

1923 GREAT POLICE STRIKE & RADIO BROADCASTING BEGINS

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Melbourne Police Strike

With dramatic suddenness the city was left completely without police protection last night, the 29 constables detailed for night duty declining to parade at 10 o'clock.

The decision to disobey orders was reached at a meeting of the constables at Russell street barracks about a quarter to 10 o'clock.

The decision of the meeting was communicated to the men on day work, and they expressed sympathy with the cause of dissatisfaction — the introduction of the system of special supervising senior-constables.

In this manner, under the headline 'POLICE MUTINY', the Melbourne *Argus* on Thursday, 1 November 1923, announced the start of one of the most sensational events in the history of the Victorian capital.

The newspaper's 3 a.m. edition reported that the men had returned to work an hour earlier after a promise by the Chief Commissioner, Alexander Nicholson, that the supervisors — dubbed 'spooks' by the mutineers — would be withdrawn until the State Cabinet had discussed the policemen's complaints. But the 'strike', called without any reference to the Police Association, was far from over.

The Government the following day took an uncompromising stand: the mutineers had to resume work unconditionally or face dismissal. The executive of the Police Association agreed, and advised men to go back to work and then seek redress of their grievances by constitutional means.

This was rejected at a meeting of the night shift on Thursday night. When the Chief Commissioner tried to address them, he was 'jostled and made a target for taunts and abusive epithets'. The men, upset at what they considered a lack of trust, as well as by low pay and the absence of a suitable pension scheme, made it clear they were in no mood to back down before their demands had been met.

By Friday morning the number of 'strikers' had swelled from 29 to 475; that evening they totalled 630. Only sub-officers, detectives, and plain-clothes police remained to protect the city where plans were hastily being prepared for transferring constables from the country, recalling police pensioners, and if necessary, enrolling civilians as special constables.

By Saturday evening the city, packed by visitors for the Melbourne Cup, was at the mercy of drunken mobs who plundered the central area of all that could be carried or driven away, savagely attacking anyone who stood in their way.

Volunteers, alerted by appeals flashed on cinema screens, were armed with pick handles and white identifying armbands before joining the few policemen in attempting to restore order.

By dawn on Sunday more than 230 people were reported in hospital, and almost a hundred were under arrest. The *Age* estimated property damage at 30 000 pounds, with jewellery and other merchandise worth many thousands of pounds stolen. Shops throughout the city were barricaded against further attacks.

As violence again flared on Sunday morning, the Attorney-General, Sir A. Robinson, issued a proclamation appealing for volunteers:

This is no industrial dispute or class fight. The security of poor and rich alike depends upon the maintenance of law and order... It is not a question of the Government against the men, but the vital principle of ordered liberty against mutiny — of fidelity against rebellion. Knowing that there are many thousands of loyal Australians able and willing to serve the community in this crisis, arrangements have been made whereby special constables will be sworn in all today at the Town Hall...

The response was overwhelming: in the city alone over 8000 volunteers were enrolled to replace the striking constables, all of whom were dismissed and informed they would never be reinstated.

By Monday the city was slowly returning to normal. Marines from five warships in the bay were guarding Federal property and ready to assist in case of further violence, while eighty looters were tried and sentenced to terms of between three and six months imprisonment.

In an isolated incident a special constable was killed by a mob at West Melbourne on Monday evening, but soon after the authorities had complete control of the situation.

On Tuesday the Melbourne Cup was run 'dry' after all hotels in the city had closed at two o'clock in the afternoon. However, there was one consolation for punters: the favourite ran home an easy winner.

Not one of the strikers was ever reinstated, not even under later Labor Gov-

ernments. Instead, the special constables were retained until permanent replacements had been recruited and trained.

A Royal Commission the following year found that although some of the policemen's complaints were merited, this had not justified their mutiny. The investigation, however, did lead to improvements in conditions of service.

Wonderful world of the wireless

The wonderful world of wireless entertainment came to Australia on 23 November 1923 when, from a studio on top of the *Srnith's Weekly* Building in Sydney, the country's first official radio station took to the air at 8 p.m. with a musical concert by Miss Deering, soprano; Miss Druitt, contralto; Mr Pick, bass; Mr Saunders, baritone; and Mr Thorp, cellist. Friends and relatives clustered round cumbersome valve sets owned by the few hundred 'listeners-in', who pronounced the evening's broadcast by station 2SB a resounding success.

Just over a week later 2FC opened 'informally' by transmitting a musical comedy, *The Southern Maid*, live from Her Majesty's Theatre. Again listeners-in in Sydney and other parts of New South Wales were 'charmed and delighted'.

There could be little doubt that entertainment over the 'ether' had come to stay.

In Melbourne, Dame Nellie Melba's farewell concert in October 1924 provided radio with an excellent opportunity to prove its worth. Under the head-

line 'Broadcasting begins. Grand Opera by wireless', the *Argus* reported on the opening night of station 3LO:

The scene in a room at the head office of the Broadcasting Company of Australia, 193 Collins street, last night probably had its counterpart in thousands of homes throughout Australia and New Zealand.

A dozen persons seated comfortably in armchairs arranged round a 'loud speaker' listened delightedly to the singing of Dame Nellie Melba and the other principals of the Grand Opera Company in 'La Boheme', produced at His Majesty's Theatre in aid of the Limbless Soldiers' Fund.

Every note came through clearly, and the ovation which Melba received at the close of the opera must have thrilled all present. Even the instructions to the huge audience in His Majesty's Theatre of a photographer before he took a flashlight photograph could be clearly heard.

The Prime Minister (Mr Bruce) visited the office before going to the theatre, and made a speech which was broadcast — a message of hope to many a lonely farmer.

Both the speech and the opera, it was reported, were perfectly heard in Auckland, New Zealand. A resident on the north-east coast of Tasmania, operating a four-valve set, 'told' the head broadcasting station at Braybrook that he heard every word of Mr. Bruce's message, and that the modulation was practically perfect.

He intended to demonstrate his appreciation of the whole performance by subscribing a guinea to the 'Limbless Soldiers' Fund.

To assist listeners, the story of the opera was told by the announcer before the performance commenced.

Mr. Bruce's message was as follows: 'This is an occasion unique in the history of Victorian enterprise and communication. Three years ago the Commonwealth Government, inspired by the great advance made in wireless telegraphy, and seized with the importance of long-distance communication in a country so large as Australia, took steps which have culminated in the present promising service.

'We feel that this innovation means a great deal to the widely separated settlers of this country. It will not only provide a constant source of entertainment, a regular supply of news, and helpful assistance, it will bring them closer in touch with their more favourably situated fellow citizens, and remove that sense of isolation which has in the past operated against country settlement.

'We do not intend to stop here. We believe that it will be possible at no very distant date to enlist the aid of wireless telegraphy for more effective communication with other parts of the Empire and with foreign countries. Who can measure the effect of such an achievement, not only in the British Empire, but in the whole of human relations?

'The official opening of this broadcasting station tonight is an important occasion, charged with definite significance for the future. On behalf of the Commonwealth of Australia I wish it every success.

The first radio stations were all commercial operations whose profits were supposed to come from licence fees paid by set owners. This meant that

early 'wireless' sets had to be 'sealed' to allow reception only of the station for which the owner had a licence.

But this soon proved unworkable, because sets could be — and were — tampered with to allow wider reception, while crystal sets could be made at home or bought for as little as 25 shillings.

Altogether fewer than 1500 licences, costing between 10 shillings and 4 guineas, were issued by the two Sydney stations, as well as by 3AR in Melbourne and 6WF in Perth. In 1924 a dual system was adopted, with 'A' class stations being financed primarily by licence fees (they were permitted to broadcast one hour of advertising each day), and 'B' class stations being entirely dependent on advertising revenue.

By 1929, with the total number of licences topping 300 000, the Government decided to establish a national broadcasting service which would eventually bring radio to even the most isolated parts of the vast continent.

The Australian Broadcasting Company (a consortium of Greater Union Theatres, Fuller's Theatres, and J. Albert and Sons, a Sydney music publisher) won the tender to provide programmes until 1931 for the new network, which consisted of A-class stations the Government was gradually taking over.

In 1932 the Lyons Government set up the Australian Broadcasting Commission (A.B.C.) to take over and operate the national network, which it still does today. When the A.B.C. took over there were thirty-five stations and 370000 licenced receivers, the latter doubling within three years.

Sport, in particular, drew millions to the radio during the bleak years of the

Depression. To enliven cricket reports, the A.B.C. and commercial stations simulated 'live' broadcasts during the tense Anglo-Australian Tests in England by using telegraphic reports sent every few minutes as play progressed, accompanied by sound effects of the bat hitting the ball (a sharp rap of a pencil on a piece of wood), and recorded crowd reaction.

Listening to the radio became a favourite pastime for the whole family. It brought into the homes of the rich and the poor, in city and country, the heart-rending romance of afternoon soap operas such as *Blue Hills* (5795 episodes); family serials like *Dad and Dave* (2276 episodes); the quiz programmes of Bob Dyer (Pick-a-Box) and Jack Davey; music; news; drama...

For thirty exciting years before the advent of television, the wireless was Australia's window to the world — and a prime means of escape for millions to a fantasyland of adventure, laughter, melody, and romance.