

## McLaren Manuscript

So far only the Introduction has been transferred to the site (Jul 2012) - more to come.

### Introduction

The history of the Northern Territory Police Forces is unique mainly because the Territory is Unique.

This is a vast and sparsely populated land of extremes. It makes up about one-sixth of Australia's land mass, more than 1.3 million square kilometres, and even today as we contemplate the beginning of the new millennium, there are only 170,000 people here, or just 0.95 per cent of the national population.

Along with the Sahara, Mongolia and areas of Siberia, Australia's Northern Territory is one of the emptiest pieces of real estate in the world.

And Territorians are not easily definable as, in most cases, other Australians may be. Some 23 per cent are indigenous people who, by and large have kept their culture alive. Aboriginal culture is not a museum exhibit or an anthropological curiosity in the NT. It is an everyday tool for about 40,000 black Territorians spread across the length and breadth of the Territory.

In 1994, there were 67 remote communities in the Territory. But no one knows how many remote outstations and settlements there are in this huge sprawl of land. At last count, the Power and Water Authority claimed to know of some 700, which have water supplies and which shift and change constantly.

They all have to be policed which immediately brings one of the main factors affecting the Territory Police force to the fore – the necessity to spread scarce resources far and wide. Its inevitable commitment is, to put it simply, a hard policing task.

The rest of the population do not fit into any readily identifiable boxes, either. According to the 1991 census by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, some 33,000 Territorians were born overseas, 43 per cent of them in Asia. There are no accurate figures on Territorians, who are Australia born, but whose first language is not English, But, given the presence of a substantial "old" immigrant population in the NT, particularly Greeks, they are a very large number indeed.

Which may mean that the majority of Territorians do not have English as their native language?

That is one of the problems that Territory Police confront every day. Another, which influences Police work considerably, is the young age of the population. At the end of 1993, 34.4 per cent of the Territorians were 19 years of age or younger; and 88.1 per cent were 49 years of age or younger. The respective national figures were 29 per cent and 75 per cent. The average age of Territorians then was 27.2 years compared to 32.7 years for Australia as a whole. And generally, they have higher incomes. Average weekly earnings in the Territory at the end of 1993 was \$634.30 in comparison with the national figure of \$604.20

Younger people with money to burn tend to do so – and sometimes they create problems for the Police.

To complicate matters, this is also a highly mobile population. Electoral rolls for the Territory's 25 small Legislative Assembly constituencies, certainly in urban areas, often experience changes of between 60 and 70 per cent between elections. Which means extended family ties, society's essential leavening, are still largely absent in the NT as they have been through its history? Heterogeneity, mobility and affluence are the distinguishing factors of the Northern Territory community as we write. Some may argue that there are also contributors to the Territory's unusually high crime rate, many times above the national average.

Geography also conspires to make the life of your average policeman/woman somewhat harder in the Territory than elsewhere. The huge area has been mentioned already. For the Police this often means distance and isolation, two unsavoury companions at the best of times. Keeping law and order in such an environment is fraught with difficulties. The Territory has a coastline of 5100 kilometres with a further 2100 kilometres of coast around off lying islands. Most of the coast is low lying and consists mainly of mudflats and mangrove swamps with occasional cliffs which rarely exceed 20 metres in height. The coastal lowlands merge into dissected sandstone plateaus of Arnhem Land to the north and the granitic sandstone Ord-Victoria River plateaus to the west, with rounded ridges of largely metamorphic rocks between those plateaus.

Much of the Top End, a colloquial term used to describe the land mass of the Northern Territory north of 15 degrees S is dominated by the craggy sandstone face of the Arnhem escarpment, with its rocky outliers and pockets of ancient rainforest and deep gorges and river channels that drain the monsoon water from the escarpment. (1)

The central section of the Territory is mainly sandstone ridges and sand plains. To the east towards the Barkley Tablelands there are black clay plains and limestone hillocks

The southern end of the Territory is dominated by the Central Australian MacDonnell Ranges. To the north of the ranges are the deserts consisting of waves of sands dunes, claypans and stony deserts and to the south are the generally dry riverbeds and sand plains. No part of the Territory can be said to be sympathetic to human habitation. This is harsh country, unforgiving to fools.

The climate does not help either. The tropical north has two distinct seasons. The Wet Season is the period from October to April and the Dry Season is from May to September. Wet and Dry mean just that. During the Wet, the Northern half experiences heavy monsoons and occasionally, cyclonic storms. Darwin has a yearly mean of 1659 millimetres of rain, with January the best month for rain. But from May to September fine conditions predominate throughout the Territory. The worse problems in the Dry Season are bush fires which fuel on the abundant growth brought about by the Wet. The weather is hot and humid during the monsoon season in the north; it is hot and dry in the southern portion of the NT in summer while temperatures can drop below zero in winter nights. The highest temperature registered in the NT was 48.3 degrees Celsius and the lowest was -7.5 degrees Celsius in Alice Springs/

This snapshot of the Northern Territory perhaps tends to explain why it has been considered

Australia's last frontier for such a long time. Certainly it provides a reasonable explanation for the historical reluctance of people, particularly those of European stock to move up to the north.

Until recently, amenities taken for granted in the "south" (a term which has come to mean anything outside the Territory) were not generally available in the NT. Life is more expensive because of freight costs. And the ambiance is not conducive to the kind of gentle society which is common in better settled regions of Australia. But this is home to Territorians and, by definition, to Territory Police who have made a virtue of necessity and adapted to the NT's conditions remarkably well through the years. Of course, there have been plenty of mistakes made along the way and, no doubt, more mistakes will be made in the future. But by and large, the Northern Territory Police forces whether in colonial times, South Australian times, Commonwealth times or under a self-governing regime as they are today – have performed astoundingly well. This is their story.

(1) Australian Bureau of Statistics – "Northern Territory in Focus"