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CLERK OF THE SENATE

THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE
ON PUBLIC WORKS.

REPORT

RELATING TO THE PROPOSED

ADDITIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OFFICES
KNOWN AS "WEST BLOCK," CANBERRA.

By Authority :
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(Printed in Australia.)

ADDITIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OFFICES, CANBERRA, KNOWN AS "WEST BLOCK".

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 additions to the Government Offices, Canberra, known as "West Block", has the honour to report as follows:—

INTRODUCTORY.

1. The Griffin Plan of Canberra stipulates that all administrative buildings (with the exception of the Civic Administration) should be located in Parkes-place, in what is known as the "Governmental Triangle", extending from Parliament House towards the river.

2. This plan was formally adopted by the Government in 1935, and no modification or variation of such plan can legally be made until after the expiry of 30 days after notification of intention so to vary has been published in the *Commonwealth Gazette* and the papers have been laid before Parliament.

3. The erection of the provisional Houses of Parliament was approved by Parliament in 1923, and later competitive designs were invited for the first Permanent Administrative Offices at Canberra. A total of 94 designs was submitted by architects from all States, the premium being awarded to Mr. George Sydney Jones, of Sydney.

4. On the 11th February, 1926, the House of Representatives referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works for investigation and report the proposal for the erection of this building for the accommodation of Government Departments. After exhaustive inquiries the Committee, on 15th June, 1926, submitted its report approving of the proposal, and this report was adopted by Parliament on the 23rd July, 1926.

ORIGINAL PROPOSAL.

5. The proposal at that time was for the construction of a large utilitarian office building, 430 feet long and 54 feet high, comprising five floors and capable of accommodating eight Departments of State, with office space sufficient for about 1,100 officials. The total cost of the proposal was set down at £842,618.

SECRETARIATS.

6. In the meantime the Federal Capital Commission, which was then in charge of construction in the Territory, reported that Parliament House would be completed in 1929, but that it was improbable that the Administrative Offices could be made ready for occupation before 1930, and requested approval for the erection of two Secretariat buildings, which could house skeleton staffs for about three years, and later be used as rooms for members of Parliament, or such other purposes as might be determined. This approval was given and resulted in the erection of the buildings now known as "East Block" and "West Block".

STOPPAGE OF WORK.

7. In 1928 the erection of the permanent Administrative Offices was commenced on a site to the north-east of Parliament House. This was in conformity

with the idea of the designer, who had made provision that it should be followed at a later date by a complementary building of similar design in a relative position to the north-west of Parliament House.

8. On the completion of the foundations, however, after an expenditure of approximately £78,000 on materials and labour, competition costs, architects' fees, &c., the work was abandoned.

OVERCROWDING.

9. With the growth of Departments, and the increase in the number of officials accommodated in the Secretariats, these buildings, originally intended only for skeleton staffs for a limited period, have proved quite inadequate, and resort has been had to various expedients to meet the difficulty. Corridors and balconies have been converted into offices, small additions have been made, but even this has not given the desired relief, and private premises have been leased in various parts of the city.

10. In January, 1943, the Prime Minister wrote the Minister for the Interior drawing attention to crowded conditions in West Block, particularly in the Cable Section of his Department, and consideration was given to proposals for—

- (a) enclosing courtyards; or
- (b) adding another story to the building; or
- (c) extending West Block in a northerly direction; or
- (d) erecting a new building to accommodate the Cable Section,

but each of these presented objectionable features, and was abandoned.

11. Some months later External Communications was transferred to the Department of External Affairs, and in June, 1943, full Cabinet directed that the Minister for the Interior bring down for consideration a proposal for a brick addition to West Block for the accommodation particularly of the Department of External Affairs.

PRESENT PROPOSAL.

12. The proposal now submitted for consideration aims at the extension of West Block towards the south-west in the form of a wing comprising first, second and part of third floor, level with and in architectural harmony with the existing building.

DESCRIPTION OF THE BUILDING.

13. The building as proposed is to have reinforced concrete foundations, hollow brick external walls, reinforced concrete columns and beams, brick or terracotta internal walls or partitions, wood floorings laid on concrete floors, and corrugated asbestos cement roof over reinforced concrete roof slabs. Usual services, including blinds to windows, linoleum floor coverings on all

MEMBERS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS.

(Eleventh Committee.)

ROWLAND JAMES, Esq., M.P. (Chairman).

Senate.

Senator William Edward Aylott.
Senator Charles Houry Brand.
Senator Charles Adcock Lamp.

House of Representatives.

William Patrick Conelan, Esq., M.P.
Hon. Eric John Harrison, M.P.
Daniel Mulcahy, Esq., M.P.
George James Rankin, Esq., M.P.
Hon. Sir Frederick Harold Stewart, M.P.

EXTRACT FROM THE VOTES AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, No. 8.

DATED 12th OCTOBER, 1943.

3. PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE—REFERENCE OF WORK—ADDITIONS TO GOVERNMENT OFFICES, CANBERRA.—Mr. LAZZARINI (Minister representing the Minister for the Interior) moved, by leave, That, in accordance with the provisions of the *Commonwealth Public Works Committee Act 1915-1936*, the following proposed work be referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works for investigation and report:—Additions to the Government Offices known as "West Block," Canberra.

Mr. LAZZARINI having laid on the Table plans in connexion with the proposed work—

Question—put and passed.

LIST OF WITNESSES.

Garran, Sir Robert Randolph	.. Barrister-at-Law, Canberra.
Hodgson, William Roy	.. Secretary, Department of External Affairs.
Joyce, Albert Charles	.. Assistant Secretary to the Treasury.
Percival, Arthur	.. Surveyor-General and Chief Property Officer.
Piper, William George	.. Postmaster, Canberra.
Robertson, Alexander Smeaton	.. Works Director, Australian Capital Territory.
Waterhouse, Bertrand James	.. Chairman of the National Capital Planning and Development Committee.

wood floors, hot water heating, carrier-communication system on first and second floors, and communication by pneumatic tube service to Parliament House and the Post Office.

14. The total floor area within the external walls is to be 20,616 square feet, comprising—

	Square feet.
Net office space for the—	
Department of External Affairs	6,616
Communications Branch	9,052
Lunch and rest room	751
Strong rooms—	
External Affairs	100
Communications Branch	382
Lavatories, staircases, &c.—	
Ground floor	1,804
First floor	1,154
Second floor	918
Third floor	100
	3,736
	29,619

It is estimated that the building will accommodate about 120 persons.

15. The floor areas have been subdivided to meet the ascertained requirements of the Department of External Affairs, but these subdivisions could be adapted at some future time, if necessary, to meet the needs of other Departments.

ESTIMATED COST.

16. The estimated cost of the building, as submitted to the Committee, is—

	£
General building works	37,384
Preparation and levelling of site	3,784
Hot water heating	6,422
Pneumatic tube service	650
Carrier system	1,600
Spiral staircase between first and second floors	200
Sound proofing of ceilings	800
Extra drainage, wash basins, &c.	200
Small service lifts between first and second floors	30
Electrical work	4,000
	54,000

TIME FOR COMPLETION.

17. It was stated that it will take five to six weeks for the excavation of the site, the main sewer and storm water drains, and the roads and footpaths; it is proposed that this be done by departmental day labour. The time occupied in the erection of the structure by contract would be about ten months.

COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATIONS.

18. The Committee viewed the area which would be covered by the proposed building, inspected the accommodation now provided for the officials of the Department of External Affairs, and examined the plans prepared for the proposed extension.

NEED FOR INCREASED SPACE.

19. It was apparent to the Committee that there is insufficient space for the proper arrangement of the staff, and that considerable inconvenience and loss of efficiency must result from present conditions. While the Secretary and four of the senior officials have separate rooms, the remainder of the professional staff works in rooms in which two, and sometimes three officials are housed. The general office space, however, is shockingly overcrowded. The conditions existing in the Cables Section, for instance, are such as to have led to an inordinate amount of sickness amongst the staff and drawn adverse comment from the Department of Health, and a vigorous protest from the Superintendent of the Canberra Hospital.

20. It was stated in evidence that, to conform to health regulations, provision should be made in large staff rooms for not less than 70 square feet of space

to each person. In the Cables Section of the Department of External Affairs, 70 officials occupy an area of 3,427 square feet, or 48.96 square feet per person. Further, some officials are working in a detached brick structure erected as an air raid shelter, where the ventilation is poor, and artificial lighting is necessary all day. It is safe to say that in privately occupied premises, such a state of affairs would not be tolerated.

21. After hearing the evidence and seeing the congested, insanitary, and ill-lighted accommodation occupied by the Department of External Affairs, members are unanimously and emphatically of the opinion that steps should be taken at the earliest possible moment to ameliorate the present state of affairs.

22. The Committee thereupon set itself to examine how this could be best and most expeditiously accomplished.

23. There is a dearth of privately owned premises in Canberra that could be used for office purposes, and the Commonwealth is already occupying portion of the former Hotel Acton, part of the old Canberra Community Hospital, part of the Boys' Grammar School, and a furniture establishment at Manuka. The only premises brought under the notice of the Committee was an area of 4,350 square feet over Manuka Arcade, comprising 32 rooms used for residential purposes. It was reported that these premises would require considerable expenditure in alterations, and their occupancy by the Commonwealth would mean dispossession of the present tenants, who would find it impossible to obtain other living accommodation in Canberra. In any case, the accommodation was stated to be quite unsuitable for use as Government offices, and the idea was consequently abandoned.

24. It was ascertained that work is proceeding with the creation of office accommodation at the Melbourne Block, Civic Centre. It will be available about June, 1944, and will give some relief to sorely pressed Departments, but it is problematic whether any of the officials now working in West Block could be accommodated there without the considerable inconvenience attaching to the dispersal of branches of Departments throughout widely separated areas.

APPROVAL OF EXTENSION.

25. The most satisfactory prospect of obtaining reasonable and early relief therefore appears to be by the extension of West Block as now proposed. It was learned in evidence that this proposal has been under the consideration of the National Capital Planning and Development Committee, which, although it has expressed itself as opposed to the erection of more temporary or provisional buildings, has approved of the proposed extension only because of the urgent need of providing further office accommodation. This Committee has reported that from the constructional, economic, and aesthetic aspects, the proposed building is satisfactory. It does not call for special design because it is a continuation of the existing structure, and provides well lighted office space.

TIME FACTOR.

26. Although the architect has stated that it was hoped the West Block extension could be completed in ten months, the National Capital Planning and Development Committee expressed the opinion that it is unlikely that the building would be ready for occupancy in less than eighteen months.

27. Time and cost are closely related to the facility or otherwise with which materials and labour can be obtained; and these again depend upon the priority accorded to the project. It was stated in evidence that it is not anticipated that much difficulty will be experienced in obtaining materials from the fact that, although the Commonwealth Brick Works are not now

in operation, there are about 3,500,000 common bricks available at grass, together with sufficient face bricks to finish this building. Other material required, such as cement and steel for reinforcements, are not in short supply, and the timber for the floors will be of local material. The amount and efficiency of the labour available, however, are important, because if insufficient or inefficient labour only is available, it will take longer to erect the structure, and it will cost more.

For these reasons it is suggested that high priority should be allotted to the project, and assistance secured from the Allied Works Council to enable the extension to be completed with expedition.

FURTHER ACCOMMODATION NECESSARY.

28. Throughout the inquiry, most witnesses stressed the fact that even the extension of West Block could be regarded only as a temporary alleviation of congested office accommodation.

It was reported that other Departments in West Block, as well as in East Block, are inconveniently overcrowded, while the Patent Office expressly erected for the special needs of that Department has had to make available over 13,000 square feet of space to accommodate such activities as the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom, the High Commissioner for New Zealand, the Department of Munitions, the Department of Labour and National Service, the Navy Department, the Security Service of the Attorney-General's Department, the Investigation Branch and the Supreme Court. The lack of office space elsewhere has also led to considerable encroachment on office space in Parliament House, to the detriment of the convenience of members of Parliament.

29. The Division of Import Procurement and the Director-General of Agriculture have been established in Sydney, because there was no office accommodation available for them in Canberra; and there are some hundreds of officials in Sydney and Melbourne who should be located at the National Capital. It was stated in evidence that apart from the premises possessed under the National Security Regulations, the Commonwealth is paying an annual rental in Sydney of £180,592, and in Melbourne £148,221 for the accommodation of its officials.

FUTURE NEEDS.

30. Notwithstanding that some of the existing war activities may cease on the termination of hostilities it is safe to assume that there will be a growing demand for more office accommodation in Canberra after the war, and the Committee is emphatically of the opinion that the time has come when the completion of the Permanent Administrative Offices should no longer be delayed.

It was stated in evidence that the winning competitive plans prepared by Mr. George Sydney Jones, and which were taken over by the Commonwealth Government, have been revised and brought up to date, and now conform with the architecture of such permanent structures as the Institute of Anatomy, the National Library and the Patents Office. Some time ago instructions were issued for the taking out of quantities and the preparation of working drawings and specifications for this building, and the Committee was informed that it would be possible to obtain tenders within three months, and for the building to be erected within two to three years.

The Committee urges that to avoid the dispersal of Departments throughout the city, and provide for the increasing demands for proper office accommodation, the approval given by Parliament in 1936 for the erection of permanent Administrative Offices be implemented as soon as practicable.

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ALLOCATION OF SPACE.

31. It was stated in evidence that all the space it is proposed to provide in the new building would not be used at once by the Department of External Affairs, but would be available for anticipated departmental expansion for the next fifteen to twenty years.

Representations were made on behalf of other Departments in West Block that it would be inequitable for the Department of External Affairs, under this scheme, to have more space than immediately needed, whilst other departments are so cramped. It was stated that the Treasurer recently represented to the Minister for the Interior that before any internal planning of the proposed new building is decided upon a complete survey of the requirements of all Departments concerned should be made by an inter-departmental committee with a view to the allotment of the aggregate available space, including that which would be available in the proposed new wing, on a basis that would make for the greatest degree of efficiency, not only in the Department of External Affairs, but in other departments affected.

The Committee agrees with this point of view and recommends that action be taken in the direction indicated.

RESEARCH FACILITIES.

32. During the course of the inquiry, representations were made on behalf of the Council of the Canberra University College that space be set aside in the new building which would permit of students of international relations, learned institutions, qualified research workers and others pursuing their researches with access to the departmental library and records. It was urged that research in Canberra, in relation to international matters will be most important. The conduct of foreign affairs has become increasingly complex as well as increasingly dependent upon expert knowledge, and material for much of the research will be found in the library and records of the Department of External Affairs. It is represented that the main centre in Australia for research and for the study of international relations must be the National Capital, because much of the material is to be found in the Department of External Affairs, and also because of the existence here of the National Library, which has been specially developed to fulfil those ends.

33. The Committee is in agreement that it would be a desirable feature to have adequate research facilities in this building, if it could possibly be arranged, and it is suggested that this be taken into consideration by the proposed departmental committee. It is realized, however, that the requirements of the whole of the officials of West Block for relief from overcrowding is so pressing that such facilities may have to be reserved for inclusion in the Permanent Administrative Offices.

POSTAL INSTITUTE.

34. During the course of its investigations, representations were made to the Committee by the chairman of the Public Service Welfare Association that early steps should be taken to make available in Canberra some accommodation on the lines of the Postal Institutes in capital cities which would include a canteen and provide facilities for the development of social, cultural and recreational activities, particularly amongst the younger members of the Public Service.

Although the Committee realizes that such facilities in a place like Canberra are eminently desirable, it does not consider that the question comes within the scope of its present reference, but is a subject that might well engage the attention of the appropriate authority.

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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS.

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

- (a) That steps should be taken at the earliest possible moment to ameliorate present overcrowded conditions in the Department of External Affairs. (Paragraph 21.)
- (b) That the most satisfactory prospect of obtaining reasonable and early relief is by the extension of West Block as proposed. (Paragraph 25.)
- (c) That high priority be allotted to the project and assistance secured from the Allied Works Council to enable the extension to be completed with expedition. (Paragraph 27.)
- (d) That the approval given by Parliament in 1926 for the erection of Permanent Administrative Offices be implemented as soon as practicable. (Paragraph 30.)

- (e) That a complete survey of the requirements of all Departments concerned be made by an inter-departmental committee, with a view to the allotment of the space that will be available in West Block amongst all Departments. (Paragraph 31.)

- (f) That additional space is desirable for research work in the Department of External Affairs, and it is suggested this be taken into consideration by the proposed departmental committee. (Paragraph 33.)

- (g) That the suggestion that some accommodation be provided in Canberra on the lines of Postal Institutes in capital cities does not come within the scope of the present reference, but is a subject that might well engage the attention of the appropriate authority. (Paragraph 34.)

R. James
R. JAMES, Chairman.

Office of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on
Public Works, Parliament House, Canberra.
15th November, 1943.