



Hansard Daily

Legislative Council: Thursday, November 03, 2022

Daily XML

OVERLAND TELEGRAPH LINE



The Hon. E.S. BOURKE (15:46): I move:

That this council—

1. Recognises 15 November 2022 as the 150th anniversary of the state celebration of the completion of the Overland Telegraph Line;
2. Acknowledges the important social, technological and economic contribution the creator of the Overland Telegraph Line, Sir Charles Todd and his team, have made connecting South Australia to the rest of the world through the creation of the Overland Telegraph Line;
3. Acknowledges that there is an important First Nations story to be told that will better enrich our understanding of the significant part of Australia's history; and
4. Recognises our great state's pioneering history in bold investments, from the Overland Telegraph Line, the world's first big battery, to our future green hydrogen industry.

I am very proud to be able to speak to this motion today and to celebrate an historic event in our state's history book. I often refer to *Hansard* as our state's storybook. In *Hansard* we can go back and see a time line of our state's historic events, from wars to pandemics, to celebrations of some of our state's greatest heroes from our past, our present and perhaps even future outstanding members of our community.

Indeed, SA Parliament and *Hansard* can be an important place to celebrate and shine a light on some of the pillars of our community. It is a place where we can record their stories in our state's history book, and they stay there forever. That is exactly what I would like to do today. I would like to speak about the change that the Overland Telegraph Line brought to our community, and also to the rest of the world, thanks to Sir Charles Todd and his team.

Today, many South Australia's may be unaware of who Sir Charles Todd was. It is not a person's name that is often referred to when you are asking: who are iconic South

Australians? Most people would be aware of Lleyton Hewitt or Haigh's Chocolates or even the Malls Balls or Paul Kelly, perhaps before they know about who Charles Todd was. I have to admit the same. It was not until I was contacted by the Charles Todd Foundation that I became aware of the significance of who Charles Todd was.

Quite often we sit in this parliament, in these very chairs, and it is easy to forget the history and the past that came before us, but it is really important that we do remember because the decisions that are made in parliament can change our state forever—hopefully for the better. Sir Charles Todd was certainly one of those individuals who went to the parliament and made a difference, not only to our state but to our country. It was Sir Charles Todd, if you were ever wondering when you switch on a light, who made that possible. He brought light to this building, to Parliament House, in 1890. But that was, by far, the least of his achievements. So, who is this mysterious Charles Todd?

Sir Charles Todd was born in London and moved to South Australia in 1855, tasked with the role of observing and being the superintendent of electric telegraph for the South Australian government. In those days, communication in and out of Australia could take years. Ships that would carry letters between England and Australia could take eight months either way, meaning having a conversation between family and friends and loved ones could potentially take years. There are many stories that were given to me about how a loved one could pass away here in our colony and family back home in England were to wait at least two years for that letter to go from here and back again to share the sad news of the passing of a loved one.

Importantly, though, this delay also hindered Australia's ability to trade and communicate with the rest of the world, and the Overland Telegraph Line was instrumental in changing all of this. For the few of us who are less aware of what an electrical telegraph line is, essentially it was a technology that was developed in both Britain and America in the 1830s. It used an electrical cable to send short messages that were coded in a series of electrical pulses taking the shape of dots and dashes. It does not sound very exciting but it changed the world.

While the science behind telegrams can be confusing, at its core this technology allowed messages to be sent to people thousands of kilometres away in countries all around the world, in minutes rather than months. But for Australia to be connected to the rest of the world a major engineering challenge would have to be overcome. A telegraph line had to be built between southern and northern Australia, where it would be connected to a line that was being built across the other side of the world—and the lines would meet in Darwin.

The race was literally on in regard to which colony would get the ability and the funding to build this incredible piece of engineering, and it was South Australia who won that race. It happened right in our Old Chamber, behind the very desks that remain there today. It is a story I love telling people who come into our Old Chamber. We are known for many of our firsts, being the first state to allow women to have not only the right to vote but also to stand in parliament. We are also a parliament that should be very proud of the bold initiatives we have been willing to take to enable us to change not only our state but our country, right here in our parliament.

It was because of this decision by our parliament that we were able to go ahead and build something that had never been achieved before. It was Charles Todd who stepped in to build this incredible piece of engineering.

In July 1870, South Australia's Superintendent of Telegraphs, Sir Charles Todd, was tasked to be the planner, designer and driving force behind one of South Australia's greatest infrastructure projects, the Overland Telegraph Line. In the same month, he chose an exploration party to survey the route the proposed telegraph cable would take. While the First Nations people had travelled on this land for thousands of years and knew of its waterholes and other resources, the exploration feat was undertaken at a time when Australia was sparsely populated by European settlers, to whom much of the land was a great unknown.

Importantly, these explorations informed the way for the route of the Overland Telegraph and gave Sir Charles Todd the confidence that his bold plan was possible—and possible it was. Just over two years later, on 22 August 1872, the line was completed. The completion sparked great celebration in Australia, but particularly in Adelaide, and even prompted Governor Fergusson to declare a public holiday in South Australia. On 15 November 1872, 150 years ago almost to the day, the state hosted a banquet at the Adelaide Town Hall to celebrate the completion of the Overland Telegraph Line.

The completion of the line meant that Australia was connected to the world, and news that had previously taken months to reach England now could be transmitted within just hours. Importantly, Australia was no longer isolated from the rest of the world and our trade markets boomed.

Newspapers at the time often printed sections by-lined 'by Electric Telegraph', and businesses clamoured for news from the European markets. Telegraph offices, especially in regions, became centres of trade where information and banking were transacted and where orders were placed. Indeed, farmers were some of the biggest beneficiaries of the completion of the Overland Telegraph Line as it enabled them to negotiate better prices for their wheat and other exports before shipping.

Without these communication tools being made available to them, they were not able to trade in an open and transparent way. They were literally trading blind. The Overland Telegraph Line opened Australia's eyes to the world and, importantly, the world now saw Australia as a land of trade opportunities. The line also provided our state with a new employment opportunity. The use of batteries became integral to the line, as it required a constant and continuous charge to function and send messages and information.

There is a good story behind the battery. We think we are the state that built the first biggest battery, but we also built batteries at the very beginning to make this feat of engineering achievable. The reason the batteries were required was that the line was built in Australia, where there is so much open space, and it was hard to know where a break in the line occurred. They had to attach a battery along the line so that they could send an electrical current through and find where the break in the line was.

Apparently, one of the biggest reasons for the breaks in the line was kids who got a little bit bored and would throw stones at the line and break it. The electrical currents helped find where the problems were. Battery rooms then became an important part of the telegraph stations, requiring workers to constantly maintain the batteries to keep the lines transmitting information and messages. I believe in some parts these batteries are still used today.

The Overland Telegraph Line also helped provide new technologies that we often now take for granted. In 1885, the line helped provide electricity to the very first house in Australia,

which was John Hullett's house in Port Augusta. John connected to the line. He was doing research in England, through the use of the line, about how to bring electricity to his home.

His main motivation for bringing electricity to his home was he wanted light in his living room for his family and also the ability for his wife to sew clothing. He was able to connect to this line and unlock an opportunity for him to have light in his home. He also made history by becoming the first home in Australia to have electricity, and it was in Port Augusta. In 1885, John Hullett made history by not only lighting his dining room but also working with Sir Charles Todd to provide light in this very building.

Sir Charles Todd was a man of many talents. His legacy lives on far beyond his passing in 1910. He was South Australia's Postmaster-General and the government's technical expert, and he often referred to himself as the government electrician. He was influential in setting up the first electrical engineering course in SA and is believed to be one of the first to suggest that local climate is affected by global phenomena. He was the man responsible for lighting up this very building, as I have said previously.

He was not the only famous person in his family on his journey building the Overland line; Alice Springs was named after his wife, Alice Gillam Bell. Sir Charles Todd had been a public servant for 64 years, 50 of them in the service of South Australia. We can only imagine his delight in the bold, pioneering technological achievements of our great state that have been able to follow from what he was able to do in the late 1800s.

We have seen the world's largest battery in Jamestown. Now, we are establishing our future green hydrogen industry. These bold projects join South Australia's growing pioneering legacy and stand next to creations such as what Charles Todd was able to achieve, for it is decisions such as the building of the Overland Telegraph Line that show how lasting reforms and change are often made through parliament looking to the future and acting on bold reforms. However, sometimes in order to look to the future, it is important to look back on our past first.

To mark the 150th anniversary, a new research project led by experts from the National Communications Museum and Professor Marcia Langton AO will use archival material to tell the story of the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line through the eyes of Australia's First Nations communities, providing a new and important perspective into what has largely been a one-sided story.

All South Australians and Australians benefit from a more truthful and complete telling of an important story such as the Overland Telegraph Line, and I look forward to seeing this project developed over the coming months. I commend the late Sir Charles Todd for his service and the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Overland line. I look forward to hearing more of this story as we celebrate its achievements and what it is doing to build our very bold state in South Australia.

Debate adjourned on motion of Hon. L.A. Curran.