

## 1978 NORTHERN TERRITORY CABINET RECORDS

### Highlights

Self-Government on 1 July 1978 meant that for the first time, the Northern Territory was governed, for the most part, from within its own borders. No longer would government decision-making be centred 3000 kilometres away in Canberra. It was a new day in the Territory, with the first Cabinet comprising Chief Minister Paul Everingham, and Ministers Marshall Perron, Ian Tuxworth, Jim Robertson and Roger Steele. These five men made a host of early decisions for the Territory that continue to reverberate to this day.

The late 1970s was a tumultuous period in which to be taking the reins of office of a new self-governing Territory. A number of the significant issues for the Australian nation were centred in the Territory. The *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* was in its infancy, a time of great change for miners, pastoralists and Aboriginal people alike. Controversy raged over whether Australia should mine and export uranium and, with the Territory being the home of two such mines, it was very much a focal point in the uranium debate.

Darwin was undergoing a massive rebuilding phase following the devastation of Cyclone Tracy on Christmas Eve 1974, with the Territory capital undergoing wholesale physical change in the latter part of the 1970s.

During the course of 1978, the deliberations of the first Country Liberal Party Executive, which became known as the Cabinet as from 1 July 1978, reflected those issues. In addition, the constitutional milestone of Northern Territory Self-Government on 1 July 1978 meant the Cabinet was faced with a host of administrative decisions needed to establish the new government.

The Cabinet records reflect discussions ranging over topics as diverse as town planning, the staffing of prisons, local government for Katherine, Tennant Creek and “small and isolated communities”, the administration of Government House, Aboriginal health programs, the cattle freight subsidy scheme, dental service charges, transport services, appointments to the NT Tourist Board, consumer protection legislation, the construction of community health centres, Asian relations, and the requirements for remote area community development, through to such matters as the introduction of reflectorised number plates, deciding on whether to call a public holiday to celebrate the Beer Can Regatta and registration requirements for vintage and veteran cars.

It was also Cabinet’s task to consider a host of varied prospects for diversifying a struggling economy, at the time dependent on very considerable Commonwealth funding. Among them: tourism, including the development of the Ayers Rock Resort at Yulara and a number of new national parks; gaming, with the establishment of casinos in Darwin and Alice Springs; exports, with the initial plans for ministerial visits to South East Asian capitals; and resource development in the form of commercial fishing and major mining developments.

In April 1978 Cabinet endorsed guidelines for the planning of the Yulara Tourist Village, noting a target completion date of 1984 and that “the Village be constructed solely for the purpose of servicing visitors of the Ayers Rock/Mt Olga National Park and not to develop into a regional centre.”<sup>i</sup> Cabinet set 1984 as the project’s completion date with the responsibility for the management and control of the Tourist Village to be vested in the Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission.

In the matter of national parks, in 1978 Cabinet allocated the sum of \$16,000 to purchase what was to become Keep River National Park. Cabinet also gave consideration over the course of a number of meetings to the establishment of the MacDonnell Range National Park in Central Australia, and to a proposal to purchase of Glen Helen Station as part of that plan. The submission to Cabinet in June 1978 stated -

*The most favoured option is for the Government to purchase the land [Glen Helen Station] and negotiate with the Central Land Council and to make suitable arrangements for future joint management when land claims by Aborigines have become established. This is seen as the most positive approach to the establishment of this National Park.*<sup>ii</sup>

While no final decision was made that year, the Submission to Cabinet gave the flavour of things to come in terms of joint management of national parks in the Northern Territory.

In an effort to stimulate an interest in operating casinos in Darwin and Alice Springs, in December 1977 the Everingham Executive had approved a draft advertisement to run in the national press and the *Far Eastern Review* inviting expressions of interest and preliminary proposals for the casinos. At that point, it had not yet been decided whether the casinos would be privately operated or Government run. In June 1978 Cabinet discussed the 17 expressions of interest received. The various proposals included plans to build a Darwin casino on the city's Esplanade, Emery Point, Myilly Point, and on the Don Hotel site in the CBD. In October 1978, Cabinet approved the selection of Federal Hotels Ltd as the successful bidder, requiring that both the Darwin and Alice Springs casinos be constructed and in operation within 18 months. In respect of the Alice Springs casino, Cabinet decided the proposed Barrett Street site in Alice Springs -

*. . . is acceptable but the operators are to be informed that the Northern Territory Government would be unwilling to provide a bridge across the Todd or other access at that part of the river and this would become the responsibility of the operators.*<sup>iii</sup>

Following the destruction of Darwin by Cyclone Tracy in 1974, a variety of major project developments for the city were considered by Cabinet in 1978. The construction of a new Magistrates Court was approved, and Cabinet also turned its attention to the establishment of arts and cultural facilities for the city. In March 1978, Cabinet approved Bullocky Point as the site for the proposed Darwin Museum and Art Gallery, which had an estimated construction cost of \$5 million. In August of

that year Cabinet approved in principle that a Performing Arts complex be constructed in the Darwin city area, comprising theatres, studios, halls and open spaces for artistic endeavours.

Continuing this theme, in September 1978 Cabinet approved that legislation be introduced to support the development of the Araluen Cultural Complex in Alice Springs. The legislation, to be known as the Araluen Arts and Cultural Trust Ordinance, was to be based on the Adelaide Festival Theatre Act and the Trust was to be given responsibility for encouraging and facilitating artistic, cultural and performing arts activities throughout the Alice Springs region. In addition, the Trust would be responsible for the development, control and management of the Araluen Centre.

Cabinet realised one of the key features of a future Territory economy was going to be mineral development, and two major projects were considered by Cabinet during the course of 1978, both requiring considerable infrastructure development in remote areas: the McArthur River Project in the Gulf of Carpentaria region and the Ranger Uranium Project in the Alligator Rivers region. The Government believed it possible to safely mine uranium in the East Alligator region even though it had concerns over the Commonwealth's unsatisfactory rehabilitation of the earlier Rum Jungle uranium mine site near Batchelor, some 100 kilometres south of Darwin.

In this respect, in September 1978 Cabinet endorsed Chief Minister Paul Everingham writing to Canberra to call on the Commonwealth to accept its responsibilities in respect of the long term rehabilitation of the Rum Jungle site. The Cabinet Submission noted that –

*. . . if the Commonwealth decides to rehabilitate the area, it would not only demonstrate its concern for the environment generally but ... would provide a practical demonstration of the measures that could be taken to achieve environmental protection at any mining site. This would be of background value for the environmental management and rehabilitation of new uranium mines in the Alligator Rivers Region.* <sup>iv</sup>

The Submission noted the estimated cost of Rum Jungle's rehabilitation was \$10.23 million, and stated that "(t)he Government must insist that all costs of any action taken be borne entirely by the Commonwealth."<sup>v</sup>

In August 1978, Cabinet approved acceptance of a Commonwealth proposal that the Territory Government be responsible to the maximum extent possible under Territory law for the control of the environmental requirements for the Ranger project. The Government in November 1978 approved the development of legislation for a statutory authority, to be known as the Jabiru Town Development Authority, to construct the town and to run normal municipal services. This was to be done with the cooperation of the mining companies concerned in order to service the planned mining activities and the emerging Kakadu National Park. The Cabinet paper canvassed matters such as the projected population of the township, local community representation on the body corporate, types of accommodation for the town, education, health and law facilities, and recreational amenities.

Ranger produced a construction program that expressed the need for completion of the town by mid-1980. The Cabinet documents reflect an expectation that, once Ranger received the final green light for development –

*. . . the town construction should be treated with similar urgency to the mine and mill. The town can not be viewed as an after-thought in the developments and something to be undertaken at leisure.*<sup>vi</sup>

While issues concerning economic growth were significant considerations for the new Territory Government, Cabinet also turned its mind to social services. A Submission considered by Cabinet in May 1978 recognised the need to formulate a position on Aboriginal health services with a view to reaching an agreement with the Commonwealth on policy and initiatives. Cabinet subsequently approved the Executive Member for Resources and Health arranging a meeting with appropriate Commonwealth Ministers to discuss health services in the Northern Territory and strategies for the upgrading of environmental health in Aboriginal communities. Cabinet's objective was to reach agreement in principle with the Commonwealth in respect of a number of matters including that –

- the overall responsibility for the health of all Northern Territory citizens remain with the Northern Territory Government Health Service
- an Aboriginal consultative committee on health be established to assist government to consider and develop policies on Aboriginal health in the Northern Territory, and
- training schemes be developed and implemented by the NT Department of Health to enable Indigenous people to take up a role in health management in communities and the provision of essential services in communities.

The 1978 Cabinet documents show the enormous diversity of decisions facing the new Cabinet seeking to establish a governance framework and a foundation for the new self-governing Territory. Deliberations ranged over such matters as the introduction a raft of new legislation following the transfer of powers from the Commonwealth, the establishment of various Northern Territory Public Service functions, approval of the 1978-79 Territory budget, establishment of Government supply and tender boards, policy on regionalisation of government operations, civil works programs, law and order, motor vehicle registration charges, setting rates of stamp duty, and government advisory committees.

The 1978 Cabinet records provide an insight into a unique period in Northern Territory, and indeed Australian, history. Cabinet's deliberations reflect the challenges facing the fledgling self-governing jurisdiction in the late 1970s both in terms of establishing a Northern Territory government and addressing the critical issues of the times.

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- i Cabinet Decision No. 281 of 11 April 1978.
  - ii Cabinet Submission No. 300, page 5.
  - iii Cabinet Decision No. 453 of 9 October 1978.
  - iv Cabinet Submission No. 356, page 3.
  - v Cabinet Submission No. 356, page 4.
  - vi Cabinet Submission No. 383, page 1.