heating.**—Provision for electrical heating, where necessary, will be made.

26. **Power.**—This will be distributed by electrically-driven motors.

ESTIMATED COST.

27. The departmental estimate of the cost of the work, as outlined in the proposal submitted, is set down at approximately £268,807, made up as follows:—

Alterations and additions	£215,057
Electric light installation	£11,000
Mechanical plant—consisting of five passenger lifts	14,000
Two mail lifts	6,000
One bucket elevator (required for handling mails)	1,250
Loose mail conveyors and elevators	3,000
Ventilation	11,000
Fire sprinklers	450
Kitchen equipment	3,000
	53,750
	£268,807

COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATIONS.

28. The General Committee visited Sydney in February, 1931, and a Sectional Committee in September, carefully inspected the site, and took evidence in Sydney and Melbourne from prominent officials, leading architects, and others, who were acquainted with the existing conditions in the General Post Office, Sydney.

29. Information was elicited from postal officials as to the present demands for space both by employees and the public, and how these could best be attained, whilst the views of prominent Sydney architects were obtained as to the most satisfactory method of improving the building without disturbing existing harmonies.

30. It was explained that frequent consultations had taken place between postal officials and officers of the Department of Works and Railways as to the most effective means of meeting the requirements of the public and the staff, and it was agreed that the suggested design would provide the facilities desired.

31. During the course of its deliberations, the Committee had the benefit of the advice and experience of the Chief Commonwealth Architect, Commonwealth Surveyor General, President of the Institute of Architects of New South Wales, Lord Mayor of Sydney, Mr. W. B. Griffin, and other representative gentlemen.

32. With the rapid increase of population, the present building is quite unsuitable to deal with the volume of business to be transacted, consequently much delay and confusion ensue. Many of the rooms are extremely overcrowded, and the facilities afforded to the general public are wholly inadequate. These congested conditions, which take place in the various departments most frequently used by the public, particularly at the stamps and money-order counters, telegraph branch, and around telephone boxes, were very apparent to the Committee. The space available for the staff is quite insufficient, ventilation is bad, and no provision whatever is made for the health, comfort, and recreation of the employees. The existing state of things in many parts is so unsatisfactory that were the same conditions to prevail in any privately-owned business, there is little doubt that the Health authorities would raise serious objections to their continuance.

COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS.

33. In the opinion of the Committee, immediate steps should be taken to remodel the General Post Office, Sydney, and bring it into line with modern buildings, fitted with up-to-date facilities and conveniences.

34. In dealing with the report submitted to the Committee, three sets of plans were supplied—the first by Mr. W. B. Griffin, the second by the Department of Works and Railways in response to a request received from the Economy Commission, and the third by the Department of Works and Railways with the reference transmitted by the House of Representatives to the Committee.

35. An examination of Mr. Griffin's plans disclosed that the main feature was a postal hall on the ground floor, with entrances for the general public from Martin-place and Pitt-street, where most of the business, with which the public is associated, would be transacted. The rectangular block within the structure was proposed to be of the same height as depicted in the departmental plan, but contained approximately 33,986 super. feet less floor space. The plans furnished, other than that of the ground floor, did not show the allocation of departments on the various stories. The estimated cost was set down as £132,000.

36. Sketch plans and estimate of the cost of remodelling at £168,000 were obtained by the Economy Commission from the Department of Works and Railways.

37. At a later date more complete plans were prepared by the Department of Works and Railways, containing provision for many additional services and mechanical appliances not allowed for in the previous designs, and estimated to cost £268,807.

38. The Committee is of opinion that, the ground floor plan, as furnished by the Department of Works and Railways, would provide greater facilities for the satisfactory transaction of public business than could be achieved by the adoption of either of the other plans.

39. The Committee gave the most serious consideration to the question of whether the ground floor should contain a main postal hall, as designed by Mr. Griffin, utilizing approximately one-half of the floor area, or whether it should be laid out on the lines of the departmental plan, which provides for a vestibule 15 feet wide occupying the full length of the three frontages with access to the various departmental activities. The Committee's decision is governed by the fact that the General Post Office, Sydney, is differently situated from any other post office in the Commonwealth inasmuch as all frontages are centres of busy thoroughfares.

In addition, instead of the telephone conveniences being all concentrated in one portion of the building, these, according to the departmental plan, will be placed at regular intervals throughout the whole of the ground floor.

40. The Committee approves of the expenditure proposed for conveying, by mechanical means, letters posted by the general public direct to the sorting room, and, under such circumstances, considers provision should be made for posting letters from within the vestibule as well as from outside the building.

41. Office accommodation for the staff on the various floors is considered fully adequate for present purposes, while special provision is being made for luncheon rooms, library, and Postal Institute. The provision for luncheon rooms is considered absolutely essential, and should tend to greatly increased efficiency and comfort. The Committee thinks, however, that the question of the Postal Institute is one that needs careful attention, as, although a Postal Institute run on proper lines is advantageous from the point of view of the officers themselves and of the Service generally, it is of opinion that there may be a tendency for it to extend too far in certain directions, and considers that the scope of the Institute should be definitely laid down by the Government, and not by a single Minister, in order that the best value may be derived from the money spent by the Commonwealth thereon.

42. As shown in paragraph 27 of the Committee's Report, the estimate £268,807 includes many items not allowed for in the estimate submitted to the Economy Commission, to which has been added the increased cost of labour and material set down at about 40 per cent. It is difficult, however, to calculate what the actual cost for this work will be owing to its complex nature, and the fluctuation in prices. The completion of this undertaking will occupy at least three years, and it is impossible to say what the cost of labour and material throughout that period will be.

43. Considerable attention was devoted to the question as to whether the receipt and delivery of mails from overseas, Inter-State and country, should be continued at the Central-square office or removed to the General Post Office. The Committee agree with the departmental view that, by concentrating at the General Post Office, economy could be at once effected to the extent of £12,000 per annum, that a proposed expenditure of £1,200 a year, in altering the route by which the country registered matter is conveyed, could be saved, and that speedier and more effective delivery of city and country mails would be assured.

44. In addition, by concentrating the Mail Branch at Head Office, the area vacated by the Mail Branch at Central-square could be utilized as a telegraph and telephone workshop, and effect a saving of £1,931 per annum, which sum represents the rental now being paid by the Department for workshops. Also the Deputy Postmaster-General, Sydney, stated that about £2,500 additional could be saved in supervision, &c.

45. While provision should be made for the receipt and delivery of ordinary and registered parcels at the General Post Office, the main parcels office should be at Central-square, adjoining the Railway Station, at which all bulk parcels should be received and delivered.

46. It is considered essential that a special water main be extended from the west side of George-street and also from Castlereagh-street, to provide an efficient water supply in case of fire, and that an electric automatic pump be installed in the basement.

47. Provision is made in the estimate for the supply of automatic fire sprinklers at a cost of £4,500, but, in view of the fact that the building is under constant supervision and the greatest danger from fire would come from outside, the Committee does not consider this expenditure necessary.

48. The estimated cost of remodelling the General Post Office is £268,807, which, at 6 per cent., would represent an annual interest charge of £16,128. As against this, evidence showed that, in addition to providing greatly increased facilities, a substantial annual saving would be effected by carrying out the proposed work. This amount is stated in evidence to be—

Concentration of Parcels Office work at Central Mail Branch ..	£12,000 per annum
Altering the route by which mails are conveyed ..	1,200 "
Abolition of rental of workshops ..	1,931 "
More effective supervision ..	2,500 "
Abolition of rental paid for offices, Macdonnell House ..	630 "

£18,261 per annum

so that the annual saving effected would exceed the interest charge on the cost of remodelling by over £2,000.

49. During the course of its investigations, the Committee ascertained that various suggestions had been made from time to time for increasing the postal area with a view to providing for necessary future expansion.

The principal of these suggestions were for the acquisition of—

- The whole block bounded by Pitt, King, and George streets and Martin-place.
- A piece of land 80 feet x 145 feet at the rear of the General Post Office, comprising portion of the area occupied by Messrs. Hoffmann and Sands.
- The acquisition of an area of land 80 feet x 70 feet at the rear of the General Post Office, being portion of the area occupied by John Sands and Company.

Whilst recommending the adoption of the plans submitted by the Department of Works and Railways, the Committee realises that they provide for postal needs only for a period of from fifteen to twenty years, and considers that it would be advantageous from a Commonwealth point of view to obtain an additional area of land adjoining the present post office block on the south side. It therefore suggests that the area of land approximately 80 feet x 70 feet in the centre of the block bounded by Pitt, King, and George streets, forming part of the late E. M. Forbes' estate, and portion of the area now leased to John Sands and Company be acquired for postal purposes. At the present time there are no buildings of great value on the area in question, but its acquisition might be rendered costly in future should large stores or offices be erected thereon.

50. The Committee makes this suggestion being convinced that the following advantages will accrue by the possession of such additional area:—

- (a) More space in the basement for the receipt and delivery of mails;
- (b) An additional inlet or outlet to the basement from George street;
- (c) Extra space on the ground floor enabling the creation of additional facilities for the general public;
- (d) Improved natural lighting and ventilation;
- (e) A reduction of the height of the main building by two floors with an increase of 24,000 square feet of floor space;
- (f) Proposed alterations can be effected with less inconvenience to the public and the staff.

51. In making a recommendation for the purchase of this area, the Committee has been guided to some extent by the report of the 1910 Departmental Committee, and also the evidence of most of the principal departmental witnesses, who were of the opinion that the proposed alterations as submitted in the reference would provide facilities only for the next fifteen to twenty years.

Taking into consideration the rapid growth of Sydney, and the ever-increasing postal facilities demanded by the general public, the Committee is of opinion that the acquisition of the area 80 feet x 70 feet, as recommended, and the amendment of the plan to provide for the immediate use of this space would, in the near future, justify the additional expenditure.

The extra space thus obtained would enable revision of the ground-floor plan to be made, which would provide accommodation for the convenience of the public of a more generous nature than at present contemplated.

A further advantage to be derived from the acquisition of this area would be that a structure two stories lower could be designed, which would give all the accommodation at present required, and be so constructed as to secure the fullest advantage of this very valuable site, and, at the same time, provide that, at some future time if necessity arose, two additional floors could be added to the whole of the remodelled structure.

H. GREGORY,
Chairman.

Office of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works,
527 Collins-street, Melbourne.
9th November, 1921.