



Natasha Griggs

Administrator of Christmas Island
Administrator of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands



Community Bulletin

Airport Terminal building to be named after champion of workers' rights on Christmas Island

Number: A58/2018

Date: 28 September 2018

The Commonwealth-owned Christmas Island airport terminal building will be officially named the Gordon Bennett Terminal on Saturday, 29 September, 2018 in recognition of the late Gordon Bennett and the role he played in achieving justice and equality for all on Christmas Island.

This week the Christmas Island community celebrates the 60th anniversary of the transfer of sovereignty of Christmas Island to the Commonwealth of Australia which occurred on 1 October, 1958. It is a time to reflect and acknowledge our history.

Given our harmonious community now, it is hard to believe that from settlement in the nineteenth century to as late as the early 1980's, Christmas Island had different working and living conditions depending on where you were born. That is, Australian-born workers' pay, conditions and even the type of housing provided was significantly better than those workers doing the same job but born in Singapore, Malaysia or China.

Furthermore, until this time Asian-born mine workers could be deported with a 'NTR' (Not to Return), even if they had contributed their life's work to Australia. Some of our current and recent Christmas Island residents still recall seeing their father being deported, not knowing when their families would be reunited.

So many families in our community were impacted by these conditions. Mr Lai Ah Hong, Managing Director of Phosphate Resources Limited, who moved to Christmas Island in 1978 for work was no exception as he was classified as a Malaysian-born worker. Reflecting on those days Mr Lai said "*I joined my good friend Gordon Bennett and many others to challenge the injustice of different working conditions for Asian-born workers. It took a while but we did it. We got pay equality and citizenship rights for all*".

History shows us that Gordon Bennett was the leading advocate for ending the British Phosphate Commission's (BPC) and Phosphate Mining Company of Christmas Island's (PMCI) racist colonial practices which clearly discriminated against Christmas Islanders of Asian descent working at the phosphate mine.

PO Box 868, Christmas Island INDIAN OCEAN 6798

Telephone: +61 8 9164 7960



While some have and probably will continue to question his methods there is no denying that Gordon Bennett fought for and achieved:

- putting an end to BPC's and PMCI's racist colonial practices;
- wage parity for Christmas Island mine workers;
- democratic and Australian citizenship rights for all Christmas Islanders;
- improved working and living conditions on Christmas Island; and
- the ongoing operation of the phosphate mine (which became Christmas Island Phosphates and still operates today).

In the late-1980s, Gordon also fought to ensure the ongoing operation of the phosphate mine, and took the challenge all the way to the High Court of Australia in a bid to forge a long-term future for the Christmas Island community.

At the time, the phosphate mine was the biggest employer on island – not much has changed over the past forty years with the mine still playing that important economic role.

While many other mining companies have adopted a fly-in/fly-out workforce, Christmas Island Phosphate's workforce is largely locally based and still providing job opportunities for Christmas Islanders. The current mine manager is a born and bred Christmas Islander, Mr. Eric Chong.

The long campaigns for equality and justice led by Gordon Bennett were often fought on the steps of Parliament House in Canberra. The constant travel demands meant that the airport terminal quickly became a focal point for large community gatherings where some of the most pivotal and significant decisions were communicated to the community. It is for these reasons that it is appropriate to name the Airport terminal building after Gordon Bennett.

Twenty-seven years after his passing, Gordon Bennett's legacy still benefits Christmas Islanders today.

Natasha Griggs
Administrator
Territories of Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Island