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THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON WAR EXPENDITURE.

SIXTH PROGRESS REPORT.

PETROL CONSUMPTION BY ARMED
SERVICES.

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JOINT COMMITTEE ON WAR EXPENDITURE.

(Appointed 3rd July, 1941.)

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* Discharged from attendance 12th November, 1941.

† Appointed 12th November, 1941.

‡ Appointed 12th November, 1941; discharged from attendance 5th March, 1942.

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** Appointed 3rd June, 1942; discharged from attendance 3rd September, 1942.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON WAR EXPENDITURE.

PETROL CONSUMPTION BY ARMED SERVICES.

REPORT.

The Joint Committee on War Expenditure which was appointed by Parliament to examine current expenditure defrayed out of moneys voted for the Defence Services and other services directly connected with the war, having received complaints as to wastage of petrol occurring in the use of motor cars and transport vehicles by the Fighting Forces, addressed itself to a consideration of these allegations, and has the honour to report as follows:—

INTRODUCTION.

1. Instances were brought under notice to the effect that military cars were being used for other than military purposes; cases were cited where journeys were made by military officers over long distances although railway transport was available; and other instances were mentioned where a number of cars or transport vehicles, carrying less than full loads, traversed the same route at practically the same time.

COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATIONS.

2. The Committee endeavoured to ascertain the facts in respect of specific cases, and took evidence from responsible Departmental officials and Army officers.

3. It was ascertained that in recent months a considerable amount of investigation has been carried on in various quarters in an endeavour to arrive at some method of minimizing the use of petrol. It was admitted by most of the Army witnesses examined that responsible officers had been greatly concerned at the quantity of petrol revealed by inspectors' reports as having been wastefully used: in some cases in flagrant breaches of orders by the wrongful use of cars; in others, by the fact that, although within regulations, want of thought or lack of co-ordinated action had led to the employment of cars when other transport facilities were available, or to the use of a number of vehicles when one or two would have sufficed.

4. Cases were cited where officers had travelled to their destination by car almost alongside a railway line; others, where several cars left Ballarat at about the same time as the train, and arrived in Melbourne within minutes of each other and of the train. It was found also that at times a number of transport vehicles has been sent from a camp to the local railway station to take delivery of stores when the total load collected has not been more than sufficient to fill one vehicle. It was stated that in recent months stricter supervision has been exercised, some disciplinary action taken, and that in the metropolitan areas at least there has been a considerable lessening of the abuse.

REGULATIONS ISSUED.

5. From the evidence obtained it would appear to the Committee that the steps now being taken at Headquarters, and the series of regulations issued dealing with the use of transport vehicles, if rigidly adhered to, would reduce the wastage of petrol to a minimum. Every car when it is called upon to perform a duty

is provided with a work ticket. On that work ticket, which is the driver's order, he is told where to report and to whom to report for duty, and on the ticket he records his drawings of petrol, the number of personnel or weight of load carried, the miles that are run, where his calls have been made, and the time at which he is written off. These tickets are checked by the commander of the company and finally by the checking staff at Land Headquarters. The same rule applies to the despatch and use of trucks.

6. Although traffic police are provided on the roads and traffic control posts are established which are designed to ensure that instructions are carried out, unfortunately it is found that the regulations are not always observed in their entirety. The personal equation has always to be considered, and unless the controlling officer exercises essential control and offenders are stringently disciplined there will always be lapses.

7. It was stated in evidence that a staff of inspectors check the use of petrol in various centres and report cases which in their opinion indicate there has been abuse. The Committee had an opportunity of inspecting a number of the files containing reports of these alleged offences, and obtained from the officer to whom the reports are sent particulars as to action taken in typical cases. The Committee fears that, in the past, offenders have been allowed to escape with a reprimand or light penalty and that it has not been thought necessary to bring the culprit to a realization of the gravity of his action.

8. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that, under war conditions as waged to-day, petrol is the life-stream of the fighting forces. Owing to world conditions a certain quota only in tankers and supplies is allotted to Australia and this quantity has to be brought to the Commonwealth through innumerable perils of sea and air. Even the volume arriving here is subject to losses through various causes including leakage, evaporation, &c., and when all these circumstances are carefully considered and it is realized that a lack of petrol would immobilize the greater part of our Army, any action which will have the effect of needlessly depleting supplies is nothing less than a crime.

9. The Committee realizes that it is impossible to police every case, and some wastage of petrol may always be expected until a realization of the importance of this commodity to the nation is generally recognized and senior officers are awakened to a keen sense of their responsibility and achieve a willingness to exercise a rigid control and impose drastic penalties.

10. The Committee was informed that in future it is the intention of the Commanding Officers to make an example of those proved guilty of waste of petrol and to impose the severest penalties. With this action the Committee is in accord, as it is strongly of opinion that it is essential that all concerned should be compelled to recognize the enormous importance of every effort being made by all ranks for the conservation of petrol.

PRODUCER GAS UNITS AND ELECTRICALLY DRIVEN CARS.

11. Inquiry was made by the Committee as to whether it would be feasible to extend the use of producer gas units for military transport. It was stated in evidence that the Army already has a number of producer gas units in operation in rear areas, particularly serving prisoner of war camps. Objection was raised, however, that generally speaking the producer gas system is not suitable for Army use. One reason mentioned was loss of power—just when power is most needed, as in boggy or difficult country, it is not available—and it was claimed that, excepting in rear areas and on reasonable roads, producer gas units are of little use to the Army. If introduced their sphere of usefulness would have definite limitations, which is of very great concern to the Army. For instance, it is contended that it is not possible to take a gas producer alight into a large petrol depot; nor is it advisable to take a similarly lighted machine into an ammunition depot. It was stated that one of the troubles at the present time is a shortage of Army vehicles, and the transport authorities claim they cannot afford to limit vehicles to definite uses and keep them on certain runs, because all transport is liable to be called up for general purposes in an emergency.

12. The Army also claims it cannot sacrifice the space required by the gas producer; that loads may have to be packed too close to a heated surface; and that it would increase complications in regard to supply. The supply of fuel in the field to vehicles is a major and intricate problem. For most vehicles petrol has to be provided; for others distillate, which is another type of supply to be considered; a third class of vehicles requires octane petrol, and to make provision also for charcoal would mean another commodity of fuel supply and other reserves to be laid down.

13. In view of all these circumstances it is contended by those responsible that it would be inadvisable to include producer gas units amongst Army vehicles.

14. Witnesses were also questioned as to the possibility of utilizing electrically driven cars for light service in metropolitan areas, but the same objection was raised that it is not in Army interests to have a fleet of vehicles which could not, in an emergency, be utilized for all purposes.

15. Notwithstanding this natural disinclination on the part of Army officers, the Committee is still of opinion that there is a field for the useful employment

of producer gas units or electrically driven vehicles in certain areas and that this would lead to an appreciable saving in petrol consumption, and urges that this possibility be explored.

USE OF HORSES.

16. In connexion with the question of Army transport it may not be out of place to mention that, in order to conserve petrol and tyres, auxiliary horse transport utilizing 1,360 horse-drawn vehicles and 2,630 horses are engaged in Army transport work in all Line of Communication Areas. These companies cover an average of 120,000 miles a month which may be taken as saving 12,000 gallons of petrol monthly.

17. The Committee is appreciative of this effort made by the Army to use horse-drawn vehicles when practicable and urges the extension of this practice wherever service conditions permit.

COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

18. After due consideration of all the evidence obtained, the Committee is satisfied that many of the abuses complained of in the past are likely to be overcome if the regulations recently drawn up are followed. To this end they should be widely disseminated and every responsible officer induced to familiarize himself with them: then the regulations should be rigidly enforced. Furthermore, there should be an awakening of the conscience of those within whose power it is to stop any abuse, and the meting out of drastic punishment to those convicted of wastage of petrol or the misuse of vehicles. Greater co-ordination should be aimed at to avoid the running of several cars or trucks to destinations where a smaller number would suffice; and the use of cars when another method of transport is available should be prohibited.

19. It should also be borne in mind that the conservation of petrol means a less expenditure of rubber which again is one of our major problems.

A. J. McLACHLAN, Chairman.

Melbourne, 5th November, 1942.