



ELEVEN

CONSOLIDATION:

2001-2007



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COMCAR was a lean organisation by the turn of the century. It had undergone a succession of reviews and periods of downsizing since the election of the Fraser government in 1975. At times its very existence had been challenged, but heightened security concerns in the early years of the 21st century served to reinforce the importance of a government car service where confidentiality was respected, drivers were highly trained and subjected to security clearances from 2000.

COMCAR came under new senior management in January 2001, when Julia Burns took a position as Human Resources Manager in the Health Insurance Commission and was succeeded by Ken Sweeney PSM. He was a career public servant with a strong financial and commercial background after positions in the departments of Treasury, Finance, and Administrative Services. Ken had worked in Asset Services from 1993 to 1997, where he had helped prepare that government business for sale to the private sector, and in removals Australia from 1997 to 1999, which he had also prepared for sale. He had been awarded the Public Service Medal in 2000.

Additional departmental restructuring occurred, with COMCAR being returned from the Business Services Group under Alastair Hodgson to Ministerial and Parliamentary Services under General Manager Jan Mason on 1 July 2001. Jan Mason had already had some experience with COMCAR, having been acting general manager of the Business Services Group within the department from November 1999 to April 2000. She was one of the department's senior women managers and an original member of the Finance Women's Network that was established in 1991. She became a great supporter of COMCAR and did what she could to enhance its profile within the

Department of Finance and Administration, and to keep senior departmental managers informed of COMCAR. She also took opportunities when she could to visit depots to meet staff and keep them informed of departmental issues that might concern them.

The functions of COMCAR remained unchanged, with the service entering a period of stable management that coincided with the return of the Howard government in November 2001. Following this election, Nick Minchin, Special Minister of State, succeeded John Fahey as minister directly responsible for the service from 26 November 2001.

The partnership between Jan Mason and Ken Sweeney did a great deal to enhance the role of COMCAR within the Department of Finance and Administration. Since the dismemberment of the Transport and Storage Group, the passenger car operation had suffered because of perceptions within departments of which it was part that it was a separate organisation, quite different from other agencies, and of little consequence in the public service hierarchy. Perhaps as a consequence, few senior managers had stayed for very long and several had the descriptor 'acting' or 'assistant' attached to their job title. This had undermined drivers' faith in management and any with particular agendas simply bided their time until there was another change of management, or took their grievances to colleagues rather than managers – or even to ministers.



Gordon Kirchner receiving an award from Jan Mason and Ken Sweeney, Sydney, 2007.

With Jan Mason's promotion to Deputy Secretary of Corporate and Parliamentary Services in August 2007, Kim Clarke, a Branch Manager in Ministerial and Parliamentary Services, was promoted to the role of Division Manager and assumed responsibility for COMCAR. Kim had previously worked as a colleague of Ken Sweeney and her understanding of the business and issues faced by COMCAR ensured ongoing continuity and leadership stability. Kim reported feeling a real affinity with COMCAR as her grandfather had been a driver in the 1960s and 70s, making her a "second generation" COMCAR employee.



Senator Eric Abetz opening the new ACT Depot, 28.4.2003. Dr Ian Watt is on his right; Ken Sweeney and Jan Mason are on his left.

Wally Stopp had been recruited as Human Relations Manager in September 2001; and Stan Marsh was now in the position of Manager, Driving Operations. Wally Stopp had considerable experience in other departments and had already worked closely with Ken Sweeney in Asset Services before its sale, and later at Removals Australia. The management team was strengthened by financial initiatives and improved reporting procedures taken by Finance Manager Beatrice Phillips and extended by Erika Fellows, who joined COMCAR from the department's Financial Management Group in April 2004. The period of stability that ensued for several years provided the opportunity for change to be consolidated.

The reforms of the 1990s meant that COMCAR in 2001 was already a different organisation than that of only a decade earlier. There was an increasing proportion of casual drivers – a greater percentage of whom were women. The nature of the casual position appealed to particular people, generally older and retired men and women, who did not depend on the income for their welfare but were looking for a productive interest. Demands on casual drivers' time could not be anticipated with any degree of certainty and were minimal during the early weeks of each year when there was little parliamentary activity. The new cadre of drivers came from diverse backgrounds, unlike their predecessors; many having been self-employed or having held management positions, others having retired, many with degrees. Moreover, the labour climate had changed. The TWU was not as dominant as it had been, and took less interest in COMCAR issues as full-time driver numbers had declined. Indeed, in the early 21st century many drivers transferred to the CPSU because they believed it suited their needs better. Others simply left unions altogether, believing that there was no role for the union once workplace agreements had been signed.

Drivers took greater notice of management initiatives once they realised that Ken Sweeney had not been recruited to close down or sell the organisation – as many had feared. His determination became evident when he finalised a new certified agreement for drivers that had been under negotiation for three years.

The negotiation of the drivers-only certified agreement had been an ongoing cause of frustration for all concerned and the cause of polarised attitudes between staff and drivers; it also exacerbated the division between full-time and casual drivers. The key sticking point was the amount of guaranteed hours for drivers. Ken Sweeney led intense negotiations for six months in an attempt to finalise the issue. A draft agreement was presented to drivers but voted down. This meant that drivers, who had not received a pay increase for three years had no immediate prospect of any. On the other hand, many casual drivers elected to sign Australian Workplace Agreements and gain an immediate 10 per cent pay increase; 10 of the 11 full-time drivers in Canberra did so.

Meanwhile negotiations began on a new certified agreement, though one based on a union rather than a general staff agreement. This proved more attractive to all concerned and in a short time there was a drivers-only certified agreement. A key to the new agreement was the minimum call-out period of two rather than four hours – three hours in Sydney and Melbourne – which meant that short-term work was wrested back from hire cars. The use of hire cars decreased from 10 per cent to 7 per cent and meant more work available for all drivers.



Drivers at the opening of the new ACT depot, 28.4.2003.



COMCAR telephone
at Qantas terminal,
Sydney airport, 2007.

Meanwhile, other initiatives were implemented to boost productivity. One of the more important was the provision of better facilities in all locations, all of them close to airports, which were now a major focus of operations. Both the national office and the Australian Capital Territory depot were co-located on the one site at Dairy Road, Fyshwick, when Special Minister of State, Senator Eric Abetz, and the Secretary of the Department of Finance, Dr Ian Watt, opened the new complex on 28 April 2003. The ACT depot had previously been at Hume, while the national office had been at 111 Canberra Avenue at Kingston. A feature was the inclusion of a gym to assist with endeavours to ensure that drivers remained fit and healthy. Those in the ACT depot were apprehensive about having the national office so close, but concerns dissipated as the independence of each was respected and maintained.

The Brisbane depot transferred from Fortitude Valley to new premises at Newstead on 9 September 2003, with Senator Eric Abetz helping to mark the occasion. It relocated again in mid-2006, this time to premises at Eagle Farm, about seven minutes' drive from the airport. Melbourne staff transferred from Port Melbourne to a new depot at 34 Hood Street, Airport West – close to the Tullamarine Freeway and only five minutes from the airport – in early 2004. The new depot was opened officially on 10 May 2004. Sydney staff moved to new premises close to the airport at 33 Maddox Street, Alexandria, in June, with Ministerial and Parliamentary Services General Manager Jan Mason officially opening the depot on 8 December 2004. The Adelaide depot on Richmond Road, already close to the airport, was refurbished during 2004-05. Jan Mason opened the new Perth depot on 27 September 2005. A feature of the design of all new depots was to ensure that drivers' lounges and managers' offices were on the same level to encourage closer relations and exchange of information. The relocation of depots caused some concern among drivers who had to travel further to work, but the superior facilities were appreciated by all and led to confidence in COMCAR's future.

During this period, local managers were asked to assume greater responsibility and prevent such apparently trivial issues as sunscreen and socks being passed on to the national manager – as had previously been the case. In South Australia and Western Australia, drivers Claire Robinson and Ross Bennett were appointed local supervisors. Along with other state supervisors, they were included in the senior management team that met in depots around Australia and participated in weekly phone conferences.



Front elevation of
Brisbane depot.



From top:

Interior of the Sydney garage, 2007.

Senior management meeting, Sydney, 2007. Left to right: Eddie Capon, Ross Bennett, Geoff Edwards, Daryl Chan, Wally Stopp, Laurie Carbone, Stan Marsh, Claire Robinson, Paul Huxley, Sian Baird, Erica Fellows, Lesley Bills, Ken Sweeney, Peter Hatfield, Jules De Smet.

Management remained committed to building and promoting mutual respect and trust between managers and drivers, and encouraging greater openness and better communication within all levels of the organisation. This need was highlighted when a call for suggestions on how to address the issue elicited only four driving staff responses.

Nevertheless, initiatives were undertaken. Jan Mason attended monthly meetings at the national office when she could to improve communications between COMCAR and senior managers within the department. Weekly phone conferences between state managers were initiated to diffuse accurate information throughout COMCAR. Ken Sweeney made a point of visiting all depots regularly – up to three times a year – timing his visits in accordance with the monthly meetings so he could pass on information from the department and listen to issues of concern in the depots. There was also a great deal of emphasis on workplace relations training in order to encourage cultural change.

Management also reorganised the driver training regime to lift the skill level of all drivers. Some senior drivers had revelled in learning new skills in anti-terrorist driver training – or so-called ‘crash and bash’ driving. But this was expensive, a potential cause of injury, and no longer appropriate or viable with the addition of air-bags to cars that would inflate on impact. The available funds were spent on lifting the levels of driver training for all. Still, drivers lamented the loss of the skills they had obtained and considered valuable, whether or not they might be called upon to use them.

The creation of a system of annual awards served to recognise and reward excellence. The significance of the awards was enhanced by support provided by Dr Ian Watt, Secretary of the Department, and Jan Mason who attended dinners at which these awards were made. All issues were summarised in a new national newsletter, *Comcar-municator*, launched to circulate information throughout the organisation.

The new initiatives for the organisation were encapsulated in the COMCAR Service Charter launched by Special Minister of State, Senator Eric Abetz, on 26 June 2003. The significance of the occasion was underlined by the attendance of Dr Ian Watt, Jan Mason, and officers from the Prime Minister’s office and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Senator Eric Abetz remained a great supporter of COMCAR and went out of his way to acknowledge the service and its drivers. For example, he had business in Brisbane on 25 August 2005 and made a point of visiting the depot and meeting drivers who were there.

Focus of attention

Discretion remained the hallmark of drivers and management was concerned to avoid the least controversy, but by of its very nature COMCAR continued to attract media attention.

Criticism by the Auditor-General in 2001 of politicians' entitlements raised doubt about the legality of a previous ministerial decision to provide COMCAR services to Life Gold Pass holders, rather than have it based on a Remuneration Tribunal determination. The issue was referred to the tribunal and, following its recommendation, the government determined that former members of parliament with Life Gold Passes should no longer have access to the COMCAR service, apart from former prime ministers. Accordingly Life Gold Pass holders lost this privilege from 1 October 2002. This caused angst among some users, who stated that the new restriction would prevent them from undertaking a great deal of charity and community work to which they were committed.

The service became embroiled in unwelcome political controversy on 13 March 2002 when Parliamentary Secretary Senator Bill Heffernan alleged that High Court Justice Michael Kirby had used the service in April 1994, when President of the New South Wales Court of Appeal, "to collect rent boys" at 'the Wall' in Sydney's Darlinghurst.¹ The allegation caused a sensation.

Justice Kirby immediately rejected the allegation as "false and absurd", and within days COMCAR was able to show that job sheets on which the allegations were based were fake.² However, political implications of the controversy – particularly issues about Prime Minister Howard's stance concerning Senator Heffernan, and the chance for the opposition to embarrass the government – meant that the allegation became the subject of a Senate inquiry and persisted for months.³

This became a very intense period for COMCAR and the department, with the reputation of a High Court judge or that of a parliamentary secretary at stake. At all times, COMCAR and the department were concerned to remain neutral in the matter, to address the facts only, and stay clear of the politics. COMCAR was also concerned because of the potential to impugn the reputation of drivers and the service.

None gained from the controversy. A former driver was investigated by police as the alleged source of the fake documents. Ultimately Senator Heffernan had no option but to withdraw his allegations and apologise for having made them; and he lost his position of parliamentary secretary.

One small outcome of the affair was the redesign of COMCAR job sheets with the addition of individual numbers to ensure there was no repetition of such an episode. This served to protect drivers, clients and the organisation and enhanced its reputation as a professional, secure, confidential service. Despite this incident, Justice Kirby commended COMCAR on many occasions.

COMCAR management and departmental officers also went on high alert later in May 2007 when Labor parliamentarian Kelly Hoare allegedly propositioned a COMCAR driver.⁴ The nature of the incident, with political overtones at a time Kelly Hoare was overlooked for preselection for the forthcoming federal election in favour of ACTU secretary Greg Combet, meant that it was highlighted by the media. Again, COMCAR management addressed the facts of the case only and ensured that the driver was offered every support.

COMCAR and its personnel remain professional in their dealings with all concerned. But the agency's identification with politicians and politics means, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted after referring to the issues noted above that, "The fleet, through no fault of its own, cannot escape controversy"⁵

CHOGM 2002

Regional conferences continued to warrant a great deal of preparation in areas other than ground transport. Consequently, close attention went into preparations for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting to be held in Brisbane from 3 to 12 October 2001, with another Royal visit of the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh to northern Queensland and South Australia to follow. Julie Yeend of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet was the Commonwealth Royal Visit Director. Reconnaissance for the visit occurred from 14 to 22 July 2001 and included a party of 14 officials including five palace officials. The arrangements had to accommodate a separate program for the Duke of Edinburgh on occasions, the feature being a visit to Sydney for the Centenary Naval Review on Saturday, 6 October.

All arrangements were in place when the terrorist attack on the Pentagon in Washington DC, and the World Trade Centre in New York, occurred on 11 September 2001. Later that week in Australia, Ansett Airlines collapsed and alternative arrangements for transport of delegates' baggage had to be made close to the scheduled travel time for those attending the meeting.

Finally, on 28 September 2001, CHOGM was cancelled along with the Royal tour because of the heightened security alert. Feverish negotiations followed, with CHOGM being re-scheduled to be held at Cooloom on Queensland's Sunshine Coast from 2 to 5 March 2002.



Stan Marsh with drivers Dick Hewitt, Fred Travers and Keith Hart at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), Cooloom, Queensland, March 2002.

The postponed meeting was no less a success for the 52 heads of state, prime ministers and senior officials from 52 Commonwealth countries and the 1200 delegates and 1000 media representatives that gathered for the occasion. The Royal tour also went ahead, though the visit to South Australia occurred before CHOGM and extended over two days only. The Queen and Prince Philip arrived in Adelaide on 27 February 2002. The Queen toured the Barossa Valley the following day while the Duke visited Ceduna and Port Lincoln; the two left for Brisbane that same evening.

COMCAR continued to provide a range of services for the government beyond the visits of distinguished guests. It coordinated ground transport for the 600 people invited by the Prime Minister to attend the memorial service for victims of the Bali bombing in Canberra on 24 October 2002. It arranged transport in Melbourne and Canberra between 6 and 11 October 2003 in association with celebrations to mark the centenary of the High Court. COMCAR was also used to organise transport for families and friends of personnel lost in the Sea King helicopter crash when they attended a memorial service in the Great Hall of Parliament House on 15 April 2005.



Drivers Peter Emanuel, Ted Moore, Terry Davys, Bernie Collins and Phil Thompson at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), Cooloom, Queensland, March 2002.



Driver Noel Ryan with his vehicle at the time of the Turkish Government visit, Sydney, August 2001.

Changing order

As time passed many permanent drivers retired and were not replaced. Casual drivers became an ever-increasing proportion of drivers and underpinned the change in culture. There were only nine full-time drivers in Canberra in 2007 where once there had been 150.

Greg Wright in New South Wales stepped down as the dedicated driver to Prime Minister Howard in early 2004 after six and a half years in the position and retired on 30 June 2005. Greg had followed in the 'wheeltracks' of his father, also a driver, when he began as a pool driver for the Department of Veterans Affairs in 1987. Mario Bartolic succeeded Greg as Prime Minister John Howard's primary Sydney driver. By this time the appointment was no longer made in accordance with seniority or the exclusive wish of the Prime Minister. Expressions of interest were sought from drivers when the position became available, with candidates being required to attend an interview. Mario had resisted the temptation to take a redundancy package and ultimately became the longest serving driver in Australia. In a similar manner, Dan Radovanovic became John Howard's Canberra driver.

There were staff turnovers elsewhere. Norman Jones, a Victorian driver, who joined the Public Service in 1969 retired on 28 February 2003. Jack Cawte from Western Australia, a driver since 1982, retired on 2 May 2003. Barry Bond in the Australian Capital Territory retired on 30 June 2003 after a 20-year career. He began as a workshop mechanic with the Department of Administrative Services, became a COMCAR driver, and moved to the role of allocator. Retiring the same day was Rick Boyland, the longest serving driver in Western Australia, who had been the dedicated driver for Senators Durack and Chaney, and Opposition Leader Kim Beazley.

Chris Troxell retired in 2003 after an association with COMCAR since 1984 when he began work as a truck driver with the Transport and Storage Group. He became a COMCAR driver in 1985 and, later, a leading hand in the reservations and allocations area. He became Allocations Officer in 1992 and acting Reservations and Allocations Supervisor in 2002.

Mark Hanley, New South Wales State Supervisor, retired on 30 June 2004 after 13 years in the office and was succeeded by Peter Hatfield. Mark had begun as a radio operator in 1990. He was seconded to the Department of Veterans' Affairs from 1991 to 1992 to manage its Transport Control Unit but returned to COMCAR in 1993. Later that year he was appointed VIP Visit Co-ordinator and in 1996 became New South Wales' State Supervisor. He was associated with more than 950 visits during his career. He received the Secretary's Australia Day Award in 2000.

Ken Moulin of Melbourne had joined the Department of Supply on 17 January 1966 when he began work as a mechanic in the workshops. He joined the Army in 1971 but returned to the workshops in 1972. He became a COMCAR driver in 1988 and considered driving the Duchess of York a highlight of his career. He retired from the service on 27 January 2005.

Ian Laidler, one of South Australia's senior drivers, retired on 30 June 2005 after a 32-year career. He had been the dedicated driver to the Chairman of Australian National from 1976 to 1982, drove most of the governors-general and prime ministers during his time, and was the dedicated driver to Ministers Gordon Bilney and Nick Bolkus; he also drove during CHOGM 1981 in Melbourne and during several Royal Visits. He drove for the Queen and was presented to her in 2002.

Though drivers changed and the proportion of casual drivers to full-time drivers continued to increase, COMCAR drivers retained their reputation for probity and confidentiality.

The Australian remarked:

Maverick MP Bob Katter once tried to pump about 20 Comcar drivers for information on a politician he thought was seeing 'the ladies your mother told you not to associate with.'

'I must say they were being as taciturn as a sphinx, as silent as a grave,' he recalled yesterday. 'They have to know where all of the bodies are buried.'

If the rumours are true, members of the elite driving force have seen and heard everything from late-night shenanigans and drunkenness to highly sensitive government business. They have even been known to be entrusted with shuttling cabinet submissions.

*It was commonsense 'to shut up and forget what you hear', one driver told *The Australian*.*

The Comcar drivers – immaculately uniformed men and women who line up in formation in their white Statemen and Fairlane vehicles at the doors of Parliament – pride themselves on being a discreet and loyal force.

For instance, when one senator was about to give an important speech during the Wik native title debate, and realised he had lost his papers, it was a Comcar driver who found them left on a plane and delivered them on time.

Another politician left a wallet in a car with \$2000 in it, and the driver took it straight back to him.

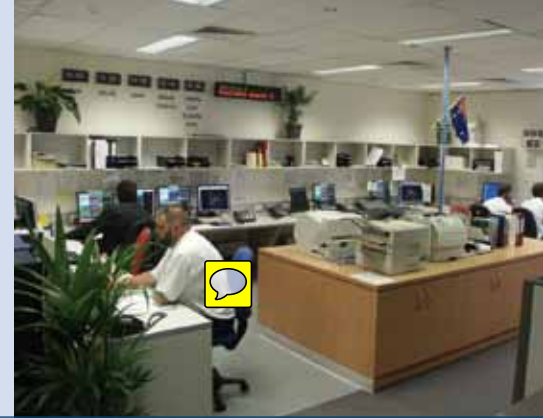
And drivers have been known to wait outside for hours while one former politician worked the bars and nightclubs.

A Transport Workers' Union official praised the Comcar team's professionalism.

*'They really pride themselves that they can listen to ministerial business, and an hour later have a shadow minister in the car and the minister and shadow minister know nothing will cross the boundaries.'*⁶

Warren Thomson of Gunnedah in western New South Wales, who had been engaged to act as a local driver for National Party leader John Anderson, ceased driving for COMCAR in July 2005 when Mark Vaile succeeded Anderson as Leader of the National Party and Deputy Prime Minister. Vaile did not insist on the provision of a driver.

National reservation and allocations centre, Canberra, 2007, with team leader Peter Kropman in the foreground.



Allocations officer Brendan Coote in the national reservation and allocations centre, Canberra, 2007.



Melbourne drivers and staff celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Department of Finance.



Reservations officer, Christine Tate in the national reservation and allocations centre, Canberra, 2007.



Royal Visit 2006

The changing nature of Royal Visits was no more evident than that undertaken in 2006. This visit was of only four days' duration and was made for the specific purpose of opening the Commonwealth Games and attending associated events, and included only Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne. The visit involved 20 COMCAR drivers, with each of the Queen's journeys involving a Rolls Royce, a standby car, three Tarago vans, two pool cars, a media coach and security vehicles. The Rolls Royce had to be taken to the various cities for each day's activities. Laurie Carbone, from the National Visits Office of COMCAR and appointed a Member of the Royal Victorian Order in March 2002, again fulfilled the role of Transport and Baggage Liaison Officer. He was one of 15 officers chiefly involved in preparations for the visit under the leadership of Frank Leverett, of the Ceremonial and Hospitality Branch of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, who acted as the Australia Royal Visit Director. There were four officers from Buckingham Palace involved as well as Lieutenant Colonel Mark Holmes, Australian Equerry to the Queen, and officers from the Attorney-General's Department and the Australian Federal Police.

Though Royal visits were now likely to be short affairs, the preparations were no less meticulous. Preparations for the 2006 visit began in October 2005 with members of the Royal advance party arriving in Sydney on 29 January 2006 for a reconnaissance of venues to be visited.⁷

The Queen arrived at RAAF Base, Fairbairn, aboard a chartered B777 at 9.00 am on Sunday, 12 March 2006. The fleet of vehicles required to greet the Queen and her retinue included the Government House Rolls Royce and five other vehicles, a coach for members of the Royal household, another for Her Majesty's personal staff and hand baggage, and a third for accompanying media, two 4-tonne vans for Royal household baggage, two pool cars and two standby cars. The Queen and her personal staff were accommodated at Government House; other members of the party stayed at the Hyatt Hotel.

The Queen travelled to and from Sydney the following day, with an official reception at the Sydney Opera House, an observance for Commonwealth Day at St Andrew's Cathedral in the city, followed by a Commonwealth Day reception at Admiralty House. COMCAR organised a fleet of 13 coaches to transport as many as 500 guests from St Andrews' Church to Admiralty House.



The Queen spent Tuesday in Canberra at various activities, such as meeting the Leader of the Opposition, attending a tree-planting ceremony, and meeting Australian Capital Territory Emergency Services Authority personnel and volunteers, culminating in a parliamentary dinner in the Great Hall of Parliament House.

The Queen left for Melbourne soon after midday on Wednesday 15 March to open the XVIII Commonwealth Games that evening. She departed Australia from Melbourne at 3.20 pm the following day.

The program was complicated because of the separate program for the Duke of Edinburgh, primarily associated with the Duke of Edinburgh Awards in Sydney and a visit to the CSIRO in Canberra.

The Government House Rolls Royce was used in each of the cities visited by the Queen. After being used to greet the Queen in Canberra and take her to Government House at 10.30 pm, it was trucked overnight from there to Melbourne where it was used to drive Her Majesty to the Melbourne Cricket Ground for the opening of the Commonwealth Games, and finally returned to Canberra. Costs for the transport of the Rolls plus travel and accommodation costs for driver Colin Shearwood were accepted by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

As was the case with the Sydney Olympic Games, COMCAR did not have a direct involvement in the Commonwealth Games. However the period was a busy time for Melbourne staff because of many visits by guests of government and heads of state, and the need to attend to usual business. Major guests included the Earl of Wessex, the games' patron, who required use of a car and two Tarago vans for 17 days, while Tony Blair, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, required four cars, three Taragos and four coaches for three days. United States Secretary of State Dr Condoleezza Rice visited for only seven hours, but required two cars and six Tarago vans during that time. The Heads of State of Tuvalu, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and the Cook Islands required vehicles and assistance with inward and outward transfers. In addition there was the need to meet the requirements of the Governor-General and Prime Minister Howard as well as regular clients. COMCAR used 29 drivers and required additional vehicles but accommodated 935 reservations in 13 days, with the peak of 157 on the day of the games' opening.



From left:

Royal Progress at Government House, Melbourne, 12.3.2006.

Queen Elizabeth arriving at Sydney Opera House, 13.3.2006.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair with COMCAR drivers, March 2006. Left to right: Gordon Kirchner, Jules De Smet, Helen Morrison, Tony Blair, John McArthur, Gary Spears, Ivan Sako, Les Pasztor.

Ecologically sustainable development

Provisions of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* demanded that departments minimise harmful impacts on the environment. COMCAR enacted measures to comply with the Act. One of the first of these was to maximise use of an ethanol-blended fuel (E10). This was introduced for Canberra-based vehicles on 17 February 2006, with state depots following as the fuel became available locally. By June 2006, E10 accounted for 70 per cent of COMCAR usage and 12 months later reached 90 per cent, being limited only by its availability from dealers.

Care was also taken with water usage, particularly as the nation slipped into drought. A new car wash installed at the ACT depot in 2004 recycled about 85 per cent of the water used. This was topped up by rainwater from the carport roof that was collected in a newly-installed 45,000 litre tank, which meant that 95 per cent of the water used in washing fleet cars was recycled.

The prolonged drought prompted introduction of water restrictions in all of the nation's capitals and prevented COMCAR from using car washing facilities in depots where there were no facilities for recycling water. Drivers in Melbourne had to use washing facilities at a commercial service station once water restrictions were enforced in Melbourne in early 2007. This continued until 7 February 2008 when a 20,000 litre water tank was installed to harvest rain from the large depot roof; the capacity of the tank when full provided for up to 2000 washes.



Car wash at the ACT depot.

APEC 2007

The big challenge of 2007 was involvement in providing ground transport services for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum meetings held across Australia between January and September. The APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting on 8 and 9 September 2007, which concluded the series of meetings across the country, was the most significant international meeting of world leaders hosted in Australia.

COMCAR provided its services under terms of a Memorandum of Understanding negotiated between COMCAR and the APEC 2007 Taskforce – a division of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet – and signed in December 2006. COMCAR was required to provide drivers for eight conferences held in different parts of Australia involving leaders of the 21 APEC economies and thousands of delegates between January and August 2007, culminating in the leaders' meeting in Sydney in September. The attraction of COMCAR to the taskforce was the agency's ability to provide highly-trained drivers who would satisfy confidentiality and security requirements.

Eddie Capon was seconded to work with the APEC 2007 Taskforce to organise more than 200 drivers who expressed a wish in being involved, and it was COMCAR policy to involve drivers from all states at each event. Cars were provided by the APEC Taskforce because of the requirement for COMCAR to maintain its normal services, though 10 cars were transferred from Canberra to assist.

Arrangements called for drivers rostered for each meeting to arrive two days prior to the meeting to attend training courses organised by the APEC Taskforce. The first of the events was the First Senior Officials' Meeting held in Canberra during the period from 10 to 30 January involving 45 drivers, with eight from interstate. The second meeting involving ministers responsible for mining was held in Perth from 7 to 19 February, involving 52 drivers, 50 of them from interstate.



From top:

Motorcade at NSW Government House, Sydney, at the time of the 2007 APEC meeting.

Drivers and supervising staff in Sydney for APEC Leaders' Week, 26.8.2007.

The final challenge culminated in the APEC 2007 Economic Leaders' Meeting held in Sydney, with more than 200 drivers and administrative staff involved from 24 August to 11 September 2007. Familiarisation with routes was necessary because of erection of temporary fencing and barricades stretching five kilometers through the central business district to minimise the threat of protester disruptions. The final security lockdown commenced at 6.00 am on 7 September and remained in force until 11.00 pm on 9 September.

COMCAR's task was to provide ground transport for leaders and their spouses, foreign and trade ministers and other senior officials and delegates of the 21 APEC economies that attended the meetings. United States President George Bush and Russia's Vladimir Putin, who attended the leaders' meeting, had their own drivers, and the Americans provided all vehicles for their motorcades – but COMCAR served all other leaders. There were four or five cars allocated to each delegation, with additional requirements having to be organised by particular delegations.

Meanwhile, COMCAR also took on the additional task of providing car-with-driver services for federal ministers and departmental secretaries invited to attend the APEC 2007 Business Summit and other associated meetings. These demands were met by Sydney drivers and resources.

Demands on all concerned were immense. China's President Hu Jintao arrived for the leaders' meeting with a party of 115 and other industry representatives. Vladimir Putin's Russian delegation included more than 200 and arrived in four aircraft. American President George W Bush arrived with a fleet of three Boeing 747s and support aircraft, and a 700-strong delegation that included 50 White House political aides, 150 national security advisers, 200 specialists from other departments and 250 protective agents; the Bush motorcade to the Intercontinental Hotel included 30 cars.

COMCAR was involved in four concurrent official guest-of-government visits arranged by the Ceremonial and Hospitality Branch of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet during the same period. These involved delegations from the United States, China, Russia and Canada. The Chinese delegation arrived in Perth on 3 September 2007 before visiting Canberra and the Cusack family sheep station at Bywong on 5 September.

Administrative staff and car allocators worked from the depot established at Wharfs 7 and 8 at Darling Harbour where all Police, APEC and emergency services vehicles were garaged. COMCAR took more than 800 bookings and provided more than 25,000 hours of service during this period. There were more than 100 motorcade movements in Sydney on Thursday, 6 September, as the last of the leaders arrived for the meeting. Drivers were rostered to either am or pm shifts, with start-times any time from 3.00 am and finish times after 11.00 pm.

APEC 2007 was undoubtedly the biggest event in which COMCAR had been involved. It proved a great advertisement for the organisation and boosted the morale of all drivers and administrative personnel involved.



The barricading of Sydney streets for the 2007 APEC meeting presented a challenge to drivers and supervisors.

'Driver Plus'

A bugbear faced by all casual drivers has been the lack of certainty concerning work. Casual drivers in the ACT were guaranteed payment for only two hours work whenever they were required, in accordance with their availability and their position on the roster.

The issue was of particular concern in Canberra, where the number of cars and drivers was determined by the total number of parliamentarians. However, there were large parts of the year when parliament did not sit, when the government's travel requirements could be met by full-time drivers, leaving little work for the casuals. In order to provide additional work for casual drivers and take advantage of their skills, Jan Mason initiated the 'Driver Plus Program'. Under the terms of the program, drivers – all of whom already had security clearances – were given the opportunity to undertake casual office work in other branches of Ministerial and Parliamentary Services within the department. Volunteers were sought and drivers were accepted into the program under the same rates of pay applying to their work for COMCAR. Unfortunately, the program could only be implemented in Canberra because of its nature, but was welcomed by the four drivers who became involved in the program which commenced during 2007-08.

Election 2007

The prospect of a federal election before the end of 2007 was another issue of great interest for drivers and their clients given the changes that had followed previous elections. Remote preparation for the demands to be made on COMCAR began as early as July. Prime Minister Howard finally called the election on Sunday 14 October 2007 and the campaign, that had been ongoing since Kevin Rudd became Opposition Leader on 4 December 2006, became increasingly intense.

The calling of the election ushered in a busy period for those in the client liaison unit in the national office. As in the two previous elections, each leader was assigned a dedicated team to arrange ground transport requirements as, where and when required. This innovation, to manage the campaign demands akin to two concurrent special visits, had been introduced for the federal election of 10 November 2001. The idea of having a single point of contact within the campaign teams of the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader had proved a great success in avoiding confusion and misunderstanding, and minimising stress on those responsible for reservation and allocation of cars and drivers. In this instance, Laurie Carbone and Vemila Karalasingam took responsibility for coordinating vehicles required by Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd, while Lesley Bills assisted by Stan Marsh had responsibility for dealing with the requirements of Prime Minister Howard.



COMCAR drivers at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), Coolum, Queensland, March 2002.

The activities of the leaders remained frenetic as they repeatedly crossed the country to shore up support in marginal electorates. Journalists commented on the presidential style of the campaign, with the focus on the leaders and the close control of campaigning by party strategists who arranged leaders' itineraries in accordance with the leading issues of the day and availability of media opportunities. Consequently, decisions were made hourly, with COMCAR staff not knowing the requirements of leaders from one day to the next; arrangements made one day were frequently altered later the same day. All of this added to the stress of allocating vehicles and drivers, but was managed with less stress than would have been the case if the leaders' campaign staff had dealt directly with reservations and allocation staff.

Moreover, drivers remained at the beck and call of ministers and members of parliament until the leaders delivered their policy speeches late in the campaign. John Howard outlined the Liberal Party's policies in Brisbane on 12 November 2007; Kevin Rudd followed with the Labor policies two days later. Thereafter, the majority of politicians lost access to Commonwealth vehicles, but there remained the need to provide regular services for ministers concerned with their portfolios and others with car entitlements, such as members of the judiciary.

Matters remained busy for COMCAR personnel after the election of 24 November 2007. The election had resulted in a 6 per cent swing to Labor that unseated Prime Minister Howard in his seat of Bennelong along with many of his colleagues, and wrought a major change in the composition of the House of Representatives. The change of government and its extent created new demands on the client liaison unit that had to be addressed quickly. The accounts of those who were now former members of parliament had to be closed after the agreed time for them to vacate their Canberra and electorate offices, and accounts opened for newly elected members.

There was a brief flurry of activity when members of the new Labor caucus travelled to Canberra on 29 November, where the new ministry was named, with Liberal members of the new parliament gathering in Canberra the same day to elect a new leadership team. The demand on the service was hard to satisfy and recourse had to be made to local taxis. The heavy demand on COMCAR services remained when members of the new government returned to Canberra with their partners to be sworn in as ministers by Governor-General Michael Jeffery on 3 December 2007.

The 2007 election, with the change of government, ushered in a new political chapter in Australia. It remained to be seen whether or not the change of government corresponded with a new period of change for COMCAR.



Minister Philip Ruddock and Gary Barklay at the launch of the first protected vehicle modified in Australia.

Drivers and supervisors in Darwin
for the APEC energy ministers' meeting, 2007.



Drivers and supervisors in Hobart
for the meeting of APEC ministers responsible
for small and medium enterprises, 2007.



Managers and winners of the inaugural COMCAR awards, July 2002.
Standing, left to right: Paul Huxley, Stan Marsh, Greg Riddell, Beatrice Phillips,
Helen Goddard, Wally Stopp, Jan Mason, Ken Sweeney, Tom Robinson,
Peter Hatfield, Mark Hanley, Laurie Carbone, Susan Pitson and Daryl Chan.
Sitting, left to right: Claire Robinson, Lesley Bills, Noel Ryan, Mavis Fitzgerald,
Ross Bennett and Peter Mulheren.