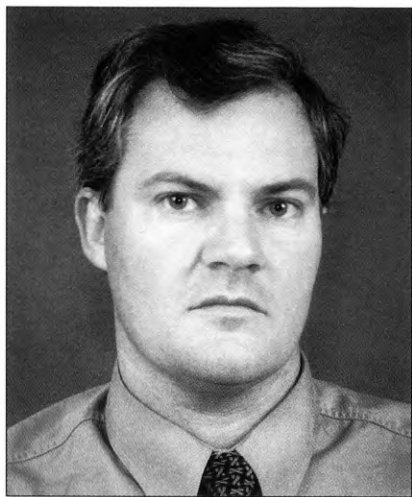


Political tension played its part in the establishment of federal policing



Federal Agent Patrick Meyers

Federal Agent Patrick Meyers from Southern Region holds a BA in politics from La Trobe University and is currently undertaking a further BA in police studies and management at Monash University. The following edited extract from his paper "The Development of Federal Policing in Australia: Queensland Government Hansard Report No 37", suggests that the decision to establish a Commonwealth police function was surrounded by political intrigue involving the Queensland Government. It discusses a scheme to defeat the conscription efforts of the Commonwealth involving the reading of anti-conscription material into the Hansard Report of the Queensland Government, and its distribution through the mail system.

The dispute faded into insignificance during WWI but the examination of this historical episode adds another dimension to the events at Warwick and perhaps brings further explanation to the beginnings of Commonwealth policing in Australia.

Not commonly attributed to the formation of the Commonwealth Police were a series of intriguing political incidents which preceded the Warwick egg incident by only a few days and were the culmination of a plan on behalf of the Queensland Government to defeat the censorship rules of the Commonwealth on the issue of conscription during WWI.

It could be argued that this was more likely than the 'Warwick egg incident' to have been the catalyst that caused Prime Minister Hughes to invoke legislation to form a Commonwealth force.

On November 27, 1917, the Queensland Government Gazette announced that Hansard No. 37 containing a report of the proceedings of the Queensland Legislative Assembly had been denied transmission through the post office by the Commonwealth Government. Commonwealth military officials had raided the State Government printing office the previous day under provisions of the *War Precautions Act 1914* and seized thousands of copies of Hansard Report No. 37.

Anti-conscriptionists in Queensland had tried to publicise their views to encourage a 'No' vote at the approaching referendum, however, if the information was promulgated as a pamphlet it would not have received approval from the Commonwealth censor. The alternative plan was to have the material read during state parliament proceedings, which was under the control of the Ryan Labour Government. It would then be reproduced in the Hansard report and distributed throughout the community, its official status protecting

it from suppression by the Commonwealth. It was thought The Constitution would protect the rights of the state.

Prime Minister Hughes was in Brisbane at the time and heard of the scheme. As the distribution of the report was dependant on the Commonwealth postal service, the Commonwealth sought to thwart the plan by preventing the passage of the document through the post.

A heated debate ensued between the Prime Minister and the Queensland Premier with Mr Ryan arguing that the incident was an invasion of the rights of a sovereign state while Mr Hughes justified his actions through the provisions of the *War Precautions Act 1914* and the general powers conferred on the Commonwealth during a period of war.

He said: "The Commonwealth is vested with supreme authority in regard to all matters incidental to the war, and any exercise of this authority completely overrides all rights of the state with which it may conflict".

Aside from the legal or constitutional positions of the two parties, the events of the war overtook the dispute and the issue was dropped.

However, it was the federal nature of Australian politics in conjunction with a specific set of social and political issues that had dictated the eventual development and role of a national police agency which has become what is now regarded as the Commonwealth's premier law enforcement body - the Australian Federal Police.

References: Australia Since Federation, Fred Alexander (Nelson 1967); A New History of Australia, Edited by Frank Crowley (Heinemann Melb. 1974); The Story of Conscription in Australia L.C. Jauncy (Macmillan Aust. 1968); A History of Australian Folklore Bill Wannan.