

1948-49.

THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

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PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE  
ON PUBLIC WORKS.

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REPORT

RELATING TO THE PROPOSED ERECTION OF A NEW

SCHOOL

AT

ALICE SPRINGS, NORTHERN TERRITORY.

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*Presented pursuant to Statute ; ordered to be printed, 7th July, 1949.*

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[*Cost of Paper.*—Preparation, not given ; 711 copies ; approximate cost of printing and publishing, £12.]

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Printed and Published for the GOVERNMENT of the COMMONWEALTH of AUSTRALIA by  
L. F. JOHNSTON, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra.  
(Printed in Australia.)

No. 56 [GROUP H].—F.3116.—PRICE 9D.

MEMBERS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS.  
(TWELFTH COMMITTEE.)

SENATOR CHARLES ADCOCK LAMP (Chairman).

*Senate.*

- (<sup>3</sup>) Senator CHARLES HENRY BRAND.  
Senator RICHARD HARRY NASH.  
(<sup>4</sup>) Senator NEIL O'SULLIVAN.

*House of Representatives.*

- WILLIAM PATRICK CONELAN, ESQUIRE, M.P.  
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- (<sup>1</sup>) Resigned 6th June, 1947.  
(<sup>2</sup>) Appointed 6th June, 1947.  
(<sup>3</sup>) Ceased to be a member of the Senate, 30th June, 1947.  
(<sup>4</sup>) Appointed 24th October, 1947.

EXTRACT FROM THE VOTES AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
No. 45, DATED 19TH NOVEMBER, 1948.

3. PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE—REFERENCE OF WORK—SCHOOL AT ALICE SPRINGS.—Mr. Lemmon (Minister for Works and Housing) moved, pursuant to notice, That, in accordance with the provisions of the *Commonwealth Public Works Committee Act 1913-1947*, the following proposed work be referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works for investigation and report, namely :—Erection of a new school at Alice Springs, Northern Territory.

Mr. Lemmon having laid on the Table plans in connexion with the proposed work—  
Question—put and passed.

## CONTENTS.

### SECTION I.

#### INTRODUCTION.

|                             | Paragraph<br>in Report. |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Administration .. .. .      | 1                       |
| Existing Provisions .. .. . | 2                       |

### SECTION II.

#### THE PRESENT PROPOSAL.

|                         |    |
|-------------------------|----|
| General .. .. .         | 4  |
| The Site .. .. .        | 5  |
| The Building .. .. .    | 6  |
| Future Planning .. .. . | 9  |
| Estimated Cost .. .. .  | 10 |

### SECTION III.

#### THE COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATIONS.

|                                 |    |
|---------------------------------|----|
| General .. .. .                 | 13 |
| Total School Population .. .. . | 14 |
| The Building Proposed .. .. .   | 17 |
| Ground Floor .. .. .            | 19 |
| First Floor .. .. .             | 20 |
| Site .. .. .                    | 21 |
| Construction .. .. .            | 24 |
| Estimated Cost .. .. .          | 29 |
| Need for the School .. .. .     | 31 |
| Future Proposals .. .. .        | 34 |
| Accommodation Hostels .. .. .   | 38 |
| The Present Buildings .. .. .   | 42 |
| The Playing Area .. .. .        | 45 |
| Materials and Labour .. .. .    | 49 |
| Technical Education .. .. .     | 51 |

### SECTION IV.

#### THE COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS.

|                              |    |
|------------------------------|----|
| Summary of Decisions .. .. . | 52 |
|------------------------------|----|

## LIST OF WITNESSES.

|  | Paragraph<br>in Evidence. |
|--|---------------------------|
| Burnett, B. C. G., Architect, Alice Springs .. .. .  | 100-106                   |
| Dodd, L., Assistant Supervisor of Education and Advisory Teacher for the Northern Territory, Darwin .. .. .  | 131-132                   |
| Driver, A. R., Administrator of the Northern Territory, Darwin .. .. .   | 133                       |
| Griffiths, Rev. H., Director of the Methodist Inland Mission, Alice Springs .. .. .  | 99                        |
| Leach, W. V., Superintendent of Primary Schools, South Australia, and Supervisor of Education for the Northern Territory Schools, Adelaide .. .. .                         | 13-26                     |
| Phillips, H. W., Director of Architecture, Department of Works and Housing, Melbourne .. .. .  | 1-12                      |
| Prewett, J. R. L., Accounts Officer, Department of the Interior, Northern Territory Administration Branch, Alice Springs .. .. .   | 44-57                     |
| Rudd, K. C., Head Teacher, Alice Springs Higher Primary School .. .. .   | 82-98                     |
| Sedgley, W. J. M., President of the South Australian Chapter, Royal Institute of Architects, and City Building Surveyor, Adelaide .. .. .                                  | 27-43                     |
| Smith, D. D., Divisional Works Officer, Department of Works and Housing, Alice Springs .. .. .   | 125-130                   |
| Warton, E. W., Assistant Surveyor, Lands and Surveys Branch, Northern Territory Administration, Alice Springs, and Secretary of the Alice Springs School Committee .. .. . | 58-81<br>and 107-124      |

# THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS.

## ALICE SPRINGS SCHOOL.

### 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 new school at Alice Springs, Northern Territory, has the honour to report as follows :—

#### SECTION I.

##### INTRODUCTION.

##### *Administration.*

1. In 1944 the Prime Minister wrote to the South Australian Premier suggesting that the South Australian Education Department might control the Northern Territory schools. The Superintendent of Primary Schools went to Canberra and conferred with the Minister for the Interior, and an agreement was reached whereby South Australia supplies teachers and determines the curricula, and the Commonwealth, on the recommendation of the Supervisor, provides schools, furniture and equipment.

##### *Existing Provisions.*

2. At the present time there is a school at Alice Springs, and overcrowded conditions have been endured for a considerable time. Temporary buildings and rented accommodation outside the existing school are being used for class-room purposes, and temporary arrangements which have been made for the instruction of chemistry and physics fall far short of the required standards.

3. The present buildings have been condemned by medical authorities as unsuitably planned for school use and completely inadequate for the numbers of pupils being crowded into them, while the inadequate playground is also the source of discomfort and sickness.

#### SECTION II.

##### THE PRESENT PROPOSAL.

##### *General.*

4. The present proposal emanated from a request to alleviate the overcrowded conditions by making suitable additions to the existing school. It was realized, however, that the area around the present school was quite inadequate for the purpose, and the proposal to erect a new school on a more suitable site was considered. A plan has accordingly been developed for an initial school block on a new site, for the secondary school section, and also allow for considerable additions envisaged for the future.

##### *The Site.*

5. The site, which is approximately triangular, occupies a position at the northern end of the town, being bounded on the south by Willis-terrace, and on the east by the Todd River, while the western boundary skirts the foot of Anzac Hill. It provides a suitable building area on the higher ground with a generous area between the main block and Willis-terrace for use as a sports oval and playing field.

##### *The Building.*

6. The building proposed envisages a complete establishment for the future, but at present consists of the first stage which will allow for additions required in a few years' time. The plans show a main class room block two stories high, and an ancillary block one story high containing woodworking room and other facilities.

7. The accommodation provides for an overall area of 20,228 square feet in this stage, and included in this area will be four class rooms, science room, library, domestic science room, woodwork room, general purpose room, staff rooms, and various services designed to provide for the local conditions. The section being considered would house the secondary school and would accommodate 120 pupils.

8. The building will be constructed with reinforced concrete frame with infill panels of cement bricks. The northern and southern walls of class rooms will consist of adjustable glass louvres in suitable frames to ensure maximum light and cross ventilation. The roof will be formed of timber trusses covered with corrugated asbestos cement sheets.

*Future Planning.*

9. Ultimately it is proposed to incorporate an Infants' Block and a Primary School Section to connect up with the western end of the building, as well as an Assembly Hall adjacent to the Administrative Section. The perspective submitted to the Committee gives an idea of the buildings envisaged in the complete programme, but no plans were included in respect of the Infants' Block, the Primary School, or the Assembly Hall.

*Estimated Cost.*

10. The cost of the proposed building shown in the plans submitted to the Committee was set down as £78,024, calculated on the basis of building costs in September, 1948, and details were summarized as follows :—

|  |        |
|--|--------|
|  | £      |
| Buildings .. .. .  | 56,397 |
| Engineering Services, including—   |        |
| (a) Site preparation   |        |
| (b) Roads and paths, including kerbing, guttering and surfacing                        |        |
| (c) Electrical installation plus essential provision for future extension              |        |
| (d) Fire protection including supply hydrants, hoses and extinguishers                 |        |
| (e) Sewerage and stormwater drainage   |        |
| (f) Mechanical Services—Ventilation and duct work, cooking and laundry equipment .. .. | 8,086  |
| Contingencies .. .. .  | 6,448  |
| Add 10 per cent. to cover probable increase in costs ..                                | 7,093  |
|  | <hr/>  |
| Total estimated cost .. .. .   | 78,024 |

11. The item in respect of site preparation includes site work for the whole of the ultimate project, as it is more economical to execute all earth moving operations at one time while the mechanical equipment is on the job.

12. No definite estimate was given for the time for completion of the building planned, owing to the difficult situation at Alice Springs regarding supply of labour and materials.

## SECTION III.

## THE COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATIONS.

*General.*

13. The Committee studied the plans of the proposed building and took evidence from departmental officials responsible for planning the project. While the Committee was *en route* to Darwin, in connexion with other projected works, opportunity was taken to spend some time at Alice Springs, where the Members visited the site for the new school, inspected the present establishment, and took evidence from various officials and persons in the locality who are interested in the provision and maintenance of school facilities in that area.

*Total School Population.*

14. In planning the proposed building the total school population of Alice Springs, as at 1st July, 1947, was taken as 348, composed of 238 boys and girls in the existing school buildings and 110 attending the Alice Springs Convent School, and it was anticipated that the enrolment at the existing school would exceed 300 in 1948. A report issued by the Chief Medical Officer on 27th April, 1949, showed that the number of pupils at this school had risen to 340, confirming the trend which was anticipated when the plans were first being prepared.

15. Study of this trend in increased school attendances, as well as consideration of the increasing birth rate in Alice Springs is causing considerable concern to some of the officials and other witnesses, who estimate that, on a conservative basis, the number of children attending the school in five years' time will be 600. If this proves to be the case the first stage of construction now proposed will be entirely inadequate even before it is commenced.

16. The Committee made inquiries from various sources regarding the possibility of increased population in Alice Springs in the near future. Alice Springs is a progressive town with a population of over 4,000 at 30th June, 1947, approximately half the total population being composed of white people. The town is the rail head for a considerable trade in cattle

being sent south, and is the centre of a rich section of the extensive cattle-raising country. Statistics show that the population is increasing, and the estimate of 600 children likely to need school accommodation in five years' time seems reasonable.

### *The Building Proposed.*

17. The plans to provide for the secondary school present a long two-story block, with a single story block joined to the eastern end of it at an angle which will make use of the ground contours and the shape of the site bounded by the Todd River.

18. The administrative section of the school is conveniently located at what will be the centre of the ultimate project. It has been planned to form the nucleus of the ultimate requirement when the Infants' and Primary Sections are added to the western end of the building.

19. *Ground Floor.*—In the Main Block the Ground Floor contains the Administrative Section (Head Master's Office, General Office, Staff Rooms, &c.), Main Entrance Lobby, Domestic Science Rooms, and a large General Purpose Room, intended to be used as an assembly hall until the complete plan for the school makes provision for a permanent Assembly Hall. The rooms forming the single story block include a woodwork room, bicycle store, sports store, and boys' and girls' toilet blocks.

20. *First Floor.*—The First Floor consists of four class rooms, large science laboratory, laboratory store and balance room, library and library store and a medical inspection room. All class rooms have a southern aspect with a wide, open corridor on the northern side.

### *Site.*

21. The Committee visited the site for the proposed school and considered its location in reference to the distance from the present school as well as from the centre of the town. Being at the foot of Anzac Hill, the site is approximately half a mile from the existing school and is at the extreme northern end of the town. However, it was stated that extension of the town to the northward was anticipated in the near future and the area chosen offers sufficient ground for the complete programme of buildings as well as for the school sporting activities.

22. Although the site is on rising ground the position selected for the buildings is only a few feet above the level of the Todd River shown on the plans. Inquiry into this point showed that there is no likelihood of flooding from the river, owing to the fact that the ground slopes away to lower levels at the other end of the town. It was also pointed out that the Todd River is completely dry for most periods of the year, and floods have not been known to reach this position.

23. At the outset it appears that there was some opposition to the site, on the ground that it would interfere with facilities available for the public, but it is understood that a site for an alternative public playing area has been set aside, and there is general satisfaction with the selection of this site for the school. The Committee is therefore satisfied that the site chosen for the school buildings is the most suitable for the purpose.

### *Construction.*

24. The building will be reinforced concrete frame with infill panels of cement bricks. External walls will be 11-in. cavity walls, bagged down externally and painted. Internal walls will be 4½ inches thick cement brick construction.

25. The roof will be framed up with timber trusses and covered with corrugated asbestos cement sheets, and a continuous ventilating ridge will be provided over all class rooms. Floors of class rooms, Administrative rooms, &c., will be covered with coloured bitumastic felt to provide a resilient, comfortable wearing surface, and the remainder of the floors will be finished in granolithic.

26. The southern walls of class rooms will consist of adjustable glass louvres in suitable frames; the northern walls will be similarly treated to ensure maximum natural light and cross ventilation. End walls of class rooms will have blackboard full width of the room to door head height, and below the chalk rail built-in cupboards will be provided for storage of stationery and equipment.

27. Ceilings to class rooms, science rooms, &c., will be covered with perforated acoustic tiles, and other ceilings will be plastered. On top of all ceilings, in roof space, a layer of 2-in. insulating wool will be laid as heat insulating material.

28. The ventilation system will consist of the necessary duct work and propeller type exhaust fans only. The domestic science section of the school will be equipped with electrical cooking appliances and fully automatic type laundry equipment.

### *Estimated Cost.*

29. The estimated cost of the building was stated to be subject to variation due to changing circumstances governing costs in the building industry, but were calculated in September, 1948, to total £78,024.

30. The Committee notes that, in addition to the 10 per cent. contingencies item, an additional 10 per cent. has been added to cover probable increase in costs. It is known that increases have already taken place in building costs since the date given for these calculations, and it is probable that the proportion of contingencies usually included in the normal contingencies item for fluctuations in cost will have been exceeded. It appears reasonable, therefore, for an additional amount to be added to provide for future increases. However, as it is by no means certain, from consideration of world trading operations, that prices will continue to rise rapidly, special attention should be given to these costs to ensure that due regard is paid to economy as the work proceeds.

### *Need for the School.*

31. On their inspection of the school buildings at present in use the Members of the Committee could not fail to be impressed with the badly overcrowded conditions under which the pupils and teachers have to work. Scholars sitting three in a desk, in rooms where the desks occupied the whole floor to within a few feet of the blackboard, demonstrated clearly the discomfort and inconvenience with which they are being hampered, and it was realized that troubles would be greatly increased when the change of seasons added hot weather conditions to the trying surroundings under which they were working when the Committee visited the school.

32. In addition to its inspection of the school the Committee considered a good deal of evidence from the Supervisor of Education for Northern Territory Schools, the Headmaster of the Alice Springs School, the Secretary of the Alice Springs School Committee, various departmental officials and other persons who are constantly in touch with the activities of the school. In every case it was emphasized that the conditions under which the school is conducted at present make it most urgent for some relief to be provided immediately.

33. The Committee is therefore of the opinion that urgent steps should be taken to proceed with the erection of new premises for the school.

### *Future Proposals.*

34. It was represented to the Committee in the first instance that the first stage comprising the secondary block, for which the plans provide, would be required as a matter of urgency; the second stage, comprising the Primary and Infants' Block, would be required for occupation in four years' time; and the third stage, providing for the Assembly Hall, would be necessary in ten years' time.

35. Knowledge of this programme caused a great deal of concern amongst those intimately connected with the school, as they regard the plans for the first stage as inadequate even if erected at once. It was strongly advocated that the whole programme should be pushed ahead at one time, and that at least the first and second stages were urgently required.

36. It was admitted that, as a secondary school, the proposals put forward were adequate and provided accommodation for all the secondary pupils likely to be coming forward for some time. Architecturally the plans were also regarded as complete for such a purpose, for they provide all the facilities desirable in a modern secondary school in that locality. It was suggested in some quarters that the plans might even be regarded, in comparison with many existing schools, as palatial. However, the numbers already using the present school, and consideration of the number of prospective pupils carefully estimated as a factor to be faced in the near future, make it essential to provide, not only for the secondary school, but also for a large number of pupils in the lower grades immediately.

37. Apart from the statistics of birth rate other evidence indicated that the school population was likely to increase substantially at an early date.

### *Accommodation Hostels.*

38. A positive indication of the likelihood of immediate growth of the school population was given in evidence concerning the provision being made for accommodating in hostels in Alice Springs the children who come from outlying districts to the Alice Springs schools. One hostel, at present catering for 52 children with a waiting list of 20, also has a new site upon which it is proposed to build another hostel for 100 children.

39. It was stressed that Alice Springs has become an important educational centre, with children coming from three States and the Northern Territory. It was also pointed out that between Quorn and Darwin, a distance of 1,750 miles, the Alice Springs school is the only one capable of giving children an education beyond primary standard, and it is the only town in that vast area where provision is made for the accommodation of children who must live away from their homes in order to attend school.

40. The Committee was informed, in evidence, that at Alice Springs there are over 90 boarders who come from distant places, such as Newcastle Waters. They board in hostels which are supervised by various denominations, and are granted on allowance of £30 per annum, which covers half the cost of the hostel charges. There is a special hostel for half-castes where the aim is to assimilate them into the ordinary school. The full-bloods do not go to the ordinary school but are looked after in a separate school.

41. Expanding air services are making it easier to send children to Alice Springs for their education, and a recent survey touching cattle stations from Wyndham to Derby showed a widespread desire to send more children to the hostels as soon as accommodation could be arranged for them. The Committee was impressed with the enthusiasm of those in charge and with the good work being done by these hostels, and it is evident that they will be a factor contributing to the rapid growth in the number of pupils to be taught in Alice Springs schools in the near future.

#### *The Present Buildings.*

42. Apart from the necessity of the school from the point of view of numbers demanding accommodation, the state of the present buildings is a most important factor. The main school consists of four rooms plus an enclosed verandah, which has a low ceiling and gets the full range of the sun, making it most uncomfortable in hot weather. Also in the school grounds are a Sidney Williams hut, and another temporary building used as a science laboratory. In addition two rooms are rented from the Methodist Inland Mission and the Australian Inland Mission.

43. Of all this accommodation available the Sidney Williams hut is good temporary accommodation, one of the rooms in the main school used for the infants is good though crowded and lacking in furniture, and one of the rented rooms is good and serviceable but is some distance from the school. The other rooms are too small, ill-lit, gloomy and badly ventilated. The toilet and lavatory facilities are unsatisfactory, and the whole school is badly overcrowded. These defects and many others were emphasized in copies of medical reports recently made and produced to the Committee.

44. The Committee therefore recommends that, as some time has already elapsed since the population estimates, upon which the plans were drawn, were made, and the time when the complete school will be necessary is fast approaching, efforts should be made to secure a tender for the whole project. This might be done in such a way that a contractor could be assured of the complete programme of buildings on which he could work consecutively, completing each of the three stages in turn.

#### *The Playing Area.*

45. The attendances at the school show a marked deficiency attributable to sickness, and, after making allowances for the usual maladies met with in school work, a considerable amount of sickness is attributed to the state of the playground. Many of the children, and also the teachers, are affected with trouble to the eyes and upper respiratory tract, with consequent absences from school and serious effects on the standard of the work. The total area of the playground was stated to be three-quarters of an acre, with a loose sand surface, and dust from it is churned up and carried into the school. As a result of preventive measures, such as drops for the children's eyes, a certain amount of success has been achieved in alleviating the eye trouble.

46. In 1947 a strongly worded report was tendered by the Health Officer to the Chief Medical Officer at Darwin, and, in April, 1949, the Government Medical Officer made a further report following his inspection of the school. Included in his report the Medical Officer said that the scholars numbered 340 at that date, but 60 were absent due to sickness. In his opinion the school yard is unhygienic and a source of infection; it is simply an area of sand, dirt and dust, and is quite unsuitable as a playground; and the position is now one of extreme urgency from a health point of view.

47. He also reported that the rooms are poorly lit, badly ventilated and quite inadequate for the accommodation of the number of children allocated to the respective rooms. In many instances three children occupy one desk, and, in the Infants' Section, owing to insufficient furniture, many of the children sit on the floor. The sanitation is absolutely inadequate for the number of children attending the school, and there has been a marked increase in sickness during the past twelve months. He regarded it as scandalous that such a state of affairs had been allowed to develop, particularly in view of the nature of previous reports on the matter.

48. The Committee feels that, without waiting for the new school to be erected, something should be done immediately to alleviate the conditions at the school, and it recommends that suitable action be taken to cover the playing area with appropriate material to prevent the existing dust menace. It also recommends that, as it will be some time before work can actually start on the new buildings, action should be taken at once to improve the sanitary arrangements and all other defects wherever it is possible to do so.

#### *Materials and Labour.*

49. Consideration was given to the question of the availability of materials and labour, and evidence shows that many of the items normally required for such buildings and for housing are in short supply. However, the position will be considerably relieved in this case, as provision has been made for the walls to be made of cement bricks which will be made on the spot. It has been possible to avoid the use of steel for the roof by planning for the roof to be framed up with timber trusses, and wherever possible items in short supply have been replaced by alternative materials.

50. Although labour is normally very scarce in Alice Springs the Committee was informed that some buildings are now in progress, and certain firms of builders and architects in Adelaide are prepared to arrange to carry out the work, if a considerable programme can be settled to make it worth while setting up the necessary organization in Alice Springs. The Committee therefore considers it advisable to push ahead with the final planning of the school programme so that advantage may be taken of the presence in Alice Springs of the technical and other labour required for the work.

#### *Technical Education.*

51. During the course of the Committee's inquiries it became apparent that, in the Northern Territory, there is a great demand for skilled labour of a type which is very difficult to obtain. It also appears that training in saddlery and other various essentials for farm and station work is not available in that locality. The plans for the new school provide a woodwork room and domestic science rooms, and some mention was made of the possibility of technical training in the future. However, the Committee is of opinion that a very useful and effective addition to the training of pupils in the Northern Territory could be made by including, as soon as possible, special courses of technical training to provide skilled labour required there. If suitable instruction is given to them the large percentage of coloured children attending the schools can be made to play a valuable part in the growing importance of the country.

### SECTION IV.

#### THE COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS.

52. After consideration of the evidence the Committee arrived at the following conclusions :—

|   | Paragraph<br>in Report. |
|---|-------------------------|
| (1) New school premises are urgently required at Alice Springs ..   | 33                      |
| (2) The site chosen is suitable for the purpose .. ..   | 23                      |
| (3) Tenders should be invited for the whole project so that the contractor<br>may work consecutively on each of the three stages in turn .. | 44                      |
| (4) Planning should be expedited to make use of the labour offering ..  | 50                      |
| (5) Special attention should be given to estimated contingency items as<br>the work proceeds .. ..  | 30                      |
| (6) Immediate action should be taken to cover the existing playing area<br>and to improve sanitary and other arrangements .. ..             | 48                      |
| (7) Special technical training facilities should be included in the planning  | 51                      |

CHARLES A. LAMP,  
Chairman.

The Office of the Parliamentary Standing  
Committee on Public Works,  
Parliament House,  
Canberra, A.C.T.

7th July, 1949.