

1937-38.



THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

*Brought up by  
Senator Brand  
on 17<sup>th</sup> Nov., 1938  
JTB  
- Vice of the Senate  
P. 11/38*

---

PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
PUBLIC WORKS.

---

REPORT

RELATING TO THE PROPOSED ERECTION OF A

GAOL

AT

DARWIN, NORTHERN TERRITORY.

---

By Authority :  
L. F. JENSEN, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra.  
(Printed in Australia.)

MEMBERS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS.

(Ninth Committee.)

The Honorable Josiah Francis, M.P., Chairman.

*Senate.*

Senator Charles Henry Brand.  
Senator Gordon Brown.  
Senator Walter Jackson Cooper.

*House of Representatives.*

Thomas Joseph Collins, Esq., M.P.  
Charles William Frost, Esq., M.P.  
The Honorable Edward James Holloway, M.P.  
Walter Maxwell Nairn, Esq., M.P.  
John Lloyd Price, Esq., M.P.

---

EXTRACT FROM THE VOTES AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
No. 37, DATED 30TH JUNE, 1938.

5. PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE.—Reference of Work—Erection of Gaol, Darwin, Northern Territory—Mr. McEwen (Minister for the Interior) moved, by leave, That in accordance with the provision of the *Commonwealth Public Works Committee Act 1913-1936*, the following proposed work be referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works for investigation and report: Darwin, Northern Territory—Erection of Gaol. Mr. McEwen having laid on the Table plans, &c., in connexion with the proposed work.—  
Question—put and passed.

---

LIST OF WITNESSES.

Burnett, B. C. G., Resident Architect, Darwin, Northern Territory.  
Chaseling, E. H., Operations Manager Guinea Airways Ltd., Adelaide.  
Collins, A. R., Officer-in-charge, Darwin Aerodrome, Darwin, Northern Territory.  
Cook, Dr. C. E. A., Chief Medical Officer, and Chief Protector of Aborigines, Darwin, Northern Territory.  
Giles, L. H. A., Government Secretary, Darwin, Northern Territory.  
Haslam, W. T., Superintending Architect, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory.  
Hepburn, Wing-Commander A., Director of Works, Department of Defence.  
Mair, H. K. C., Superintendent of Agriculture and Curator of the Botanic Gardens, Darwin, Northern Territory.  
Nichols, J. W., Sheriff, &c., Northern Territory Administration, Darwin, Northern Territory.  
Shepherd, F. P., Chief Surveyor, Lands and Surveys Branch, Darwin.  
Walker, R., Gaoler, Fannie Bay Gaol, Darwin, Northern Territory.  
Whitney, J. F., Comptroller-General of Prisons, Brisbane.

# ERECTION OF GAOL AT DARWIN, NORTHERN TERRITORY.

## REPORT.

THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS, to which the House of Representatives referred for investigation and report the question of the Erection of a Gaol at Darwin, Northern Territory, has the honour to report as follows :—

### PRESENT PROPOSAL.

1. The proposal submitted by Parliament for the consideration of the Committee aims at the provision of a building on modern lines, designed after investigations by the Superintending Architect, Canberra, in Darwin, Java and Singapore, to conform with the principles of tropical architecture. It comprises the following buildings :—

Administrative Block.  
Remand, First Offenders' and Debtors' Block.  
White Prisoners' Block.  
Aboriginal Prisoners' Block.  
Hospital Block.  
Medical Inspection Block.  
Kitchen and Garages' Block.  
Workshops and Stores, &c., Block.  
Boundary Wall.  
Covered Ways, Watchtower, Patrol Trackways, &c.,

and is intended to provide accommodation for seventeen white prisoners and 98 aboriginal prisoners.

2. The initial considerations governing the design are to meet climatic conditions as far as possible, and to segregate various types of prisoners. The general principle of the lay-out is to separate the prison proper into sections which are practically self-contained excepting for cooking arrangements. A complete girdle wall surrounds the prison wall proper.

3. The construction is proposed to be of reinforced concrete with steel doors, grilles, &c., and the outer verandah walls of the prison block are to be composed of concrete posts, adjustable fibro-cement louvres and expanded metal screens.

### REASONS FOR THE PROPOSAL.

4. The reasons for requiring a new gaol were given as follows :—

- (a) The existing gaol is situated in the vicinity of the civil aerodrome. The buildings being on high ground to the north-west of the landing ground, interfere with the landing of overseas planes and those taking off during the north-west season.
- (b) The buildings are unsatisfactory for the purposes of a gaol, being badly ventilated and unsuitable for the climate.
- (c) The yard enclosure is too small and creates difficulties in segregating white and aboriginal prisoners.
- (d) The surrounding galvanized iron wall is in a bad state of repair and ineffective as a barrier.

### ESTIMATED COST.

5. The estimated cost as submitted to Parliament was set down at £42,000.

### COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATIONS.

6. The Committee visited Darwin, inspected the existing prison accommodation, viewed the site proposed for the new structure, and took evidence from the Government Secretary, the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Protector of Aborigines, the Superintending Architect, Canberra, the Works Director, and the Resident Architect, Darwin, the Sheriff, the Gaoler, the Director of Works, Department of Defence, Aviation Officials and others, and by every means available endeavoured to acquaint itself with the special prison needs of Darwin.

## NECESSITY FOR A NEW BUILDING.

7. The existing gaol building at Darwin is situated on the water front at a distance of about 3 miles from the Court House. It is a single storied structure, the main portion of stone construction erected before the Commonwealth took over the administration of the Northern Territory, with sundry additions, from time to time, of less durable material.

8. The prison, having been erected in the seventies, has all the architectural defects and objectionable features associated with prison practice of that period. Much of the structure is in disrepair, the kitchen and lathing accommodation is very crude and the sanitation particularly objectionable.

9. Further unsatisfactory features mentioned by the Chief Gaoler in his evidence were to the effect that the existing cells are too large to be used as individual cells for Europeans, but with more ventilation would be suitable for several aboriginals; there are no facilities for handling lunatics or refractory prisoners, and mental patients and prisoners of all kinds occupy the same yard. It was stated that at present there are 24 prisoners convicted of murder and ten others serving sentences ranging from three years to ten years hard labour in association in the same yard with all other male prisoners. The lighting system is bad, there is no accommodation for female white prisoners, while the best that can be said of the gaol wall is that it encloses an area, but is not a bar to any prisoner intent on escaping. Although the temperature of Darwin is high all the year round, with six month's continuous dry weather followed by a six month's rainy season, the Committer's inspection showed that no provision exists in the yard for shelter from sun or rain, and the buildings are obsolete, inconveniently arranged, badly ventilated and generally unsuitable for a tropical climate.

10. The Committee arranged for the Resident Architect, Darwin, to consult the Chief Gaoler with a view to ascertaining whether the existing building could be remodelled at a reasonable cost. After due consideration of a sketch plan showing the alterations that would be required, and details of the expenditure that would be involved, the Committee is satisfied that the existing buildings do not lend themselves to economical extension or remodelling, and recommends that to provide prison accommodation suitable and adequate to meet present and prospective requirements, a new building is essential.

## SITE.

11. The existing gaol occupies an area of approximately 10 acres, overlooking Fannie Bay, and distant about 3 miles from the Court House. One of the reasons advanced for providing a new gaol was that the existing buildings were in a position dangerously close to the civil aerodrome. After inquiry, the Committee is satisfied that although under present circumstances the only danger would be in the case of a take-off or landing at night or in very stormy weather, any attempt to enlarge the present gaol area or erect a higher encircling wall would increase the obstruction from an aviation point of view. Moreover, the advent of larger and heavier planes in the future would demand longer runways, and in the absence of buildings in this locality it would be possible to extend the aerodrome to the westward if it were ever considered necessary or advisable.

12. It was stated in evidence that the gaol occupies one of the best building sites outside Darwin, is in a prominent position and is obviously too valuable to be used for gaol purposes; the area of 10 acres is too restricted; and the soil is of such poor quality that little can be done in the cultivation of vegetables for the institution. For these reasons the Committee considers that any new building erected should occupy a more secluded position, have a greater area, with soil capable of being cultivated for the growing of vegetables, &c.

13. In selecting a site for a new gaol the Administration stipulated that it should be (a) within a reasonable distance of Darwin and possible of access all the year round; (b) be on the seashore if possible; (c) have good soil and timber in the vicinity; (d) possess a reasonable water supply.

14. After inspection of several sites, suggested the Commonwealth acquired, on 2nd September, 1937, an area of 160 acres comprising the southern portion of Section 2, Hundred of Bagot, which conforms generally to the conditions laid down. It is about 4 miles from Darwin, about a quarter of a mile from a main road and about half a mile from the sea at the nearest point. There are about 4 to 5 acres of arable land which though not first class would, it is reported, be capable of producing certain classes of vegetables and fodder. Water may be obtained by sinking wells and the site is only a quarter of a mile from the pipe line of the projected Darwin water supply. The area is said to be good building land and in the opinion of the Committee is suitable for the purpose for which it is intended.

## AMOUNT OF ACCOMMODATION TO BE PROVIDED.

15. The Committee made careful inquiries to ascertain what amount of prison accommodation is warranted to meet existing and prospective requirements. The present gaol contains sixteen male and two female cells and is capable of accommodating 48 males and 10 females. The cubic capacity of each male cell is 1,728 feet, and that of the female cells 2,028 feet. Information was obtained that the daily average of prisoners irrespective of colour, was—

				Males.	Females.
In--					
1933-34	..	..	..	46.5	2.7
1934-35	..	..	..	55.9	1.07
1935-36	..	..	..	54.1	2.459
1936-37	..	..	..	52.3	1.774
1937-38	..	..	..	55.6	4.93

16. In the plan referred to the Committee by Parliament, accommodation was provided for an aboriginal prisoners' block to accommodate 98, a white prisoners' block to accommodate twelve and a remand block which would take an additional five white prisoners. It was subsequently explained in evidence that provision had been made for the future erection of another block to house 98 aboriginal prisoners and a further block to house twelve white prisoners, thus providing at some future date for a total of 196 aboriginal prisoners and 29 whites.

17. Information obtained by the Committee showed that there were only about 600 aboriginals within 20 miles of Darwin, that that number was steadily decreasing and that moreover the action taken by the Administration to establish a new aboriginal compound at a greater distance from Darwin was expected to have the effect of materially reducing the number of punishable offences amongst aboriginals. All witnesses questioned on the subject agreed that provision for 98 aboriginal prisoners was on the generous side, while those perhaps more competent to judge stated that the number could be materially reduced.

18. It was adduced in evidence that it is undesirable that an uncivilized aboriginal be placed in a cell by himself; unless he has company he is likely to become terrified and would perhaps die. Hence no single cells are proposed for the aboriginal block, it being customary to adopt the dormitory system and house a number of aboriginal prisoners in large cells. This tends to economy of construction but to avoid possible clashes between members of different tribes some segregation is advisable.

19. After due consideration of all circumstances, the Committee is of opinion that ample accommodation for aboriginal prisoners will be met by providing three cells to accommodate eighteen each and two other cells to accommodate four each thus making provision for a total of 62 aboriginal prisoners.

20. The amount of accommodation to be provided for white prisoners will depend to a large extent on Government policy. It was stated in evidence by the Superintending Architect that in addition to the Remand Block of five cells one block only to accommodate twelve whites was proposed at present as it was assumed "that there will not be a great number of white prisoners as probably long service white prisoners will be sent south". Certain circumstances such as the consent of the State Governments to receive such prisoners and the question of the expense involved would have to be taken into consideration, and the Committee received no information as to whether the policy suggested would be adopted.

21. In view, however, of the trying climate and the lack of facilities for effective vocational training at Darwin, the Committee is strongly of opinion that from a practical as well as a humanitarian point of view steps should be taken to permit of the transfer of long term white prisoners to the Commonwealth Gaol at Alice Springs, or by arrangement with State Governments to one of the State prisons in the temperate zone, from which, after serving their sentence they might emerge unimpaired in health and with some manual skill which would enable them to earn an honest living in the future.

22. If this be done the Committee is of opinion that accommodation for seventeen white prisoners as suggested, would be sufficient to meet all normal requirements for a number of years, as it was stated in evidence that the daily averages of European prisoners serving twelve months and under were—

in 1932-33	..	..	..	..	..	4.144
1933-34	..	..	..	..	..	4.590
1934-35	..	..	..	..	..	3.594
1935-36	..	..	..	..	..	5.904
1936-37	..	..	..	..	..	2.584

23. If it be found impracticable to send long-term white prisoners away from Darwin as recommended, both the Sheriff and the Gaoler were definitely of opinion that accommodation for more than seventeen white prisoners would be necessary. It was pointed out that while the aboriginal population is diminishing the white population is likely to progressively increase, and information furnished to the Committee envisaged a possible total population of 6,000 within a reasonable period.

24. The Committee is aware that the average proportion of prisoners to total population in the various States while remaining stationary at 6.5 per 10,000 for the four years ended 1932, has since declined to about 5 per 10,000. The amount of accommodation provided is usually double the number of prisoners under detention. In the Northern Territory where conditions are in some respects abnormal the daily averages of prisoners other than aboriginals have been -

	European.	Coloured.	Total.
1932-33 .. .. .	4.84	6.191	11.031
1933-34 .. .. .	7.476	2.832	10.308
1934-35 .. .. .	7.344	4.153	11.497
1935-36 .. .. .	12.381	2.723	15.104
1936-37 .. .. .	7.584	5.726	13.310

The anticipated increase in the population of Darwin in the near future probably will consist mainly of Defence personnel, artisans and others amongst whom the incidence of crime is likely to be very low. If however, further prison accommodation should be found to be necessary later, provision exists in the plan for the erection of an additional block for twelve white prisoners.

25. In respect of female white prisoners the Committee considers that one cell should be provided in a position adjacent to the Chief Gaoler's quarters.

#### BUILDING.

26. When the resolution was submitted in Parliament by the Minister for the Interior, it was stated that the building proposed was estimated to cost £42,000. In giving evidence before the Committee, the Superintending Architect, Canberra, repeated this figure, but explained that no provision was included in the estimate for residences for the Chief Gaoler and Chief Warden, quarters for Single Warders, or accommodation for women prisoners. These buildings were estimated to cost an additional £8,000. The figure of £42,000 also did not include costs of service mains to the site and no provision was made for roads or pavings, as it was anticipated that the latter work would be carried out by prison labour.

27. When, in Darwin, the Resident Architect who drew the original sketch plans for the buildings, was called upon to give evidence, the Committee was astonished to learn that he was preparing to make his statement on the assumption that the estimated cost of the project was £115,000 and that he was, until then, unaware that the proposal submitted to the Committee by Parliament was for a prison to cost £42,000. This was the more regrettable as the amended plans for the lower expenditure had been in Darwin for some months. This is an example of the lamentable lack of co-ordination amongst various officials working for a common objective which it is hoped will be overcome by the recent extension of the powers and functions of the Administrator.

28. The Committee provided the Resident Architect with a copy of the latest plan and gave him an opportunity of considering the proposal submitted for investigation, before taking his evidence. Subsequently after hearing his views, and duly weighing all the other opinions advanced, the Committee has arrived at the conclusion that the goal building proper, with the modifications suggested by the Committee can be erected for approximately £37,000.

29. The fact that through lack of accommodation some of the prison staff are compelled to live in rented quarters at a distance from the gaol is a disadvantage, but with the new gaol erected where proposed it would, in addition, be a distinct danger in the event of trouble in the gaol.

The Committee therefore recommends that quarters for the gaol staff should be provided simultaneously in or adjacent to the gaol. There is a considerable shortage of houses in Darwin and no difficulty would be experienced in finding other occupants for the dwellings now occupied by the Gaoler and the prison guards.

## SANITATION.

30. The present practice, which is unavoidable, of placing sanitary pans in the cells at night, has very unpleasant and undesirable features. The odour of excreta and phenyle which permeates the building is distressing to visitors and must be most objectionable to prisoners. With the provision of the projected Darwin water supply it is intended to supply water closet pans with flushing cisterns in the corridors operated by a lever through the door frame. All plumbing will be outside the cells, soil pipes being under the floor and flush and vent pipes carried in a vertical duct of triangular shape.

## HOSPITAL BLOCK.

31. The hospital block provides accommodation for two whites and eight aboriginals in the scheme catering for 115 prisoners and for seven whites and twelve aboriginals in the full proposal to house 225 prisoners. There is also provision for a surgery, attendants' room, observation cell and a padded cell. It was ascertained that no hospital block exists in the present building and that it is the custom to transfer any really sick prisoner to the general hospital. In view of this practice and the fact that no nursing staff is available and that no provision has been made for ward cells, the Committee considers that extensive accommodation for hospital purposes is unnecessary. It agrees with the evidence given by the Chief Medical Officer that it would be sufficient to provide for two white patients and four aboriginals in an infirmary. The refractory ward could be retained and a dressing station or first-aid room provided.

## GIRDLE WALL, ETC.

32. The existing wall is of galvanized iron, twelve feet high and although from its inspection, and the evidence obtained, the Committee is satisfied it offers no bar to a prisoner intent on escaping, there have been few attempts at escape. A complete concrete girdle wall 547 feet by 220 feet and 16 feet high is proposed to surround the whole institution. Some witness expressed the view that this was too low and suggested various heights up to 24 feet. This would greatly increase the cost of the proposal and in view of all the circumstances the Committee considers that if the inner corners be rounded a wall 16 feet high should be effective to hold the class of prisoner detained. With the reduction of the accommodation recommended by the Committee, however, it is thought that the length of the wall may be materially reduced.

33. There is an elaborate provision in the plan of gridded covered ways, cat walks and an observation tower which the Committee after hearing the evidence, considers unnecessary and recommends should be eliminated.

## GENERAL REMARKS.

34. In providing a new prison at Darwin the Committee recommends that cognizance be taken of the fact that during recent years most civilized countries have introduced considerable modifications and improvements in methods of prison management. Under the old system punishment partook more or less of the character of reprisal for wrongdoing, and the idea of constituting the prison as a reformatory agency was in the background. But in recent years there has been an earnest attempt at effecting a moral reformation in the unfortunates who lapse into crime. For this reason the Committee suggests that special efforts be made to provide facilities to enable the prisoners to engage in reproductive work of a regular and intelligent nature not from sympathy with the criminal, but as ordinary necessities to the wholesome functioning of the mind. Very few skilled tradesmen are received into gaol, the great majority of prisoners being ignorant of any trade, and many being drunkards, vagrants and physical and moral degenerates. In cases where it has been found possible to have an area of land laid down in crops, and some attention given to poultry or pig-raising, it is reported that considerable improvement has resulted both in demeanour and physique of prisoners. In fine the objective should be to provide such exercise and instruction as will enable them to form habits of industry, afford them a means of earning a livelihood on their release, and give them a chance of a return to honest citizenship.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS.

35. Briefly summarized, the recommendations of the Committee are—

- (1) That to provide prison accommodation suitable and adequate to meet present and prospective requirements a new building is essential. (Paragraph 10.)
- (2) That the site selected is suitable for the purpose intended. (Paragraph 14.)
- (3) That accommodation be provided for 62 aboriginal prisoners. (Paragraph 19.)
- (4) That from a practical as well as a humanitarian point of view steps should be taken to permit of the transfer of long-term white prisoners away from Darwin. (Paragraph 21.)

- (5) That if long-term white prisoners be sent south accommodation for seventeen whites in Darwin would meet all normal requirements for a number of years. (Paragraph 22.)
- (6) That one cell for female white prisoners should be provided in a position adjacent to the Chief Gaoler's quarters. (Paragraph 25.)
- (7) That the gaol building proper with modifications suggested by the Committee can be erected for approximately £37,000. (Paragraph 28.)
- (8) That quarters for Gaol staff should be provided in or adjacent to the Gaol. (Paragraph 29.)
- (9) That in lieu of an elaborate hospital block an infirmary with accommodation for two white patients and four aboriginals be provided. (Paragraph 31.)
- (10) That the surrounding wall be 16 feet high with rounded inner corners. (Paragraph 32.)
- (11) That the provision of grilles covered ways, cat walks and an observation tower are unnecessary. (Paragraph 33.)
- (12) That special efforts be made to provide facilities to enable prisoners to engage in reproductive work of a regular and intelligent nature. (Paragraph 34.)

JOSE FRANCIS  
Chairman.

Office of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works,  
Parliament House,

Canberra, 27th October, 1938.