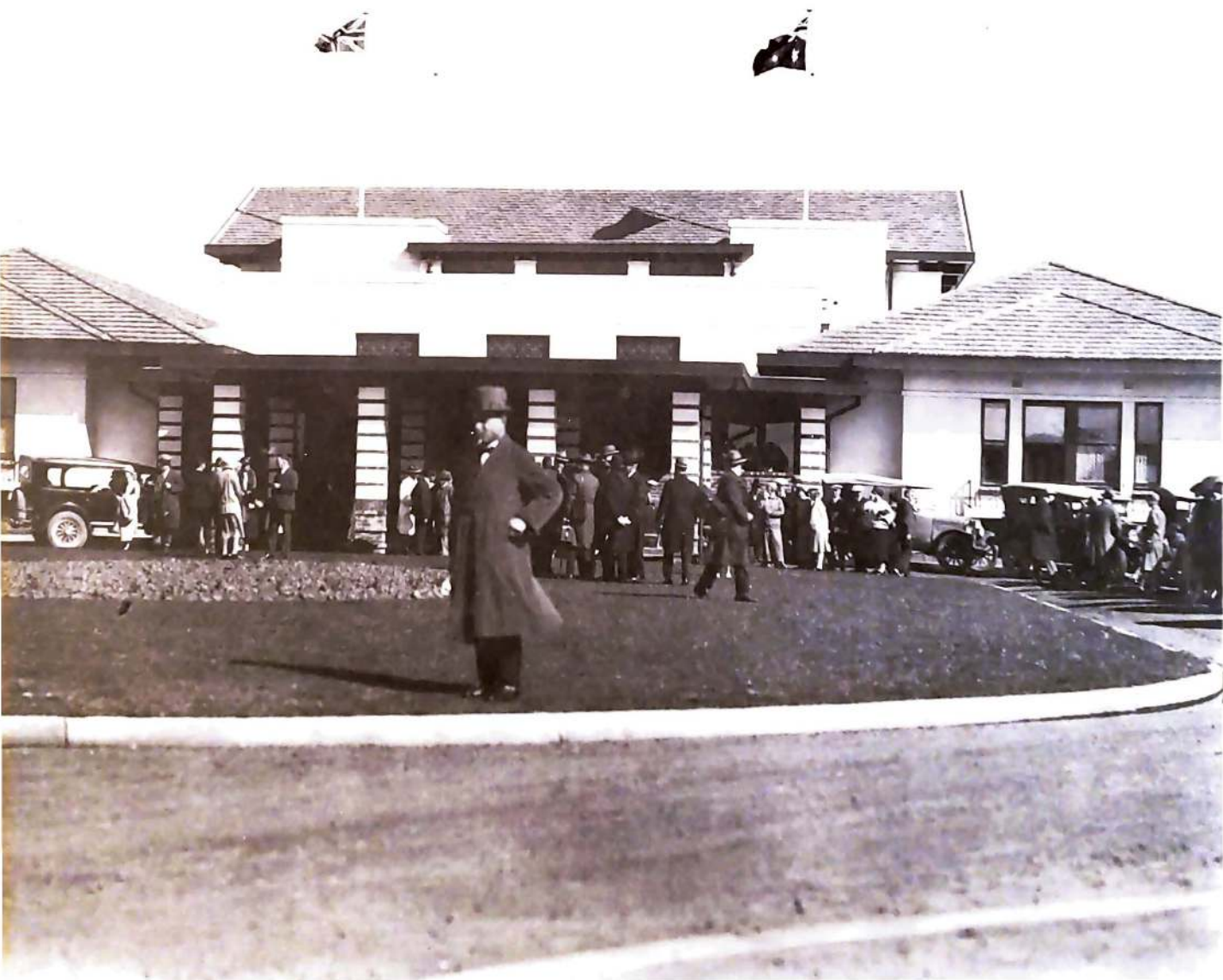


HYATT HOTEL CANBERRA
A HISTORY



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IN JANUARY 1921 Parliament decreed that Canberra needed to provide suitable accommodation for Parliamentarians and visitors to the national capital. John Smith Murdoch, the Commonwealth Architect who later drew up plans for Old Parliament House, based the original design for the hotel on the old Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, now destroyed.

The 'Hostel Canberra' opened its doors to the public on 10 December 1924 and immediately became a meeting place for both residents and visitors to the national capital. Labelled a hostel because of the ban on the sale of alcohol which prevented the existence of hotels in the normal sense, the name was soon altered to 'Hotel Canberra' after the ban on alcohol was rescinded.

Designed as a showpiece, the Hotel Canberra was constructed in the Prairie style of architecture and evoked the serene and welcoming atmosphere of a country estate. Its precise angular forms, white rough-cast walls and red-tiled roofs, coupled with the arrangement of the pavilions around two garden courtyards, set a popular standard for subsequent buildings in Canberra.

Initially designed with the capacity for 180 guests when it first opened, not all of the hotel's pavilions were used for accommodation. One section of the hotel was designated office space for government departments in the 1920's, with a second pavilion storing the equipment of the Mount Stromlo observatory while the facility was under construction.

As the only building with 'lock-up' facilities, the Hotel Canberra often accommodated alleged offenders before their transfer from Canberra, while juries deliberated their fate in another pavilion. Another part of the hotel was converted into a temporary dance hall, with the internal partitions omitted, a tallow-wood floor laid and a player piano and gramophone installed. Dressed in their velvet and taffeta, lace and jewels, Canberra's socialites would assemble in the lavishly decorated ballroom for evenings of fun and frivolity.

The Hotel Canberra was for many years an important part of the social and political life of Canberra. It is said more dastardly plots were contrived and consummated in the smoke-filled public rooms and elegant, private suites of the Hotel Canberra in its halcyon days than in any other building in the national capital since! The most famous visitors slept under its roof. Ruling gentry, exalted statesmen and other distinguished visitors jostled in its corridors. Philandering gentry whispered there to lady loves, lobbyists cornered Ministers, a thousand toasts were drunk and the Canberra cocktail society launched.

Perhaps the hotel's most famous long term resident was the Labour Prime Minister, Mr James Scullin, after whom the hotel has since named one of its pavilions. In 1929, at the beginning of the depression, Mr Scullin and his wife moved to the Hotel Canberra rather than authorise the expense of living in the Prime Minister's Lodge. Mr and Mrs Scullin took a suite in the hotel where, with the exception of being sheltered in the dining room by a high screen, they lived as ordinary guests. During the bleak depression years, Scullin adopted the habit of changing notes for shillings with the hotel's cashiers which he then threw to people on the long journey by road to either Sydney or Melbourne.

Described as the 'second Parliament House', the hotel was often the focus of plot making and political intrigue. In October 1941, the Hotel Canberra was the scene of intense political lobbying when the fate of Arthur Fadden's government relied on the votes of two independent members in the residence at the hotel. Great schemes were hatched in the lobby to win the independents over, but ultimately John Curtin's Labour government took power in a period of war-time crisis.

The end of an era was witnessed on 13 May, 1974 when the Hotel Canberra closed its doors after 50 years. After the last breakfast was served in the graceful dining hall, the few remaining guests checked out of the hotel. Amid much speculation, the building was converted into government office space.

The hotel reopened as Canberra's only five star property in 1988, under the management of Hyatt International. The original section of the hotel has been faithfully restored to its Art Deco grace and charm with extensive renovations elevating the hotel to the prestigious Park Hyatt branding. The atmosphere is one of a welcoming 'home away from home', a genteel estate surrounded by landscaped lawns and gardens.

A sense of history echoes through the building, born of a tradition of serving prime ministers, power brokers, industry leaders and visiting heads of state. For those who feel nostalgia for Australia's past and passion for her future, Hyatt Hotel Canberra is an experience to be treasured.

HYATT HOTEL CANBERRA™

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