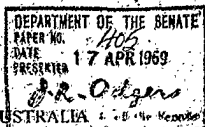


1969



THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

JOINT COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTH REPORT

COMMONWEALTH FIRE BOARD

JOINT COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

SEVENTH COMMITTEE

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	D.S. Jessop, Esquire, M.P. (4)
	E.W. Peters, Esquire, M.P.
	I.L. Robinson, Esquire, M.P.

The Senate and the House of Representatives appointed their
Members on 22nd February, 1967.

- (1) Appointed 23rd August, 1967.
- (2) Deceased 2nd August, 1967.
- (3) Resigned 26th February, 1969
- (4) Appointed 26th February, 1969

DUTIES OF THE COMMITTEE

Section 8 of the Public Accounts Committee Act 1951-1966 reads as follows :-

8. The duties of the Committee are -

- (a) to examine the accounts of the receipts and expenditure of the Commonwealth and each statement and report transmitted to the Houses of Parliament by the Auditor-General in pursuance of sub-section (1.) of section fifty-three of the Audit Act 1901-1950;
- (b) to report to both Houses of the Parliament, with such comment as it thinks fit; any items or matters in those accounts, statements and reports, or any circumstances connected with them, to which the Committee is of the opinion that the attention of the Parliament should be directed;
- (c) to report to both Houses of the Parliament any alteration which the Committee thinks desirable in the form of the public accounts or in the method of keeping them, or in the mode of receipt, control, issue or payment of public moneys; and
- (d) to inquire into any question in connexion with the public accounts which is referred to it by either House of the Parliament, and to report to that House upon that question,

and include such other duties as are assigned to the Committee by Joint Standing Orders approved by both Houses of the Parliament.

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JOINT COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

One Hundred and Sixth Report

The Commonwealth Fire Board

Chapter 1.

Introduction

In its One Hundred and Fifth Report, which related to the Report of the Auditor-General for 1967-68, Your Committee reported on the fire that occurred at the Royal Australian Naval Air Station at Nowra on 25 December, 1967. As a result of that fire, valuable equipment that had been acquired in the United States of America for the training of Tracker Aircraft Crews was extensively damaged. During the course of its inquiry into this matter Your Committee had occasion to examine the Commonwealth Fire Board in conjunction with its examination of the Department of the Navy.

2. For the purposes of that examination, public hearings were conducted at Parliament House, Canberra, on -

Tuesday, 12 November, 1968.

Tuesday, 19 November, 1968.

3. The following witnesses were sworn at the Public Inquiry and were examined by Your Committee:

Department of the Navy

Mr. M. T. Hyland - First Assistant Secretary,
Finance and Materiel.

Mr. W. H. Monk - Principal Fire Officer, Shore
Establishments, and Member,
Commonwealth Fire Board.

Department of Works

Mr. C. A. Inman - Chairman, Commonwealth Fire Board.

Mr. J. C. King - Senior Assistant Director-General,
Engineering.

4 During our Inquiry we were assisted by the following
Observers:

Mr. R. G. Parker	-	Auditor-General's Office.
Mr. G. G. Glenn	-	Public Service Board.
Mr. C. T. Monaghan	-	Department of the Treasury.

Chapter 2.

The Insurance of Commonwealth Property

5. Commonwealth policy in relation to the insurance of Commonwealth property is laid down in Treasury Directions 7/1 and 7/2. Those Directions state that to the greatest extent possible the Commonwealth acts as its own insurer for all property under its control and accepts insurable risks as early as possible in the production of property to be purchased by it. In accepting insurable risks on behalf of the Commonwealth, Departments are required to ensure that:

- (a) there is a saving to the Commonwealth by accepting the risks and avoiding the cost of premiums which would otherwise be payable directly or indirectly from Commonwealth funds;
- (b) the property is under effective Commonwealth control and all safeguards are exercised against occurrence of risks for which the Commonwealth is acting as insurer;
- (c) there is a clear line of demarcation between property for which the Commonwealth accepts the risks and property for which it does not, i.e., should a loss occur, there would be no doubt about the identification of the property after the loss as **having** been property on which the Commonwealth had specifically accepted insurable risks;
- (d) if the Commonwealth does not effect a saving in a contract price by acting as its own insurer, a contractor shall not be relieved of responsibility for Commonwealth-owned property or property being manufactured for the Commonwealth; and
- (e) the Commonwealth is not placed in a position of relieving the contractor's insurers of claims

through destroyed property owned by the contractor
being represented as Commonwealth property.

6. We were informed by the Treasury Observer, Qs. 401
Mr. Monaghan, that this policy had been laid down in 1909. to 404
He stated that studies that had been made had shown that the
Commonwealth gains overall by carrying its own insurance risks.

Chapter 3

The History of the Board

7. A Commonwealth Fire Board was first constituted in January 1909 by the Minister for Home Affairs, following a Cabinet direction that Commonwealth buildings were not to be insured. The Board, which was a part-time body, comprised a consultant and officers of the several Commonwealth Departments. At the time of its establishment the Commonwealth Fire Board was not envisaged as a permanent body but on 30 October 1919, its establishment on a permanent basis was given Ministerial approval. The duties of that Board were:

Commonwealth
Fire Board
Report,
1959-60, and
Qs. 994 to 996.

- To collect detailed information pertaining to fire protection of Commonwealth buildings and works.
- To obtain the advice of a Fire Brigade expert and to formulate a general scheme upon which the necessity for providing for fire fighting appliances in each building might be considered.
- To frame instructions for the guidance of officers in charge of appliances and submit a report to the Minister.

8. Because of a large reduction in Commonwealth building activity, the Board was disbanded in 1930.

9. We were informed that in 1941 the Department of Defence Co-ordination proposed the re-establishment of the Commonwealth Fire Board but due to wartime problems this proposal did not become effective. In 1945 the Business Board (Defence Division) of the Department of the Treasury proposed that the Commonwealth Fire Board should be re-established. Effect was given to this recommendation on 3 October 1946 when the Minister for Works and Housing approved the reconstitution of the Board on the basis of a central authority - the Commonwealth Fire Board - to be established to supervise requirements of the Commonwealth in regard to fire fighting principles and appliances and to ensure uniform application of approved methods throughout Commonwealth departments.

Commonwealth
Fire Board
Report 1959-60
and Q. 998

10. The new Fire Board was to comprise the following members:

- Chairman - a senior technical officer of the Department of Works and Housing.
- The Chief Officer of the Melbourne Fire Brigade.
- A representative of the Service Departments.
- A representative of the non-Service Departments, and
- A representative of the client Department for specified Works Projects under review, to be co-opted as necessary.

Commonwealth
Fire Board
Report, 1959-60

It was also envisaged that arrangements would be made for each State Branch of the Department of Works and Housing to arrange consultations, where necessary, between a senior engineering officer and representatives of the State Fire Brigade, State Water Supply Authority and client Department. Reports of such consultations, when necessary, were to be submitted to the Commonwealth Fire Board for review.

Chapter 4.

The Functions of the Board

11. The first Report of the newly-constituted Board, issued in 1959-60, stated that the Board is an advisory body which makes recommendations but does not issue directions. The advice given by the Board is related mainly to:

- . The planning and construction of buildings to minimise the occurrence and spread of fire and to protect life.
- . The type and scale of provision of alarm and extinguishing equipment.
- . The promulgation of recommended practices aimed at discouraging hazardous procedures which could endanger life and property by fire.
- . Securing uniformity of practice and standardisation of fire equipment in Commonwealth Departments.

12. We were informed by the Department of Works witness that when the Fire Board was re-established it gave early consideration to the manner in which it should deal with its functions. The amount of work involved was assessed to be so great that the Board decided that it would need to rely to a large extent on available experts. It requested the Department of Works to arrange for discussions with local fire authorities and, if necessary, with local water supply authorities and others to determine what fire precautions and fire fighting equipment should be provided in all Commonwealth buildings. It relied, therefore, to a large extent on delegation of its work. The Board has taken the view that it would offer advice if it was requested to do so. Its advice has been sought in respect of specific projects and it has given advice in such circumstances. It was stated that the Board seeks to secure uniformity of practice and standardisation of fire equipment in Commonwealth Departments, mainly by the issue of circulars containing recommendations.

Qs. 1001,
1004, 1005
and 1020.

13. It was stated that the Department of Works has a responsibility for the maintenance of Commonwealth property. Each Branch of that Department has a fire protection officer who makes Adequacy and Effectiveness Surveys. In these circumstances we questioned the witnesses regarding the nature of these surveys and their relationship to the work of the Fire Board. Q. 1057

14. We were informed that the Department of Works desires to conduct these surveys at two-year intervals but the frequency varies. The nature of the surveys depends to some extent on the assessment of the nature of the buildings and the activities engaged in at the particular Commonwealth establishments. The inspections result in reports which are sent to the authority that occupies the establishment. The Department of Works provides estimates for the work that is recommended by its fire protection officer and it is then a matter for the authority concerned to decide the extent of this work that should be undertaken. The Adequacy and Effectiveness Survey Reports, however, are not forwarded to the Fire Board in normal circumstances. Qs. 934 to 937, and 1058
The Chairman of the Fire Board confirmed that, in fact, very few of the survey reports have been examined by the Fire Board, and that it is a matter for the Department of Works to decide whether or not to refer such reports to the Board. It was claimed that the Fire Board cannot associate itself with all of the detailed work necessary in fire protection. Such an involvement would require a considerable increase in the Board's work load. In practice the Fire Board leaves many fire protection matters for arrangement or discussion between the Departments and the expert fire protection officers and the fire brigades.

15. We also questioned the Chairman of the Fire Board specifically on his understanding of the functions and purposes of the Board. We were informed that the function of the Board is to recommend construction materials and

building design so that the occurrence or spread of fire is thereby minimised. Bound up with that is an endeavour to ensure that exit arrangements are ample so that in the event of fire there will not be risk to the occupants of buildings. The Fire Board issues recommendations dealing with such matters as the avoidance of hazardous practices and the avoidance of the accumulation of combustible materials which would aid the spread of fires. It also discourages the placing of articles of furniture or other equipment in exit routes which would affect the efficiency of the original good planning of a building. He informed us that the Board also recommends, in the case of major buildings, the type and extent of fire detection and fire extinguishing equipment to be installed in Commonwealth buildings, or any other buildings on request. He added that the safety of life is the primary concern of the Fire Board.

Qs. 1070
and 1071

16. We were informed that in 1965 the Department of Works had recommended that the Fire Board should visit all States, as it was thought to be desirable for the Board to establish better liaison with State fire fighting authorities and to carry out inspections of Commonwealth buildings in all States. It was also thought that these visits would help to interest the various Departments in the activities of the Board. The first visit was made in December 1965 and visits have continued at intervals of about four months. As at November 1968, Sydney, Canberra, Adelaide and Perth had each been visited on two occasions, and Darwin, Alice Springs and Brisbane once.

Exhibit 106/5
and Qs. 1011
and 1194

17. Before making a visit, the Board asks the Director of Works in the State or Territory to suggest buildings and works which it might inspect. It may itself nominate some buildings or works in which it is interested. Its inspections are made from the point of view of fire protection. It was said that although, due to limited time, the inspections are not as exhaustive as the routine Adequacy

and Effectiveness Surveys conducted by the Department of Works, many undesirable features have been noted.

18. We were informed that the Fire Board prepares reports on its inspections and these are forwarded to the Director of Works in the State or Territory concerned and, as appropriate, to Departments occupying the inspected buildings. Copies of the reports, however, are not normally forwarded to the Department of the Interior, notwithstanding that Department's responsibilities in relation to Commonwealth property.

Exhibit 106/5

and Q. 1195

19. It was stated that during the visits the Fire Board usually formally meets the Chief of the local Fire Brigade and senior officers of the Department of Works in the area and discusses matters relevant to fire protection. During its inspections it is accompanied by a representative of the occupying Department or Authority and a fire protection officer or other representative of the branch of the Department of Works. It was also said that the Board may peruse plans being prepared for new buildings and check that proposed fire precautions are satisfactory. In regard to the perusal of plans during an interstate visit, we were informed by the Chairman of the Fire Board that if there is a building proposed for which the plans are available, and time permits, the plans would be examined. He emphasised that in this regard the time element is important. He added, however, that the Board would not always have an opportunity to peruse plans for a proposed Commonwealth building because it would not necessarily be aware of the proposal to erect the building. He considered that it might be desirable for the Board to have such an opportunity but that this would involve an expansion in the staff of the Fire Board and would add to its costs. In regard to this matter the Department of Works witness informed us that there is an arrangement whereby plans of new buildings must be considered by the Department's own fire protection

Exhibit 106/5

and Qs. 1195
to 1205.

officers. In the case of major but not of minor buildings, they take the plans to the local fire brigade which has the responsibility of fighting a fire and may have to administer regulations in connection with new buildings for the area. He added that the Fire Board's inspection of plans for proposed buildings arises for two reasons - first, that the building has some special feature or is specially large and the Department of Works therefore decides to refer it to the Fire Board. The second reason is that from time to time checks are made on the effectiveness with which the Department of Works is safeguarding the aspects in which the Fire Board is interested.

20. The Department of Works witness stated that no formal certificate is issued either by a local fire brigade or by the Fire Board to show that they have seen and approved the plans for a building. He did not consider that such a certificate ought to be issued and explained that a record is kept of discussions that occur with these bodies. In the case of a reference to the Fire Board, the Board makes a formal report to the Department or Authority that submits plans. Then the Department of Works submits plans to a fire brigade, a note relating to any particular requirements set down by the fire brigade or by the Department of Works fire protection officer is given to the architects who are designing the building. Qs. 1205 to 1210

21. As part of its submission the Department of Works tendered details of the visits made by the Fire Board since 1965. Three of those visits in particular attracted our attention. In March 1966 the Board visited Sydney where it inspected several buildings, including the ABC Television studios. Then we asked the Chairman of the Fire Board to inform us of the Board's findings on those studios he stated that verbal comments had been made to the ABC officer who accompanied the Board on its inspection. He added that as the ABC is not a Commonwealth Department it had been Exhibit 106/3 and Q.1220

considered questionable whether the Fire Board had any right to make formal recommendations in that instance. In August 1966 the Fire Board visited Canberra and inspected the Administrative Building, the Canberra Community Hospital, the Secretariat Building and the offices of the Bureau of Mineral Resources. The Board also discussed with a member of the National Capital Development Commission certain fire protection matters and some undesirable features that had been noticed in the buildings that had been inspected. In March 1968 the Fire Board returned to Canberra and inspected Russell Offices Building No.9 and the National Library Building, which were under construction at that time. It also inspected the Government Printing Office. During this visit, however, no attempt was made by the Board to re-inspect the undesirable features that had been discovered during the inspections made in 1966. While the Chairman of the Fire Board agreed that there would be merit in follow-up inspections by the Board of buildings where undesirable features had been discovered, he expressed the view that it is more important to inspect entirely different buildings on a subsequent visit to an area than to make re-inspections. In this context he emphasised that the Fire Board has no statutory authority to require action to be taken following its advice. If the Fire Board's recommendations have not been followed, the responsibility rests with the Departments and Authorities to whom the recommendations were given.

Qs. 1224
to 1226
and 1087

22. As the Fire Board has been engaged over a period of some three years in interstate inspections, we questioned the witnesses in regard to the formulation of Fire Board estimates, particularly in relation to travel. We were informed that the Director of Finance of the Department of Works who is responsible for the preparation of the Department's estimates of expenditure, had not at any time sought from the Chairman of the Fire Board a proposed programme of travel for the Board as the basis for the formulation of an estimate.

Qs. 1227
to 1239

Chapter 5.

Departmental Fire Reports.

23. We were informed that in 1957 the Fire Board had held discussions with the Department of the Treasury dealing with the reporting of fires, as it considered that it should be informed of all fires that occur in departmental premises. Following these discussions the Department of the Treasury had issued a circular which was incorporated later in Treasury Direction 33/11. That Direction states that in addition to reports required by Directions 33/1 to 33/9, Departments shall report the occurrence of fires on Commonwealth property to the Commonwealth Fire Board, Department of Works, Melbourne. The report shall include:

Q.962

- (a) date and time of fire;
- (b) location of property;
- (c) description of property:
 - (i) owner ;
 - (ii) occupying Department ;
 - (iii) construction ;
 - (iv) contents ;
 - (v) usage ;
- (d) fire damage:
 - (i) particulars ;
 - (ii) estimated value of damage to building and contents ;
- (e) method of extinguishing fire ;
- (f) cause of fire;
- (g) fire protection and fire fighting equipment installed ; and
- (h) comments (particularly as to the effectiveness of items under (g) and whether automatic equipment operated.

24. It was stated that the manner in which the information required should be submitted to the Fire Board has been left to the discretion of each Department. Departments may, if they so desire, compile a form or merely provide the information in a letter. In support of this

approach, the witness **representing** the Department of Works informed us that some reports are made out by technical officers who are well versed in fire matters while others are compiled by *administrative officers* without technical knowledge. The Fire Board had felt reluctant to seek a great deal of information initially from Departments. Its attitude is that it should obtain some information **quickly** after a fire has occurred and seek further information at a later stage should it so desire.

Qs. 962
to 964

25. The evidence shows that all departmental reports relating to fires are referred to the Chairman of the Fire Board who, after examination, decides whether or not they should be submitted to other Fire Board members. He also decides whether any further action, such as the obtaining of additional information on the circumstances of a fire, should be obtained from the Department concerned. In explanation of this procedure it was stated that the Fire Board is concerned with the principles of fire protection and with the adequacy and effectiveness of fire precautions, **fire detection and** extinguishing equipment. It is particularly interested in the lessons that can be learnt from patterns or trends that are revealed in departmental reports. The details of a particular fire, however, are usually found to be of less importance to the Board than the trends that are observed from a number of fires. Those factors, and the large number of fires that occur each year, were said to be the reasons for the Fire Board not considering each individual fire report.

Q. 973

26. At our request the Department of the Navy submitted a copy of the report relating to the fire at HMS Albatross, *Howe*, that it had submitted to the Fire Board in conformity with Treasury Direction 33/11. The Department also submitted a copy of the Fire Board's acknowledgment of the report.

Exhibit 106/1

27. The Department of the Navy report, undated, indicated, inter alia, that building No.200, a training hut, at HMS Albatross had been severely damaged by fire on 25 December, 1967, and that a computer trainer had also been severely damaged. The estimated value of damage to the building and its contents was undeclared. The cause of the fire was said to have been an electric urn. The report stated that a Board of Inquiry into the fire had been convened.

28. On 22 January, 1968, the Chairman of the Fire Board acknowledged the report submitted by the Department of the Navy and advised the Department that it would be notified if any further action was contemplated. The witness representing the Department of the Navy informed us that the Fire Board did not seek any further information regarding the fire, notwithstanding that the extent of the loss incurred had not been declared. He agreed, however, that in accordance with the requirements of Treasury Direction 33/11, the Department should have supplied to the Fire Board details of the value of the loss incurred when that figure became known.

Qs. 919
and 1251

29. The witness representing the Department of Works informed us that, in addition to receiving a report from the Department of the Navy, the Fire Board had obtained a report from the Department of Works' office in Sydney. In that report the district officer at Lowra had indicated that the estimated cost of replacing building No.298 was \$8,000 and that the value of damage relating to the contents of the building was unknown because the contents were classified. The Department of the Navy witness, however, informed us that although the nature of the equipment was classified the estimated value of the damage involved was not a classified matter. The value of the damage had not been declared in the Department's report to the Fire Board because it had not been assessed at the stage when that report had been submitted.

Qs.977, 1035
and 1251

30. The consequences of the failure by the Department of the Navy to disclose the value of damage incurred on the computer equipment and the failure of the Fire Board to specifically seek that information are dealt with in the following chapter, which relates to the reports of the Fire Board.

Chapter 6.

The Reports of the Fire Board

31. During the course of the inquiry we examined each of the Reports of the Fire Board for the years 1959-60 to 1967-68. Although the Fire Board had been reconstituted in 1946, no Report had been issued by the Board until 1959-60. In this regard we were informed that the decision to issue an annual report had been made by the Chairman of the Board in 1959-60 merely for the purpose of informing Commonwealth Departments generally on trends in fire occurrence and causes, for the purpose of arousing some degree of fire consciousness. The Reports of the Fire Board, however, have not been furnished to the Minister for presentation to the Parliament as, so far, there has been no procedure or requirement for this to be done. The Chairman of the Board expressed the view that as the Board has no statutory authority and is purely advisory in nature, it might be somewhat improper if portions of the Reports, which are, in a degree, critical of the administration of Commonwealth departments in this field, were to be given wide publicity.

32. In particular we examined the Report of the Fire Board for the year 1967-68, the year in which the fire had occurred at HMAS Albatross, Nowra. We were informed that the Report, which was undated, had been adopted by the Fire Board at its meeting held on 26 August, 1968. On page 7 of that Report it was stated that the largest fire loss reported during 1967-68 occurred in the Postmaster-General's Department Mail Exchange building located at the corner of Bourke and Spencer Streets, Melbourne, on 27 November, 1967. Damage was estimated at \$750,000, of which \$500,000 was building damage. However, we noted that paragraph 310 of the Report of the Auditor-General, tabled in the Parliament on 20 August, 1968, had stated that the principal losses by fire reported by Departments to the Auditor-General included an estimated \$1,602,100 which related to building and equipment at Nowra. In these circumstances we questioned the Chairman of the

Q.1091

Fire Board as to the adequacy of the Fire Board Report in the absence of this information. The Chairman of the Board, however, denied that this lack of information limited the value of the Report and pointed out that, in fact, the fire at the Melbourne Mail Exchange was the largest fire loss reported to the Fire Board in 1967-68. He added that any information received by the Board subsequent to 30 June is not included in the Report relative to the year ended on that date but is included in the Report for the following year. qs. 1103
to 1108

33. As attachments to its Report for 1967-68 the Fire Board included 8 statistical tables concerning each of the years 1963-64 to 1967-68 inclusive in respect to the following matters:

- . Number of Fires Reported.
- . Reported Value of Fire Damage.
- . Fires causing Reported Damage of \$10,000 or more.
- . Fires Started according to Time of Day.
- . Occurrence of Fires by Days of Week.
- . Fires according to Usage of Property.
- . Fire Causes.
- . Method of Extinguishment.

The Report submitted by the Department of the Navy to the Fire Board in January 1968 relative to the fire at Nowra was adequate to enable data relating to that fire to be included in each of the tables listed above, with the exception of the tables relating to the value of fire damage. Accordingly, the Fire Board incorporated into those tables only such details as were officially available to it on the Nowra fire, notwithstanding that the Chairman of the Fire Board learned in mid-August from an Australian Broadcasting Commission news release, following the tabling of the Auditor-General's Report, that the value of the fire at Nowra had amounted to \$1,602,100. The Chairman of the Fire Board indicated that the value of that loss would be included in the Fire Board's Report for 1968-69 in conformity with the Board's normal treatment of information received subsequent to 30 June each year. qs. 991
and 1104
to 1108

34. The statistical dangers inherent in the procedure of recording in the tables to the Fire Board Reports information relative to a previous year were illustrated by an examination of Appendix No.1 to the Fire Board's Report for 1967-68.

That appendix showed that the number of fires reported had increased from 301 in 1963-64 to 447 in 1964-65. We were informed by the Chairman of the Fire Board that the number of fires shown for 1964-65 included an appreciable number that had, in fact, occurred in 1963-64 but which had not been reported during that year.

Q-1185

Chapter 7.

Conclusions

35. The evidence shows that since 1909 the Commonwealth, to the greatest extent possible, has acted as its own insurer for all property under its control. Directions issued by the Department of the Treasury require departments, in accepting insurable risks on behalf of the Commonwealth, to ensure, among other things, that there is a saving to the Commonwealth by accepting the risks and avoiding the cost of premiums which would otherwise be payable directly or indirectly from Commonwealth funds. A further obligation rests on departments to ensure that any such property is under effective Commonwealth control and all safeguards, including fire protection, are exercised against the occurrence of risks for which the Commonwealth is acting as its own insurer.

36. When this policy was adopted a Fire Board was appointed, at first on a temporary basis but permanently as from 1919. From that year until 1928 the Board experienced difficulties in defining its aims and functions. However, the evidence shows that, due to a large reduction that occurred in Commonwealth building activity in 1930, the Board was abolished. Although an attempt was made in 1941 to re-establish the Board, the exigencies of the war prevented its re-establishment until 1946.

37. It appears to Your Committee that, upon establishment, the purposes of the Fire Board should have been enunciated clearly. It also appears that, as the Commonwealth had acquired property to a considerable value by 1930, the disbandment of the Fire Board in that year, on the ground that Commonwealth building activity had declined, was not justified.

38. The evidence shows that since its re-establishment in 1946, the Fire Board has relied to a large extent upon the delegation of its work, particularly to the Department of Works which has a

responsibility for the maintenance of Commonwealth property. In this capacity the Department arranges for its fire protection officers to make Adequacy and Effectiveness Surveys of Commonwealth property. We were disturbed to learn, however, that the reports arising from these surveys are not forwarded as a matter of course to the Fire Board and that, indeed, that Board has had access to very few of these survey reports. Your Committee believes that all Adequacy and Effectiveness Survey reports prepared by the Department of Works should, as a matter of course, be forwarded to the Commonwealth Fire Board.

39. Your Committee notes that, since 1965, the Fire Board has engaged in inter-State visits to improve its liaison with State fire-fighting authorities and to carry out inspections of Commonwealth buildings. Your Committee believes that, rather than rely mainly on the advice from Directors of Works in the States visited as to the inspections that should be made, the Fire Board should wholly develop its own programme of inspections, based at least in part on Adequacy and Effectiveness Reports that it has received. Its inspections should be designed to ensure that all Commonwealth property is inspected on a regular and effective basis. Your Committee envisages that such a programme would include the re-inspection, as required, of property where the Fire Board had previously discovered sub-standard fire protection features. Your Committee also believes that, while the Fire Board maintains its present form and relationship with the Department of Works, details of its proposed programme of inter-State inspections should be submitted annually to the Finance Officer of that Department to serve as the basis of a properly constituted estimate of travel for the Board.

40. While copies of reports prepared by the Fire Board are currently supplied to the Director of Works in a State visited by the Board and are also supplied to departments occupying inspected buildings, Your Committee believes that, as a matter of course, such reports should be forwarded also to the Property Branch of the Department of the Interior in the State concerned.

41. We were informed that during its inspections the Board may peruse plans being prepared for new buildings and check that the proposed fire precautions are satisfactory. We were disturbed to learn, however, that the Fire Board has not always taken the opportunity provided to peruse plans of proposed buildings. Your Committee is of the opinion that such a position is not consistent with the 1946 Charter of the Fire Board, which included the words 'to supervise requirements of the Commonwealth in regard to fire fighting principles and appliances and to ensure uniform application of approved methods throughout Commonwealth departments'.

42. Your Committee notes that the Fire Board inspected the television studios of the Australian Broadcasting Commission in Sydney in March 1966. However, as the Commission is not a Commonwealth department, the Fire Board felt reluctant to make formal recommendations regarding the studios. As the Fire Board was evidently competent to inspect the studios, Your Committee believes that it should have offered a formal report to the Commission for its guidance. However, the fact that this reluctance existed points to a strong need for the role of the Board in relation to properties occupied by Commonwealth Statutory Authorities to be clarified.

43. Treasury Direction 33/11 specifies that departments shall report the occurrence of fires on Commonwealth property to the Fire Board and itemises 8 matters that shall be included in such reports. Your Committee is disturbed by the fact that while the Chairman of the Fire Board receives all departmental reports relating to fires, these reports are made available to other members of the Board at the Chairman's discretion. Also, decisions are taken by the Chairman as to whether additional information should be sought from departments. We were informed that this procedure has been adopted because the Fire Board is concerned with the principles of fire protection and with the adequacy and effectiveness of fire precautions, fire detection, and extinguishing equipment. Your Committee believes that because of these factors and because Treasury

Direction 33/11 states that departments shall report the occurrence of fires on Commonwealth property to the Fire Board, the members of the Board itself should have access to each departmental report and should decide, corporately, on any further action that is required in each case.

44. So far as the report by the Department of the Navy relative to the fire at Nowra is concerned, it is clear that, in accordance with the requirements of Treasury Direction 33/11, the department should have furnished the Fire Board with details of the value of the loss incurred as soon as that loss had been assessed. We also believe that the Fire Board should have specifically sought that information from the Department prior to 30 June, 1968. We further believe that it would have been appropriate for the Chairman of the Fire Board, when he discovered from other sources the value of the loss incurred in the Nowra fire, to have sought confirmation of the figure involved from the Department of the Navy for inclusion in the Fire Board's report for 1967-68.

45. Your Committee's examination of the annual reports of the Fire Board shows that these reports relate each year to information reported by departments in that year rather than to the fires that occurred in that year. While the basis on which the annual reports have been compiled is stated clearly, Your Committee doubts the value of reports compiled in that manner. In one instance, for example, we discovered that the number of fires shown as having been reported during the financial year 1964-65 included an appreciable number that had, in fact, occurred in 1963-64 but which had not been reported to the Fire Board until the following year. Your Committee believes that the annual reports of the Board would serve a useful purpose if they related to the fires that occurred each year even if this involved the amendment, in a later report, of figures reported for an earlier year. We consider that where the Board finds that, at the time of preparation of its annual report, it has not received all of the statistical detail relevant to fires that occurred in that year, it should either report that the details are

not yet available or should publish such details as it has in its possession and indicate that they are subject to revision.

46. The reports of the Fire Board have not been furnished to the Minister for presentation to the Parliament. We were informed that so far, there has been no procedure or requirement for this to be done. In this regard we note that when the Fire Board was established initially, one of its duties included the obligation to report to the Minister. As the Commonwealth, to the greatest extent possible, acts as its own insurer for all property under its control, Your Committee is strongly of the opinion that the annual reports of the Fire Board which relate to a major cause of loss of Commonwealth property, should be made available through the Minister to the Parliament. Your Committee rejects the view put forward in evidence that as the Board is purely advisory in nature, it might be somewhat improper if portions of the reports, which are, in a degree, critical of the administration of Commonwealth departments, were to be given wide publicity.

47. In this Report Your Committee has made several recommendations which, on the evidence, it believes would improve greatly the effectiveness of the Fire Board in the public interest. However, we have noted that under its present arrangements the Board lacks any form of statutory authority. The absence of such authority was referred to by the Chairman of the Board in the context of the Board's incapacity to ensure that advice which it gives to departments is acted upon. In these circumstances Your Committee believes that if the need for such an advisory fire body exists, consideration should be given to the re-constitution of the Board, with clearly stated responsibilities, including that of reporting to the Minister and to the Parliament.

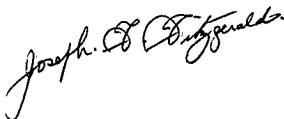
For and on behalf of the Committee,



DAVID M. REID
Secretary,
Joint Committee of Public Accounts,
Parliament House,
Canberra.....A.C.T.



RICHARD CLEAVER
Chairman.



25 March 1969