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## Chapter 12

### **Electricity: Joining the twentieth century.**

It could be argued that a town that cannot provide its inhabitants with modern amenities such as water, electricity, and good roads, has serious problems. The lack of these amenities often causes an exodus of younger people, and especially of families, from such towns. It is also a deterrent to new settlers, and a hindrance to economic growth. Many factors contribute to the inability to supply the amenities that the majority of people see as essential to modern living. For instance, the town could be too small to justify the necessary expenditure, or it might lack the political "muscle" to secure Government funding.

Cooktown's experience shows that a combination of factors prevented the town from truly joining the twentieth century until over half that century had passed. The town's efforts to secure modern amenities, especially electricity, were hindered by its lack of population, and its poor economic base. Even when Cooktown was offered the chance to secure these amenities from a private source, suspicion and distrust of the "new" prevented the town from taking advantage of the situation. Bureaucratic intransigence also contributed to the problem. The inability of various Government bureaucracies to cooperate prevented Cooktown getting a reticulated electricity supply much sooner than it did. Electricity was available in Cairns in 1925, but although the first proposal to supply Cooktown came in 1933, it was not until 1960 that it received a service that was generally regarded as an essential to

modern life. When it was provided, the cost was greater than it need have been.

After World War Two, the electricity supply industry in Queensland was dominated almost exclusively by semi-Government organisations. However, before that, the private sector supplied many areas. In many cases, businesses had generators for their own use, and the supply from these was frequently shared. For instance, before Cooktown got a reticulated supply the Convent, Sovereign Hotel and two butcher shops had generators. So did the hospital, but its plant was obsolete and needed replacing. This would be costly and the supply would still be limited. A reticulated supply would allow an x-ray machine and diathermy apparatus to be installed.

### **Electric Light, Power And Development Co.**

Private companies were usually the first to supply reticulated electricity in the larger towns. Cooktown's first proposal for a commercial electricity supply came from E.C. Collins, an "Electrical & Mechanical Engineer", of Brisbane, in 1933. The idea was too radical for some Council members. For instance, Councillor Summerhayes thought the provision of electric light in Cooktown was "looking too far ahead", but the Council voted to seek further information.<sup>1103</sup> Collins proposed to form a public company, with shares reserved for Cooktown residents. He told the Council that it would need to get an Order-in-Council for the project to proceed. He assured Council that if the scheme went ahead, it would not be liable for any expense, as the Franchisee would carry all

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<sup>1103</sup> Cook Shire Council Minutes, 6 November 1933.

costs.<sup>1104</sup> The Council did not have the funds to supply the town with power itself, so Collins' offer was welcome. A sub-committee was formed to consider issues such as proposed rates for the supply of power, and the time frame for the franchise. Collins was also asked if the proposal included an option for the Council to purchase bulk electricity and distribute the power itself.<sup>1105</sup>

Collins wanted to adopt the method used by the Western Australian Government, which included a franchise for ten years, after which the local authority had the right to purchase the facility. Another ten-year franchise would apply if the local authority did not take up the option. The proposed pricing schedule was similar to the State Government's preferred model. As a sweetener, Collins said the local authority would get further concessions, with power for street lighting and water pumping at slightly above cost.<sup>1106</sup>

Collins offered the Council the alternative of a bulk supply of power, which it could sell on to the consumers. However, before he could give a quote, the Council had to nominate its requirements and guarantee to purchase that amount each month. It would need to employ at least one person, at a rate of £5/10/0 to £6/0/0 per week. Power would be supplied by a three-phase, fifty-cycle plant producing 440/250 volt A.C. current.<sup>1107</sup>

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<sup>1104</sup> E.C. Collins, Electrical & Mechanical Engineer, Brisbane, to The Chairman and Councillors, Shire of Cooktown, Cooktown, 22 September 1933. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1105</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Mr. E.C. Collins, Sth. Brisbane, 7 November 1933. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1106</sup> E.C. Collins, Electrical Engineer, Sth. Brisbane, to Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 12 December 1933. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1107</sup> Ibid.

The Company, Electric Light, Power And Development Co., issued a prospectus offering 5,500 shares at £1 each. It estimated that the cost of supplying a power station and reticulation system within a two-mile radius of the town would be £4,500. Collins estimated that 125 consumers would connect to the system, paying an average of £12 per year each for power. The Council also wanted ten street lights, which would cost £75 per annum for maintenance and power. The Company expected revenue of £1,575 for the first year of operation, with a profit of £322.<sup>1108</sup>

The Council Committee approved the franchise, with the proviso that the scheme start within two years.<sup>1109</sup> However, Collins wanted to amend the contract to give the franchisee rights to supply power to the town for forty-two years. This would relieve the Company of the necessity of applying for a new Order-in-Council every ten years if the Council did not want to purchase the facility.<sup>1110</sup> Council would retain the right to purchase the facility as before. Despite the Council's acceptance of the proposal, the project did not proceed. There is no evidence to indicate why the project never eventuated, but it is obvious that Cooktown's economic position was poor. Given the world-wide depression of the 1930s, it would be difficult to justify investment in an electricity supply for Cooktown, and the Company probably failed to attract enough investors.

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<sup>1108</sup> Prospectus, Electric Light, Power, And Development Co., Cooktown, Nth Queensland. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1109</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Mr. E.C. Collins, Brisbane, 11 April 1934. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1110</sup> E.C. Collins, Sth Brisbane, to The Chairman and Councillors, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, (N.D.). Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

After the collapse of Collins' scheme, the Council made inquiries about connecting to the Cairns Hydro scheme.<sup>1111</sup> Although the local Member, H.H. Collins, supported the proposal, the Commission decided that the supply of electricity to Cooktown was not viable.<sup>1112</sup> In retrospect the Commission's decision was correct. Even with today's technological advantages, such as helicopters to check the transmission line and all-terrain vehicles, the supply from Cairns is frequently interrupted.

### **War surplus generators.**

The Shire Council saw a chance to get an electricity supply for the town after World War Two. The Commonwealth Disposals Commission had two 25kVA generating sets, which had been used at the radar station, and the Council was asked to make an offer for them. Similar sets had recently sold for £730 each.<sup>1113</sup> However, the Council had few financial resources, and its offer of £600 for both generators was rejected by the Commonwealth.

The State Government was again asked to help, as by this time it had instituted a scheme to subsidise electricity undertakings. However, the Premier said that the State Electricity Commission had rejected the possibility of establishing an electricity supply at Cooktown. Despite the subsidy, such a scheme would still leave an annual deficit of at least £1,250. A proposal to offer a 50% subsidy would still result in a loss of £1,075 per annum. He said the Government recognised the

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<sup>1111</sup> Cooktown Independent & Northern Sun, 20 January 1936.

<sup>1112</sup> Chairman, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to H.H. Collins, M.L.A., Parliament House, Brisbane, 11 January 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

disadvantages of isolated communities and was investigating ways to help.<sup>1114</sup>

Councillors saw this as just another stalling tactic. It accepted an offer from several of the local businesses to supply current to street lights in Charlotte Street, the main thoroughfare, and moved to install the necessary poles and lights.<sup>1115</sup> Attempts to secure a power supply to the Council Chambers proved more difficult. The Councillors got a taste of the drawbacks of generating sets when Mrs Monro, the owner of the Sovereign Hotel, offered to supply the Chambers building with electric light at ten shillings per week. However, the limited capacity of the hotel's generator excluded the use of many appliances that drew heavy loads.<sup>1116</sup> The Council also criticised the scale of charges as excessive. Mrs Monro was reminded that the Council needed lights for only three nights each month.<sup>1117</sup> She conceded that the Council might use the chambers only three times each month, but pointed out that the meetings often went on until well after midnight, and she had to stay awake to turn off the engine. She suggested that the Council should recoup some of the costs by charging the organisations that used the

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<sup>1113</sup> H.E. Steel, District Superintendent, Commonwealth Disposals Commission, Department Of Supply And Shipping, Townsville, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 19 November 1945. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1114</sup> E.M. Hanlon, Premier, Premier's Department, Brisbane, to The Hon. H.H. Collins, M.L.A., Secretary for Agriculture and Stock, Brisbane, 9 October 1946. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1115</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Mrs. I. Wallace, Hotel Commercial, Cooktown, 15 October 1946. (Copies also to the Sovereign Hotel and the Endeavour Butchering Company). Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1116</sup> I. Monro, Sovereign Hotel, Cooktown, to The Shire Clerk, Cooktown, 15 August 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1117</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Mrs. I. Monro, Sovereign Hotel, Cooktown, 16 September 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

rooms for meetings a small fee.<sup>1118</sup> Neither side would give ground, and the idea was dropped.<sup>1119</sup>

### **Roaring Meg hydro scheme.**

Despite the setbacks, the Council proved that it was persistent, and could be innovative. When the State Electricity Commission rejected its request for a reticulated power supply, Council suggested the installation of a Hydro Electricity Scheme at the Roaring Meg Falls near Bloomfield. It claimed that water could be brought by race to a point where sufficient volume and speed could be achieved to operate a turbine. The volume of water crossing the falls had not been measured, but the large flow available during the current severe drought boded well for a permanent supply.<sup>1120</sup> The Council was assured that the feasibility of the scheme would be investigated.<sup>1121</sup>

The State Electricity Commission asked the engineers at the Stanley River Works Board for an opinion on the viability of the proposal. It reported that the creek feeding the Roaring Meg Falls currently provided sufficient water for a six-inch pipe for tin sluicing at China Camp. With a head of 1,000 feet, a turbine could produce 300 kW of power during drought times, and 600 kW for most of the year. The project would require the construction of a transmission line of forty miles to Cooktown. Ayton, a small settlement between the falls and

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<sup>1118</sup> I. Monro, Sovereign Hotel, Cooktown, to Shire Clerk, Cooktown, 8 October 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1119</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Mrs. I. Monro, Sovereign Hotel, Cooktown, 20 October 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1120</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Secretary, State Electricity Commission, Brisbane, 22 November 1946. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1121</sup> Secretary, Cairns Regional Electricity Board, Cairns to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 3 December 1946. Secretary, The State Electricity

Cooktown, could also be serviced.<sup>1122</sup> However, the State Electricity Commission decided that the project was too expensive, and was not warranted at the time.<sup>1123</sup> The answer was not unexpected. The people of Cooktown were used to having their proposals rejected.

### **Moffat Constructions plan.**

With the Government refusing to cooperate, this left the Council again vulnerable to the whims of private providers. Soon after the Commission rejected the Roaring Meg plan, Cooktown was offered a reticulated electricity supply as part of an integrated development in the town. As reported in chapter six, Moffat Construction Co., a Brisbane based firm, proposed to build a tourist complex in Cooktown. The plan included the supply of reticulated water and electricity to the town, but the proposal was contingent on the Council adopting a town plan and development control plan commissioned by Moffat.

Moffat needed an Order-In-Council for a franchise to supply electricity, and feared that bureaucratic malaise might cause delays in the process. Consequently, he urged the Council to support his application to the State Electricity Commission.<sup>1124</sup> Council was only too willing to promote Moffat's application, and the Commission promised its favourable consideration to the franchise.<sup>1125</sup> Their immediate reward

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Commission, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, 11 December 1946. Transcripts in Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1122</sup> W. Nimmo, The Stanley River Works Board, Engineering Office, South Brisbane, to The Secretary, The State Electricity Commission, Brisbane, 19 December 1946. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1123</sup> Secretary, The State Electricity Commission, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 3 January 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1124</sup> O.C.C. Moffat, Moffat Construction Co., Brisbane, to The Town Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 14 May 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1125</sup> Secretary, The State Electricity Commission, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 30 June 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

was an electricity supply from the Sovereign Hotel, which Moffat had purchased.

Moffat engaged a Brisbane firm, A.E. Axon and Associates, to represent him. Axon applied for an Order-In Council to license Moffat Construction as a supplier of electricity to Cooktown. Power would be supplied to a ten-mile radius of the town, with the main business and residential areas being obliged to connect to the system. Moffat intended to install a three-phase system delivering 414/240 volt power. For the first twelve months after installation, power would be available between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m, after which delivery would be continuous.<sup>1126</sup>

The Council supported the application, and told the Commission that the proposed tariffs were reasonable.<sup>1127</sup> For some reason, Moffat became convinced that the Council was procrastinating, and sent a telegram to the Shire Clerk charging that the members of the Council had "no vision and probably less brains". He told the Clerk that he had ceased all activity in Cooktown.<sup>1128</sup> Ironically, two days previous to the telegram, Moffat had written to the Council asking that it immediately support his application for an Order-In-Council for the electricity supply. The letter was amicable, and concluded with an assurance of "our best attention at all times".<sup>1129</sup> The Council made no reference to the

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<sup>1126</sup> A.E. Axon And Associates, Brisbane, to The Secretary, State Electricity Commission, Brisbane, 15 October 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1127</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Secretary, State Electricity Commission, Brisbane, 16 November 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1128</sup> Telegram from Mofcon, Cairns, to Shire Clerk, Cooktown, 12 November 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1129</sup> Moffat Construction Co., Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 11 November 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

telegram, and promised to support the application. It assured Moffat that it appreciated his efforts on behalf of the town.<sup>1130</sup>

It is possible that Moffat's "tantrum" owed its origins to another matter entirely. His development proposal coincided with plans by Bunning Bros. to construct a sawmill in Cooktown's main street. Moffat saw this as a threat to his plans, and offered to provide two acres of land near the wharves for the mill.<sup>1131</sup> He argued that this was a better site as the mill would be a major consumer of electricity, and should be close to the generators. This was especially critical in the first two years of the project, when the power supply would be restricted.<sup>1132</sup>

The conflict between Moffat and Bunning placed the Shire Council in an invidious position. It realised that if the mill went ahead it would provide work for some locals, but would not necessarily promote growth. Council thought the two projects were complementary, and together might even reverse the town's decline. It feared that Moffat would not proceed with the development if Bunning refused to compromise, and urged him to cooperate with Moffat for the good of all concerned.<sup>1133</sup> Bunning refused, and the Council eventually decided not to adopt Moffat's plan.<sup>1134</sup> Moffat accepted defeat, and told the State Electricity Commission that he would abandon the project.<sup>1135</sup>

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<sup>1130</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Manager, Moffat Construction Company, Brisbane, 13 November 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1131</sup> Moffat Construction Company, Brisbane, to Messrs Bunning Bros., Perth, 16 November 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1132</sup> Moffat Construction Co., Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 21 October 1948. Telegram from Mofcon, Brisbane, to Shire Clerk, 14 October 1948. Transcripts in Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1133</sup> Telegram from Cook Shire to C.R. Bunning, Bunning Bros., Perth, 13 November 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1134</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Secretary, Moffat Construction Company, Brisbane, 16 March 1949. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1135</sup> A.E. Axon, A.E. Axon And Associates, Brisbane, to The Secretary, State Electricity Commission, Brisbane, 8 April 1949. Secretary, State Electricity

The failure of Moffat's proposal illustrates the problems faced by local authorities with small populations and limited economic resources. The pool of people available for election to Council is usually restricted to permanent residents. When the town is an "old" one, it is common for many of the possible contenders and voters to be related, and major Council decisions would be subject to family pressures. Councillors could face obstruction within the extended family, as well as the general criticism to be expected of any Council decision. Cooktown was not immune to this problem.

The Cook Shire Council faced the possibility that if it approved Moffat's town plan, Bunning would abandon the saw mill proposal. Many of the unemployed timber workers who stood to gain jobs in Bunning's mill were locals, and were related to some of the Councillors. In addition to these pressures, Councillors who had previously faced no decision more important than road maintenance now had to decide on matters that could drastically change the lifestyle of the local population. There is little doubt that the majority of Councillors were in favour of the development proposal, but were unable to surmount the obstacles they faced.

In retrospect, the Council erred in allowing Bunning to influence its decision. Although the mill was eventually constructed, its operational life was very short, and never used a greater area of land than Moffat offered. As Moffat predicted, the mill buildings were an eyesore in the main street, and detracted from the aesthetic value of the town until they were removed. The decision not to proceed with Moffat's plan is

still defended by sections of the local population who were present at the time. Their support for the Council's decision is based on various perceptions. Some opposed him because he was a "womaniser", while others insisted that he lacked the financial resources to complete his project. It is unlikely that the former accusation would influence the Council's decision, and there is no evidence to support the claim that Moffat lacked funds.

### **D.C.A. power supply.**

The next chance the Council had of improving its own power supply came in mid-1949, when the Department of Works and Housing asked if it could erect power poles for an electricity supply to the Post Office. The Department of Civil Aviation (D.C.A.) provided power from generators at the aerodrome to its own houses in Cooktown, and wanted to extend this supply to the Post Office. The Council agreed, and asked D.C.A. if it would supply power to the Council Chambers and to street lights along the proposed route.<sup>1136</sup> The Council wanted four street lights in Charlotte Street, and lights and power outlets in the Council Chambers and Clerk's residence.<sup>1137</sup> Despite numerous requests for an answer, nothing was heard until the Minister of Defence became involved.<sup>1138</sup> Almost nine months after the D.C.A. was approached, the Council received a reply.

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<sup>1136</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Officer in Charge, Department of Civil Aviation, Cooktown, 11 July 1949. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1137</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Officer in Charge, Department of Civil Aviation, Cairns, 28 July 1949. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1138</sup> P.A. McBride, Acting Minister for Defence, Canberra, to T.V. Gilmore, M.P., Parliament House, Canberra, 22 March 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

The potential market for electricity in Cooktown was much larger than previously indicated, and a number of residents had also asked to be connected to the D.C.A. supply. Its generators had limited capacity, and could not cope with a greater load. However, the Department told the Council that if it guaranteed to buy power in bulk, it would consider installing larger units. The Council would be responsible for the erection of supply lines, and the distribution of power. The Department was willing to cost the proposal, but it would need an estimate of the town's requirements.<sup>1139</sup> This was difficult, as many Cooktown residents had little experience of electricity, and were unaware of their possible needs. Eventually the Council guaranteed to purchase 2,090 watts, and asked the Minister for an early decision.<sup>1140</sup>

None of the Councillors had a grasp of the technicalities of an electricity supply, so they asked the State Electricity Commission to represent the Council in discussions with the Civil Aviation Department.<sup>1141</sup> After preliminary discussions with the D.C.A., the Commission urged Council to give an estimate of demand, and a commitment to proceed. It wanted the position of each consumer marked on a map, and the specifications of every device to be connected. This would allow a close estimate of the costs of the scheme, and all information necessary for an informed decision to be made. If the project was feasible, the Commission thought that a

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<sup>1139</sup> A.W. Doubleday, Regional Director, Department of Civil Aviation, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cooktown (sic) Shire Council, Cooktown, 2 April 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1140</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to T.V. Gilmore, M.H.R., Parliament House, Canberra, 18 April 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1141</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Secretary, The State Electricity Commission, Brisbane, 6 September 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

subsidy of 50% on capital costs would be offered.<sup>1142</sup> Following preliminary investigations, the Commission decided that the scheme was viable.<sup>1143</sup> It asked the D.C.A. for the terms and conditions of a contract to supply 78,000 units annually, on a twenty-four hour supply basis. It also wanted to know the location where the bulk supply would be given to Council, and where the meters were to be installed.<sup>1144</sup>

### **Connecting to the power grid.**

Eventually the Commission appointed the Cairns Regional Electricity Board (C.R.E.B.) to act as Consulting Engineer to the Council, and it negotiated the terms and conditions of supply.<sup>1145</sup> In 1953 Cooktown finally got its reticulated power supply from the D.C.A. generators. However, a year later, the State Electricity Commission provided its own system, with diesel driven generators operated by the Council. This system lasted until 1957, when Cooktown came under the control of the C.R.E.B., and the supply was administered by that authority. The change was part of a Government plan to provide power to a number of isolated communities.<sup>1146</sup> Eventually the diesel generators could not

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<sup>1142</sup> R.W. Picking, Acting Secretary, The State Electricity Commission, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, 4 October 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1143</sup> R.W. Picking, Acting Secretary, The State Electricity Commission, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 10 November 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1144</sup> The Commission cited Cooktown's estimated load demand as 36kVa, and consumption as 78,000 units. R.W. Picking, Acting Secretary, The State Electricity Commission, Brisbane, to The Regional Director, Dept. of Civil Aviation, Brisbane, 10 November 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1145</sup> W. Power, Minister For Mines And Immigration, Office of the Minister for Mines, Brisbane, to C.F. Wordsworth, M.L.A., Parliament House, Brisbane, 21 August 1951. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1146</sup> Erland Craig Blackhurst, 1922. Telegraphic Address "Hydro": A History of Hydro-Electricity in Far North Queensland, M.A. Thesis, Department of History and Politics, James Cook University. The power house was provided with two McLaren MR 4 Mk II diesel engines of eighty eight horsepower each. Electricity was produced by two sixty-nine KVA alternators. Chief Inspector of Machinery, Cairns, to The Secretary, Cairns

supply sufficient power for the increasing population. Pressure from the local population finally resulted in the construction of a 22 Kw line between Cairns and Cooktown through Daintree, and the diesel generators were shut down in 1968.<sup>1147</sup> The line has since been upgraded, but power supplies are still interrupted during bad weather.

The Shire Council faced many problems in trying to provide Cooktown with an electricity supply, most of which were beyond its control. There is little doubt that the members of the Council were committed to the concept of supplying power to the town long before this was achieved. However, they were unable to overcome the disadvantages of a small population, and lack of funds.

### **Conclusion.**

Moffat's scheme was the first real chance for an electricity supply for Cooktown. The failure to take advantage of his offer was influenced by two factors. The most important of these was the previous commitment to allow Bunning to construct a timber mill in Charlotte Street. When it was forced to choose between Moffat's proposal and its agreement with Bunning, the Council took a moral stand and honoured its agreement with Bunning. Its decision was also influenced by opposition to the development proposal by a significant proportion of the town population, and by the kinship structure in the area.

The Council had no such opposition when it tried to obtain power from the D.C.A. It was determined in its efforts to obtain an electricity supply

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Regional Electricity Board, Cairns, 28 August 1967, TR1700. Box 284, Power Station Cooktown, Q.S.A.

<sup>1147</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 245-246.

from the airport generators, and showed skill in mustering political support to achieve this goal.

Cooktown's connection to the State power grid has fostered growth in the town. It has allowed the development of industries such as concrete block manufacturing and ready-mixed concrete production, which in turn have accelerated building activity. The people of Cooktown now have access to many modern amenities, including air-conditioning and domestic appliances, which would not be available without power.

There is no doubt that the considerable population growth in the Cooktown area since the 1960s has been influenced by the provision of electric power. This reinforces Myrdal's theory that a town in decline can reverse the momentum only by the introduction of a new impetus to growth. In Cooktown's experience, the provision of power was undoubtedly instrumental in providing such an impetus.

It is easy to say with hindsight that Cooktown would have reversed its decline sooner if the State Government had funded the supply of electricity to Cooktown soon after the Second World War. However, it is more probable that the provision of mains power to the town earlier would have caused little change. The progress associated with electricity must be assessed within the context of a number of improvements, including a viable road connection to Cairns, and a permanent water supply.

Cooktown's experience in trying to get an electricity supply is an example of the absurdities that can occur in the interaction between bureaucracies of different levels. The two generators the Commonwealth Disposals Commission offered to sell the Shire Council

after the war would have provided for the town's needs at the time, as their output greatly exceeded the initial supply from the D.C.A. generators at the aerodrome. A State Government subsidy to help the Council buy these generators would have been considerably cheaper than the system it funded in 1947. The Federal Government, which owned the generators, could also have saved the expense of providing a power line from the aerodrome to its houses in Cooktown by offering them at a more reasonable price. The lack of cooperation between the three levels of Government placed greater cost on all concerned, and denied the people of Cooktown the benefits of electricity for some years.