



The  
**First  
Police  
Union**

*The Police Association of  
South Australia - 100 years*

Nigel Hunt

Wakefield Press

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# Foreword

This book is more than just the history of the Police Association. It sets out the evolution of the organisation, from the time it emerged as Australia's first police union to its current place within the police politic and South Australian community.

The milestone centenary of the association highlights the ongoing Australian ethos of a 'fair go' and the hope for improvement in living conditions, both at home and in the workplace.

The association's founding fathers were men of extreme courage and great conviction, committed to improving the lot of those who served the South Australian community as police officers.

Forming Australia's first industrial body for police back in 1911 came with personal ramifications for those involved. Some called them Bolsheviks and other derogatory terms during the 1918 dispute with the government.

*The First Police Union* outlines the instant transfers to which some were subjected – without appeal – and the hardship that resulted.

One of the most graphic examples of this was the summary transfer of association secretary Walter Wissell in 1918. Transferred from Adelaide to Kadina by Commissioner Thomas Edwards, he died after a violent offender assaulted him during an arrest in the main street of Wallaroo.

Many, such as Sub-inspector Fraser, suffered damage to their police careers. Fraser had been touted to become the Commissioner of Police, but had stood up to the government in a leadership role in that 1918 dispute.

Few of us can now even conceive of the attitudes of that era; and the passage of time seems to have brought about acceptance of police unions, and unions generally, as part of a free and democratic society.

While *The First Police Union* identifies the struggle for recognition, it also provides further evidence that persistence and determination always prevail.

Author Nigel Hunt has worked as a police reporter for almost 30 years. The decision to engage him to write this history has ensured a factual,

incisive look, warts and all, at the association and police issues in South Australia over 100 years.

At a time when many in the media practise sensationalism, Hunt has based his narrative on evidence. This history does not suffer from the abundant inaccuracies inherent in that sensationalist style of reporting.

Hunt takes us from the formation of the association, at a time when police had no days off and a paltry wage, through to today, a time of acceptance of the fact that police need and deserve appropriate remuneration.

The book examines the 1918 police dispute which was able to be settled without resorting to strike action, in contrast to the disastrous police strike which played out in Victoria in 1923.

*The First Police Union* covers the years of The Great Depression and post-World War II and examines the association's role in confronting the social issues of the 1960s and subsequent decades.

One paramount issue to emerge from the book is that, throughout the years, the association has been served by many dedicated individuals acting for the common good.

But, more important, it outlines that association membership, which is non-compulsory, stands at 99 per cent and is attributable to the loyalty and solidarity of the men and women who have sought to maintain the rights of individual police officers and the collective.

Often said is that we can learn from history without living in it. This book will no doubt be a valuable aid to members seeking a better understanding of association history. It also has the scope to assist future leaders and members in the noble and ever-challenging police occupation.

*Peter Alexander, APM LLB  
Past President*

# Preface

In times of affluence, the struggles of those who trod the same path decades earlier are, more often than not, forgotten. While that's applicable to many professions, it's particularly apt for police officers.

Just how many police officers who today enjoy excellent rates of pay, a generous superannuation scheme, regular days off, fair and just promotional opportunities know how they were obtained, or, for that matter, know exactly what the conditions of their colleagues were 50 years, or even a century ago?

How many police officers are aware that in 1911 – the year the Police Association of South Australia was formed – a constable was earning the princely sum of just eight shillings a day and never had a rostered day off?

Compare that to current wages, conditions and career opportunities, and then ask how they were achieved, who was responsible and what industrial battles were fought along the way?

The first police union formed in Australia, the Police Association of South Australia has risen from virtual obscurity – it was not even recognised by the government or police commissioner until 1921 – to become one of the most influential and powerful unions in South Australia.

Its achievements for members are recognised nationwide, having set the agenda in many areas. Likewise, its leadership, past and present, has been recognised nationally with successive leaders assuming key positions in the national body representing all police, the Police Federation of Australia.

Its evolution from a simple representative body for members to that of being a major player in legislative reform in the industrial and law and order fields cannot be ignored. Many of the reforms, such as radical changes to DNA legislation, have helped make South Australia a safer place by virtue of enhancing the evidence available to the courts in prosecuting criminals.

## The First Police Union

The following history of PASA is not a forensic, day-by-day account of its operations for the past 100 years. Rather, it traces its evolution, the major disputes fought for members in workplace issues and pay and conditions, its milestones and its transformation into the dynamic, proactive trade union it has become.

## CHAPTER ONE

# The first steps

In 1911 South Australia was a rapidly growing state with a population of more than 408,000 and the highest birth rate for nearly 15 years.

That year the courts convicted 73 of the 100 people charged with offences against the person or property, and forgery or currency offences. Over the previous decade seven criminals had been executed.

A police constable was paid eight shillings a day – similar to the daily wage paid to miners, watchmen and general labourers, but less than the 12 shillings a bricklayer, plasterer or stonecutter could earn.

Commonwealth figures for 1909 show local police also had a bigger task than their interstate counterparts. There were 929 South Australians per police officer – the highest ratio in the nation.

Police worked under harsh conditions – long shifts, mostly on foot, poor pay and little scope for changes. All were catalysts for unrest within the ranks and fuelled a rising tide of discontent.

It was amid those bubbling issues that the first moves for united, formal representation were hatched at a meeting of disenfranchised officers held at the City Watchhouse on January 11, 1911. Those present at that historic meeting resolved to take the first tentative steps towards affirmative action to improve the workplace. Far from militant, direct intervention, it was decided that a committee of nine be appointed by ballot to prepare a list of grievances to be submitted to Police Commissioner William Raymond and Chief Secretary Frederick Wallis of the incumbent Labor government. The ballot took place at the Watchhouse just a week later on January 18. The first Police Committee was born.

The inaugural Police Committee met for the first time on January 26 and set to work drawing up a scale of rates of pay for police, a list of allowances for uniforms and travelling, a pension scheme and the right of association. This work continued for some months and the committee eventually submitted a proposed scale of pay and allowances to the chief secretary.

Minutes of meeting of members of S. A. Police Force held in Co-Operative Hall, Angas St Adelaide on Thursday December 7<sup>th</sup> 1911 at 3.30 p.m.

Sergeant Beare occupied the chair & explained the objects of the meeting.

The rules as drawn up by the Police Committee were then submitted to the meeting.

Sergeant Holmes moved & M. C. Wells seconded that the rules set as submitted by the Committee be adopted. Carried

Sergeant Beare was then nominated for the position of President of the Police Association of S.A. He being the only nomination he was declared elected amid acclamation.

M. C. Downing was nominated for the position of Vice President & being the only nomination was declared elected by the President.

F. C. Trestail was nominated for the position of Hon. Secretary & Treasurer & being the only nomination was declared elected by the President. Detective O'Sullivan & Corporal Pethick were then nominated for the position of Committeemen & being the only nominations were declared elected by the President.

Sergeant James & Corporal Nicholson were elected as Auditors.

Hon. Secretary then read Balance Sheet of the Police Committee showing a credit balance of £5-11-10.

Resolved that the £5-11-10 be left with the Police Committee for judicious expenditure.

Receipts of the day amounted to £10-12-6.

Confirmed 4/1/12 John Beare

It was accepted. Crucially, the chief secretary also granted the committee permission to form an association. The committee proceeded to do more work on the historic initiative and held a meeting of members on October 18, 1911 which approved the formation of the Police Association of South Australia. The meeting gave the committee approval to draw up a formal list of rules and regulations for the proposed association and they were approved by the chief secretary.

It is doubtful if the Cooperative Hall had ever hosted a meeting like it.

It was 3.30 pm on Thursday, December 7, 1911 when 66 police officers gathered to discuss their grievances. But it wasn't an impromptu meeting. It was planned, had an agenda and the man chairing it knew what was about to take place.

Sergeant John Beare, the president of the Police Committee, told the historic gathering the aim of the meeting was to form a police union, an association to represent police.

He told the meeting the government had approved the formation of a Police Association, provided it was restricted to members of the force and not affiliated with any other union.

Committee member Sergeant Molloy then moved that an association be formed. It was seconded by fellow committee member Sergeant Holmes.

PASA was born by a simple resolution; one that would shape the lives, well-being and welfare of police officers from that day on. It would also play a significant role in the future direction of the police organisation. It was also the first such union in Australia.

Those behind the historic move had obviously done their homework, as a set of rules and objectives was duly placed on the table following the resolution. They were adopted by those present.

There were just four plain objectives listed. The first was to promote the interests of the police force by every means consistent with its regulations 'and with loyalty to the Government of South Australia'. The second and third objectives concerned the welfare of members and dealing with complaints and grievances, while the fourth was simply to 'encourage spirit de corps among members of the police force'.

The first listed objective was clearly a diplomatic measure. Sergeant Beare and his cohorts wanted to assure both Police Commissioner William Raymond and the government they were not a threat and, above all, were first and foremost police officers.

After the rules were adopted, the first executive committee elections followed. Not surprisingly, Sergeant Beare was elected inaugural president;

vice-president was Mounted Constable Downing and Foot Constable Trestrail was secretary/treasurer, with the committee comprising Detective O'Sullivan and Corporal Pethick. Auditors were Sergeant James and Corporal Nicholson. An amount of £16/12/6 was subscribed to start the association.<sup>1</sup>

A committee meeting held in the City Watchhouse 11 days later was told by Foot Constable Trestrail that the membership was now 114 members, each of whom had paid their annual 2/6 subscription.

President Beare resolved that the chief secretary and the police commissioner 'be officially informed that the association formed and that a copy of the constitution and rules be submitted to them for approval.'<sup>2</sup>

While Police Commissioner Raymond showed his disapproval of PASA's formation by refusing to acknowledge receipt of the rules, the chief secretary promptly signed them and returned them to PASA, indicating his official approval.

The second general meeting was held on January 4, 1912, when the first recorded grievance arose and was discussed for the entire meeting. The only resolution appearing in the minutes of that meeting concerns footwear.

It reads: 'That a request be forwarded to the Commissioner asking that the foot police, while on duty, be allowed to wear plain toed lace-up boots or a plain elastic side boot.'<sup>3</sup>

The motion was carried unanimously and the meeting declared closed. Heady stuff indeed.

Just two meetings were held between January 30 and November 29, 1912. While the reasons for this are unknown because none are documented in the early minutes, the fact that Secretary Trestrail and Sergeant James tendered their resignations at the November 29 meeting can be interpreted in two ways – either pressure from those running the police force because of their disapproval of PASA or just simple apathy on the behalf of the rank-and-file. The former is the most likely explanation.

The fact the Labor government was replaced in February 1912 also contributed to the lack of activity. The conservative Peake government did not approve of PASA and it can be construed it was thought best that PASA maintain a low profile.

It was at a meeting in the Cooperative Hall on January 9, 1913 that perhaps the first signs of industrial agitation surfaced. A notice of motion was put forward, and carried, that one Sunday in every four be given off. An executive committee meeting at the City Watchhouse on January 20 resolved to write to Police Commissioner Raymond concerning days off for some constables.

In the letter, penned by Secretary Downing, who was elected following Trestrail's resignation in November, he gave the commissioner the background to the request, adding that the resolution had been carried unanimously.

He politely and carefully explained the resolution was to ask for 'a Sunday off duty being granted to all constables where two or more are now stationed'.<sup>4</sup>

He suggested a system in place in Western Australia at the time – which gave constables every fourth Sunday off – be considered, and he offered in support the fact that police in NSW received every other Sunday off, in addition to their 28 days annual leave entitlement.

'And in further support, the executive committee respectfully beg to remind you that for several years half the morning watch were allowed off duty on Sundays and at an interview granted to the committee by the late Hon. Chief Secretary Frederick Wallis he assured the committee in your presence that on the force being strengthened the Sunday off would be again restored to them,' Downing wrote.

He added that the Sunday off was discontinued because the strength of the metropolitan police conducting foot patrols was low – 89 officers – whereas at the time of the letter being written it had increased to 126 officers which was 'a very substantial increase'.

Not surprisingly, the letter was ignored and it was not until March 10 a reply was received. It indicated that the request had also fallen on deaf ears.

An April 8 letter to the commissioner from Secretary Downing was a clear attempt to have the commissioner reconsider.

He stated the committee had directed him to 'write to assure you that they have no desire whatever to interfere with the discipline and administration of the service, but to state that their anxiety is to uphold discipline and bring under your notice all matters that may tend to the betterment of the force'.<sup>5</sup>

The committee was clearly not finished with the issue, but other matters were also looming that warranted PASA's attention. The committee had been agitating for the establishment of a pension fund similar to one operating in NSW and, after years of demands, had won a breakthrough.

While there had been an agreement reached, no detail on structure, content or benefits had been provided to PASA by the government. A committee meeting at the City Watchhouse on May 2, 1913, resolved to write to the chief secretary seeking details of the proposed Police Pensions Bill.

'The men are most anxious to know the provisions of the proposed Bill ...' Secretary Downing wrote in his subsequent letter.<sup>6</sup>

At the next committee meeting a month later it was noted there had been no reply from the chief secretary and it was resolved a letter seeking a reply would be dashed off. The meeting was then adjourned because there was no reply to discuss and no other business to attend to.

At the July 3 general meeting the gathering was told there had been no reply to the letter seeking details of the Bill. It resolved to seek a meeting with the chief secretary to discuss issues including recreation and sick leave and 'an adequate retiring allowance'.<sup>7</sup>

A fortnight later a committee meeting decided to delay sending the letter until after the next parliamentary sitting session in order to ascertain the content of the Pension Bill.

But much to the executive's disappointment, this debate did not occur and in September another letter was sent to the chief secretary requesting a meeting to discuss the Bill. A response essentially told PASA to butt out and that the Bill would be presented to parliament when the government was ready to do so.<sup>8</sup>

The reply prompted Sergeant Beare to put pen to paper. He wrote a forthright letter to the chief secretary which left no doubt as to his intense frustration at the situation.

It outlined the history of police pensions, in particular the situation of members who joined prior to 1904. Those in that category received a pension under the *Police Fund Distribution Act 1904* that entitled them to a payout of three quarters of a month's pay for each year of service prior to 1894. Prior to that Act they retired on a payout of one month's pay for every year of service, covered by a moiety fund. Police who joined after 1904 were covered under the Public Service Superannuation fund.

The introduction of the 1904 Act also meant those who joined after 1894 and 1904 were not covered by any scheme whatsoever.

'Consequently, there are now in the service over 100 men who have become members during that period who have absolutely no claim to any pension whatever,' Sergeant Beare wrote.

'It would be manifestly unfair then, to retire these men except under the same provisions as applied to those who joined prior to the year 1894.'<sup>9</sup>

In his letter Sergeant Beare said police were 'suspicious' that the Public Service Superannuation Board would not want to see around 200 of its police members lost if a new police fund was established, hinting that may have been behind the delay in the Bill.

'... I respectfully beg, on behalf of every member of the police force, that

no person – even the management of the Public Superannuation Fund – be allowed to intervene and jeopardise our chances of success,’ he wrote.

‘The police have every confidence in the government, and especially the Hon. the Chief Secretary, who must have taken considerable trouble to get possession of facts relating to the provisions necessary for the needs of the service, but they cannot understand why the delay in the preparation of the Bill, should anything happen to the Hon. the Chief Secretary, all the work that has been done would have to be gone over again and then another delay of a year or so.

‘For that reason we ask that the Bill may be introduced in the House this session.’

Surprisingly, for the next 15 months the fledgling PASA was practically inactive. At a special general meeting held on April 14, 1915 (only a very short committee meeting was held on August 24, 1914), President Beare explained to the 40 police officers present why this tactic had been adopted.

He explained the government was against the association and it was ‘thought best to keep quiet’ and wait for results. It was also decided to wait six months to let the new Labor government led by Premier Crawford Vaughan settle in before pushing any old matters.

Despite this, a resolution was carried to reignite the days off issue once again with a request to the police commissioner to grant one day off in every four for foot police in the metropolitan area.

The next general meeting was held on October 19, 1915, specifically to discuss the public actuary’s report to government on police pensions. Many of those present believed sections of the report were wrong and it was resolved to alert the government to these concerns. That may have been the case, but the government had no intention of putting the scheme through anyway because it believed it was ‘too costly’ based on the actuary’s figures.<sup>10</sup>

The meeting resolved to employ a suitable ‘competent man to frame a Bill as early as possible’.

The general apathy towards PASA came to the fore when the annual general meeting held on December 4, 1915, had to be cancelled because of lack of interest. Only President Beare, Secretary Downing and seven metropolitan police turned up.

At the reconvened meeting on December 21 the president and secretary were re-elected. The main topics discussed were the retirement age, which police wanted fixed at 60, and the Pensions Bill.

With the apathy of members obviously playing on the executive’s minds,

a committee meeting the following month resolved to form sub-committees of PASA at locations including Port Pirie, Port Augusta, Mt Gambier and Port Adelaide 'as it would tend to strengthen and increase the interest' of members who could forward any propositions through them.<sup>11</sup>

This was also a brave move because neither the government nor commissioner approved of PASA's existence, let alone the spread of its tentacles to other parts of the police force to boost its position and standing.

The next committee meeting on January 20, 1916 was consumed with discussions on the pension scheme, mainly around the contentious retirement age clause. It was resolved once again that the retirement age be 60 years after five years of the passing of the Act. A sliding scale to give older members five years' notice was also proposed, and would see a police officer who was 60 retire at 65, one who was 59 would retire at 64 and so on 'unless they decided to retire early'.<sup>12</sup>

A special general meeting of PASA held six days later at the Cooperative Hall also saw the Pensions Bill discussed, but the meeting was dominated by a more serious issue – the future of PASA.

Still plagued by general apathy – just 28 police officers attended the meeting – the executive was clearly frustrated and believed the time had come to make a decision.

President Beare told the gathered officers what PASA had so far achieved and then 'reluctantly' asked those present if they considered it 'advisable to go on with the Association or that it be disbanded'. His clear dismay at the lack of interest in PASA meetings was evident.<sup>13</sup>

A proposed ballot of all police officers on that question did not go ahead. Instead, it was resolved that notices would be sent to members advising them of the proposed continuation of the association. Before the meeting adjourned it was resolved that more amendments be made to the Pensions Bill concerning retirement age and that a 'legal man to put the above sections into proper form' be engaged.<sup>14</sup>

It had taken several years of agitating, but it had finally happened – the government was willing to put the Pension Bill through parliament, with PASA's required changes. In early 1916 PASA representatives and Superintendent Edward Priest, the police commissioner's representative, met with the chief secretary to discuss the Bill.

At a committee meeting in the Watchhouse on April 6, 1916, Superintendent Priest briefed the executive on the discussions with the chief secretary and explained how the different sections would operate. At a committee meeting

on April 11 it was decided President Beare should meet with the public actuary to discuss the Bill. The same week a copy of the draft Bill was provided to executive committee for perusal.

At a special general meeting called on June 14, 1916, Superintendent Priest was called on to explain the Bill to the 60 police officers present. Another special general meeting held on August 17, 1916, which was attended by Superintendent Priest – then acting police commissioner and the public actuary – the merits of both the Police Pensions Bill and the Public Service Pension Bill were discussed. On this occasion 200 police officers attended. The meeting resolved that police should have their own pension fund, consistent with what was proposed in the Pensions Bill.

Not long after that productive meeting a committee meeting, also attended by Superintendent Priest, resolved to write to the chief secretary asking him to ‘urge the government to pass the Police Pensions Bill in its entirety’ as that was the wish of the members of the police force.<sup>15</sup> And it did. Although passed through parliament in November, the *Police Pensions Act 1916* would not start until July 1, 1917. After years of preparation, debate over content and amendments, police now had their own pension scheme. It was a major milestone for PASA, thanks particularly to the efforts of inaugural president John Beare.

Under the Act police would contribute between £8.0.0 and £10.8.0 a year, depending on their rank. Retiring age was fixed at 60 years, and although there were exceptions none could exceed 65 years, and those who joined prior to 1904 were accepted into the fund.

It provided for a pension of £130 a year, paid monthly. This scheme would stand until 1929 when it was amended with the *Police Pensions Act 1929*, which placed an absolute retirement age of 60 on all police officers and raised the police pension to £208 annually.