



MEETINGS INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

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*Twenty Years of Talking:  
A history of the meetings  
industry in Australia*

MEETINGS INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA LTD

# A History of MIAA and the Meetings Industry in Australia

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## Chapter 1

Towards the end of 1975, a small group of colleagues, loosely linked through a growing awareness of the burgeoning possibilities of of an as yet scarcely formed and little understood meetings industry, sit down to talk in a small, suburban office in Crows Nest, Sydney.

The hotelier, the trade press publisher, the airline executive and the tourist officer present in the group need little convincing that organising and staging conferences is rapidly becoming a viable and potentially lucrative occupation. Together with several other colleagues in that modest office, they discuss their experiences of the expanding overseas conference environment, already strong in Europe in 1975 and building daily in the United States of America.

The potential to generate similar growth in Australia is seductive, hence the gathering at the publisher's office. The hotelier has visions of his beds filled and his ballrooms operative for more than the usual Saturday-night charity ball. The publisher sees orders for advertising space plumping up each issue of his neophyte meetings and hospitality trade magazines. The airline executive counts up the dramatically increased volume of empty seats waiting to be filled on the new jumbo jets introduced by the national carrier three years earlier, and the tourist officer is eager to foster a new industry which can service so many of his political masters at the same time.

The way to such riches will not be easy, and everyone present agrees that to do so requires not only a professional and experienced supplier base - conference organisers, suitable venues, inbound and ground travel managers, specialised support services suppliers - but also that most devoutly to be desired commodity, buyers.

It is the beginning of the formalisation of a new industry. An industry which will grow to become the highest dollar earner per capita sector in the Australian tourist industry, itself destined to become the country's leading foreign exchange earner, a decade before the end of the century.

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This genesis of an industry - an industry built around a widespread national and international need to meet and talk - had long-established roots in Australian history. Its form however, was to change dramatically in the 20 year period heralded by that modest and seemingly inauspicious meeting in Sydney in the early summer of '75.

At the turn of the old century, public meetings were prevalent and deeply entrenched in Australia. In the second half of the nineteenth century, together with the popular press of the day, public meetings played an indispensable role in forming and expressing public opinion. According to Japanese historian Takao Fujikawa, public meetings were one of the most important features that

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distinguished Australia and other countries with an `Anglo-Saxon' political and social background, from the rest of the world.

Politically, public meetings in Australia seem to have been as important as the daily press in the formation and development of a national consciousness of the process of democracy.

"In spite of the power of the Press in voicing public opinion, it has not superceded the public meeting as a means of eliciting and strengthening the sentiments of the people on natural concern," the Sydney Morning Herald comments rather pompously in 1901.

Towards the end of the 19th century there was a great increase in the circulation of Australian newspapers, but even so, speeches at public meetings continued to be an essential means of leading public opinion.

That these were considerably more than just street corner harangues is evident by the fact that more than 851 meetings were publicly advertised in NSW in the 1899 campaign over the Federal Bill, with an average of 840 attendees at each meeting. Held in town halls, civic halls or school halls and mostly on Mondays, these meetings attracted a total of well over 700,000 people on just this one issue. Most modern meeting convenors would be more than happy to attract those sort of numbers today.

The suburban areas of cities such as Sydney and Melbourne in the late 19th century were really communities struggling for facilities associated with urban life. Most people lacked public transport to the city. Where it existed it was slow and expensive. Roads were unlit and often unsealed. Houses did not have gas or electricity and suburbs were without a post office, parks and even a town hall.

It becomes clear from the newspapers of the day that if people wanted to enjoy some sort of `urban life' they had to agitate for roads, bridges, ferries, trams, railways, an adequate water supply and street lighting. Public meetings and deputations were the most important means of pushing demands with energy and perseverance. Local public meetings, especially suburban meetings, were born mainly from agitations for basic public facilities. While these meetings could not always realise participants' objectives, they were at least an effective means of letting off steam over the inadequacies of colonial politics.

In that respect, little has changed. In today's late 20th century climate, many meetings are staged by planners for corporations needing to inform and sometimes manage their shareholders or for organisations to deal with issues of public controversy. The volatile and high interest meetings staged at short notice around the attempt to float the National Roads and Motoring Association (NRMA) and its aftermath in 1994 (?) is an example of this. The public relations benefits gained in letting off steam and simply communicating through large scale meetings can be just as much a primary motivator in their planning and staging today as it was in the late nineteenth century.

And, just as it is in today's modern meeting, the element of being informed and entertained was of significance in the success of the meeting and the impact of its message. By the close of the last century the flamboyance and charisma of individual speakers could often attract up to several thousand attendees as word of their appearance and subject matter was advertised in advance through the newspapers of the day. When the Establishment, particularly local government, sought to control the sometimes critical content of public meetings by denying access to public halls for their staging, the most charismatic of these speakers moved outside and became highly popular `stump orators' in public parks such as Sydney's Domain which was in the centre of the city and close to Parliament House and government offices.

Besides voicing the needs of local communities, the late nineteenth century in Australia saw public meetings being staged to encourage nationalism, racism and imperialism. The reports of these

meetings were then published, commented and enlarged upon in newspapers and so distributed further afield. Such public meetings also proposed and prepared for celebrations, demonstrations and door to door collections for various funds, usually of a patriotic kind such as the Patriotic Fund to support the expedition to the Sudan.

These activities were again reported in newspapers and this combination of public meetings and press propaganda took place for almost all major events in Australia of a nationalist or imperialist nature, such as the Indian Famine Relief Fund, the celebrations for Queen Victoria's Jubilee and Diamond Jubilee and the National Patriotic Fund for the Boer War.

Today's meetings follow a similar pattern primarily of presentation of new information which can ultimately be disseminated to the wider community, with of course, some significant differences. Differences in subject matter, issues of concern and sheer volume of information make the early history of meetings in Australia seem simple and somewhat single-minded in comparison.

But the overwhelming difference is, of course, technology. Establishment-controlled local newspaper reportage of selected presentations at the end of the last century has given way to full proceedings distributed internationally on CD-ROM or via the Internet.

Television coverage of presentations can transmit a meeting's message almost instantaneously to audiences in their hundreds of millions, and such is the voracious hunger of the media of the late twentieth century's electronic age that today's meetings worldwide provide the information and entertainment nutrients upon which the media is dependent for life.

## Chapter 2

The human need to meet is a reflection of our evolution as a species. Whether the grouping was a tribal sharing of hunting knowledge or ancestral stories, or whether it was the more formal gatherings of Greece or Rome which saw the early seeking of consensus on law and government, meetings have been a natural part of the process of civilisation and development.

But meetings as we know them today - conferences, congresses, symposia, seminars, corporate talk-fests - have their genesis in the explosion of the mechanisation and transportation advances of the 19th and 20th centuries, just as have so many other aspects of contemporary life.

With its critical mass of population, 19th century Europe was and still is at the hub of the world's most prolific meetings activity, with the Vienna Congress of 1812 heralding one of the first great international assemblies. As road and rail transportation closely and swiftly linked Europe's great capitals and industrial development expanded across the continent, following the transportation networks like floodwaters along a dry riverbed, meetings in the modern sense became more common and more vital.

The great 20th century explorers, followed by a new breed of voracious industrialists, began to open up the known world to new and ever more complex trade and industry networks, while politics, government, and business internationalised on an unprecedented scale. It was this development which demanded a sharing of knowledge and consensus often achievable only through more widespread, more formalised and more international meetings.

Associations, originally of like-minded, affluent middle-class interests such as Britain's famous Royal Geographical Society, and great industrial family companies such as Germany's Krupp Corporation formed and grew, and the need to meet to share knowledge, plan strategically or simply be informed and entertained fuelled the neophyte industry.

The post-World War II years saw an explosion of major political organisations such as the United Nations and all its hundreds of affiliated bodies, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation), ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations), APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Community), the EC (European Community) and many more. All have helped fuel and appreciably add to a world meetings industry. It was the decades following World War II which also saw the USA, with its large population and well-developed industrialised economy, rapidly catch up to Europe in the development of a home-grown industry.

But the key to the development of the meetings industry worldwide was transportation. It was to take a quantum leap in the 1950s with the introduction of the commercial jet airliner. Perhaps more than any other factor it was this development which caused the modern meetings industry as we know it, characterised by larger, regularly-held domestic and international gatherings, to really take off

Tourism as a growth industry was being recognised around the world, and Australia was no exception. Australians themselves were highly oriented to leisure travel. In the 50s, Australia had one of the highest per capita incomes in the world and although people mainly travelled domestically by motor car, they travelled by ship to England or other European destinations traditionally regarded as 'Home'.

The staging of the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne helped to change that. The influx of international visitors, and the changes their presence wrought in terms of infrastructure needs and enhanced awareness of the new and exciting tourism industry, changed the way in which Australia looked at travel, particularly international travel. Australia was becoming 'internationalised' through a multitude of influences, from the 25 chefs who stayed on after the 1956 Olympics and helped begin the move away from bacon and eggs to vichyssoise, to the first Boeing 707 jet aeroplanes into Australia barely three years later. Australia had begun to like the flavour of tourism and its promise of foreign exchange earnings.

The big shift came with the introduction of the 747 'jumbo' jet in the early 1970s. The role of tourism as a major, and for some countries critical, source of hard currency changed forever on 22 January, 1970, when the first Pan American 747 'jumbo' jet took off from New York to London. Barely two years later, in 1972, the first 747s began the long haul into and out of Australia.

Nineteen seventy-two was also to be the year that Australia's first federal Minister for Tourism was appointed, albeit a junior portfolio at that time, ranked somewhere alongside Corrective Services for political status and popularity.

Internationally, it was the beginning of the era of large meetings around the world dominated by the scientific and medical associations, a trend still prevalent today whether the meetings are nationally, regionally or internationally based. Increasing specialisation and decreasing international isolation substantially increased the frequency, number and size of meetings within these two fields alone.

All of which serves as an interesting reminder that while the act of meeting to exchange information is as old as the human race, the modern industry which has developed from this rapid international growth of meetings and the concomitant need for specialised services and facilities, is extraordinarily new.

In Europe the International Congress & Convention Association was not formed until the early 60s. The European Federation of Conference Towns (EFCT) was not formed until 1964 and the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers (IAPCO) did not come into being until 1970. It was April 1979 before the massive ICC Berlin, one of the first large modern purpose-built conference centres to be built in Europe was opened, to serve as an example and role model for congress centres being developed around the world. But it was to be nearly a decade later before Australia would follow suit.

## Chapter 3

In the '60s, as was common at the time, Australia looked to overseas expertise to provide its young travel and tourist industry with guidelines for development.

At the invitation of the Australian National Travel Association (formed in 1929 by Charles Lloyd Jones and Sir Harold Clapp and predecessor to both the Australian Tourist Commission and Tourism Council Australia), a team of observers, comprising Allan C. George, Partner of Harris, Kerr, Forster & Company (New York) and Henry T. Maschal, Partner of Harris, Kerr, Forster & Company (San Francisco) together with J. Stanton Robbins, President of Stanton Robbins & Co., Inc of New York visited Australia in the last quarter of 1964.

From this visit a report was commissioned by the Australian National Travel Association (ANTA) on behalf of the Commonwealth and State Governments as well as tourist interests generally. Its objective was to provide an authoritative assessment of, as well as guidelines for, the development of travel and tourism in Australia.

The report, entitled Australia's Travel and Tourist Industry 1965 and known colloquially as the 'HKF Report' was presented to the ANTA in September 1965 and was the first comprehensive survey of the travel and tourism industry to be carried out in Australia.

In fact, according to Don Beresford, an independent consultant in strategic tourism planning and management and formerly with the Australian Tourist Commission through several of its incarnations, it was probably the most detailed report of its kind to be done in any country at that time. At 345 pages, the 'HKF Report' was a landmark with some remarkable astute recommendations:

The operators of hotels, motels and other accommodations in each of the capital cities of Australia and in other important visitor centers should take a leading part in establishing a visitor and conference bureau and business group for their city.

. . . a Visitor and Conference Bureau should be financially supported on a co-operative basis by the City Government and the leading business organizers in addition to the accommodation operators. The cost of such a joint effort is exceedingly small in relation to the benefits derived. The effectiveness of such promotion offices has clearly been demonstrated by the successful results obtained by convention and visitors' bureaux in many cities of the United States (Chicago being the most successful bureau city at that time - Ed.).

The development of visitor travel in groups has become a specialized field of selling and promotion; when operated on a concentrated and co-operative basis it far exceeds in effectiveness whatever separate sales efforts are made by separate business organizations.

As a matter of fact, the direct benefits obtainable from the additional business would make it well worthwhile for the hotels and motels alone to operate a Visitor and Conference Bureau. The pooling of selling and promotion efforts would thus be more effective and less costly than the present or non-existent promotion efforts of hotels and motels.  
(pp 168-169)

Hoteliers responded to the call and Sydney was the first to establish a convention and visitors' bureau, under the executive directorship of Ted Puckeridge. By 1974 there were five city convention bureaux in Australia - Melbourne, Hobart, Adelaide and Perth.

From the many significant recommendations made by the 'HKF Report', two outcomes shine in the reflected glow of hindsight. The first is that 30 years ago the governments of the day were informed that conventions would be a very significant industry sector and that it would be highly advantageous to address the supporting of a meetings industry.

The second was the recommendation that a commonwealth instrumentality responsible for tourism and travel in Australia should be formed under statute. It was from this recommendation that the Australian Tourist Commission was established.

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"It's hard to know where the original impetus came from...whether it was the private sector or state and federal governments or both together who began the initial drive for greater awareness of the potential of a conference industry in Australia," comments Ian Kennedy recalling those years immediately after the release of the 'HKF Report'.

"I would like to think that the governments came first and started identifying the convention segment as something worth pursuing," says Kennedy, formerly the first appointed Convention Manager by the Australian Tourist Commission (ATC) in 1976 and now Executive Director of the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA)

But government's vague understanding of conventions as an industry segment presented a few difficulties. For Peter Gamage, Convention and Group Tours Manager at the ATC's head office in Melbourne in the early 70s and now residing in Canada, one of many challenges came when the then federal government decided that the ATC should stretch its perennial small budget by focussing on 'industry leaders'.

British immigrant Peter Gamage had been a Convention Manager with BOAC, now British Airways, and was to prove to be a catalyst within the ATC, stimulating an awareness of conventions as a distinct and viable market sector. Prompted by the government directive to focus on 'industry leaders', the ATC Board decided to concentrate more on developing the international convention market. However the reaction from local convention organisers, almost exclusively association managers at this time, was not encouraging, with Australia's isolation fuelling the country's entrenched 'cultural cringe'. No-one, it was agreed, would come so far for a conference.

But for Peter Gamage this was tantamount to throwing down the gauntlet. At a time when outside the world political arena the only major international meetings were those held by professional associations, he contacted the Union of International Associations and requested a list of

international associations with Australian participation. For the sum of \$50 he received a list of over 1200 names.

"I wrote to all of them asking for the name and address of their Australian representative, and to enquire if they'd consider an invitation to stage a convention in Australia," recalls Gamage. Overwhelmed by replies which indicated that association Secretary-Generals were "only waiting for an invitation from Australia", Gamage contacted the Australian representatives to ask if they had ever considered putting in a bid to hold their association's convention in Australia.

Faced with the almost universal cry: "The Association would never consider coming so far!", he proceeded to flourish his armoury of Secretary-Generals' enthusiastic replies with some relish!

PATA's Ian Kennedy also saw Australia at that time as being behind the eight ball in world terms; slow to hook into the convention segment as one of potential for Australia and naive about the processes involved in marketing to that segment.

"In discussions at that time, I remember we identified that the best way to get to an overseas association or organisation and have them think 'Australia' for their next convention, was to talk to the Australian member of the association. We put a lot of work into early databases.

"We had to work hard and sell the idea to Australian associations. The ATC ran campaigns aimed at Australian association officers, alerting them to the fact that if they were going to their international association meeting abroad, then we had developed kits on staging a meeting in Australia for them to take with them. We encouraged them to come to us to be briefed on how to pitch for future conferences.

"What was surprising to a lot of people, including suppliers to the industry, was the way in which the bidding would have to be constructed. It was a bit of a revelation that we had to direct our attention to the Australian association to formalise the invitation and prepare the bid -- that we couldn't just go directly to Berlin, for example, and say: Come on down to Australia the next time round!

"The response was not very good and it was a hard sell. There were stand-out exceptions but mostly local association members didn't see it as their function. On reflection it was probably because there was a perception that here was another government organisation telling them what to do."

If it was one thing to get the Australians to bid for a convention, it was another to leave them to organise an event for which they had no experience. Under the guidance of Peter Gamage, the ATC set about producing guidelines for associations' convention organisers, covering the running of small, medium or large meetings, committees, sub-committees, individual responsibilities and possible agendas for various meetings and duties.

The manual, called Guidelines for Convention Organisers was first issued in August of 1972, with special editions prepared for the ATC, Qantas, TAA (Trans Australian Airways, later to become Australian and finally Qantas) and Ansett Airlines. It was distributed to Australian association officials, for whom it was designed, and the airlines offered it as a contribution to overseas organisers when they were nominated as official carriers. Twenty-four years later it still provides relevant basic principles of conference management.

And association officers weren't the only target. At around this time the ATC also organised a 'road show' of expertise which visited nearly every major capital city around the country. It featured Peter Berns Price (name??), General Manager of the Grosvenor Hotel in London, who described the ways in which a really 'switched-on' convention hotel needed to operate, as well as (name??? Hall), the Chief Executive of the American Association of Executives (Society of Association Executives

???. Attended by hoteliers, convention bureau personnel and conference industry suppliers, the road show aimed at informing and improving the performance of those people already working in the industry as well as interesting others who had not as yet, recognised that here indeed was a new industry sector in its own right.

For there was no doubt about it, recognition was still slow. As PATA's Ian Kennedy points out, nobody understood tourism market segmentation, and if you'd said the word MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions) back then, somebody would probably have produced a tom cat.

"At that time even the ATC didn't really understand market segmentation like we do now and for tourism organisations at the state level that was certainly true. State Governments had no departments of tourism and had almost no idea that there was an industry called conventions, meetings and exhibitions. That was something that just happened."

However, although probably not fully recognised within the ATC, its executives at that time travelled extensively and took notice of what international competitors were doing, particularly in Europe. They identified the fact that a lot of people travelled to conventions and exhibitions, and they set out to work through ways in which they could promote that business. Not only did the ATC create a conference segment within its management structure quite early on, but it identified as critical the need to get out to its international offices the message that Australia had an infrastructure to support conventions.

But it took the airline carriers, particularly Qantas who had exposure to international ideas and international trends and who took careful notice of what its international competitors were doing, to start a groundswell of private sector interest. A sharp, irreverent young Qantas executive, Robert (Bob) Westcott, was quick to see the potential for Qantas in developing the high yield convention delegate market to and from Australia and began to agitate both internally and externally to raise awareness of conventions as a distinctive market sector. The more advanced experience of overseas airlines also had an impact through the awareness and understanding brought by imports such as ex-BOAC employee Peter Gamage.

As private sector interest grew, so did a hunger for more convention business - more buyers who were better informed, more motivated and better served. The need for independence from disinterested governments and restricted bureaucracies, for swift, market-driven activity and an educated, professional supplier base began to be recognised by some of the bigger players in Australia's growing tourism industry.

People such as Ulrich Wolfram, General Manager of the Hilton Hotel in Sydney, Bob Westcott, Conventions Manager of the national airline Qantas, Trevor Howarth of Captain Cook Cruises and Rob Yeomans, publisher of the then Convention Magazine all had different reasons for seeing the potential of a meetings industry in Australia but they needed some form of catalyst - an independent and bottom-line focussed industry association - to ensure that the meetings industry truly did fulfil all that it promised to be. At this stage not all of them were in a position to start such an association, but a handful of individuals working for the national carrier and the national tourist organisation were.

## Chapter 4

In the late 1960s, Europe as a regional destination dominated the still relatively young world meetings industry. In professional development, infrastructure and volume, Europe's expanding meetings business was observed with great interest and no little envy by the United States and, slowly, Australia whose national carrier Qantas, with extraordinary foresight fuelled by the enthusiasm and energy of Bob Westcott, established a Conventions Department in 1966.

However, the United States was quick to pick up the pace and, with its vast and conservative domestic market, the burgeoning meetings industry there quickly began to encroach upon European dominance as the biggest player in the world meetings marketplace. That dominance was primarily driven by the huge meetings business generated by economic and transportation hubs such as Munich and Berlin, Paris and Vienna, and was not necessarily prevalent throughout the whole of what was then Western Europe.

In the United Kingdom for example, a healthy meetings industry was also developing but it was not until 1971 that a formal association representing the professional and business aspirations of workers in the meetings industry was formed.

This association was called ACE (UK), the Association of Conference Executives, and while it was to prove a major influence on the impetus to form a similar association in Australia, it is a reflection of the relative newness of the worldwide industry to realise that ACE (UK) was formed only four years before a similar, some might say cloned association was to be established in Australia.

Through their travels, keen industry observers such as Qantas' Bob Westcott and the Australian Tourist Commission's Ian Kennedy, together with British ex-pats such as Peter Gamage, were familiar with and attracted to the objectives and structure of a professional industry association such as ACE (UK). If such an association could be formed in Australia, then here was the independent catalyst needed to present a viable and professional industry identity to governments and buyers alike.

The fact that meetings activity in Australia was sufficient to justify Rob Yeoman's publication *The Convention* for the preceding 12 months, plus Qantas' commercial commitment to early computerisation through its one-of-a-kind registration program called 'Qanvene' gave further impetus to that first, significant, ad hoc meeting called by Yeoman and Bob Westcott towards the end of 1975.

This gathering of interested parties in Yeoman's small Crows Nest office in Sydney now had some guidelines, albeit imported from Mother England, within which to formalise itself as a professional industry association. Participants at that modest gathering also included the Sydney Hilton's Ulrich Wolfram, the Australian Tourist Commission's Ian Kennedy, Ansett Airlines' Wal Brander, Trans Australian Airlines' Merrill Barker, former ACE (UK) member and now Managing Director of medical

and scientific specialist company Watson Victor Ltd Tony Bowden, General Secretary of the Institution of Radio and Electronics Engineers Keith Finney and others.

Despite having all the appearances of an 'insiders' club' counting up the promise of its unhatched chickens, it was this meeting which sowed the seeds for the formation of a new Australian professional meetings industry association, the Association of Conference Executives (Australia), to be known as ACE (Australia).

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The Crows Nest meeting was significant for more than just the establishment of the nucleus of a 'Board' for an as yet unconstitutional Australian meetings industry association. It was also an unprecedented expression of faith in a new and relatively unknown industry, particularly from Yeomans and Westcott who both generously invited normally jealously guarded friends and contacts, such as Keith Finney, General Secretary of the Institution of Radio and Electronics Engineers (IREE) and Tony Bowden, Managing Director of Watson Victor Ltd , to provide a nucleus of valuable 'buyers'.

"We decided at this meeting to get on with it and make the association happen," recalls Rob Yeomans. "The key to the whole thing was bringing buyers in. The idea was to make the conference industry bigger and better." It was this drive to attract and hold buyers which was to become a major force in the shaping of ACE (Australia) for the next decade. It was, however, also to prove something of a hindrance to the association's long-term professional development.

Following this first informal meeting, the marketplace was plumbed to verify interest in the formation of the new meetings association. Managers of other professional associations, the dominant buyers of the period (corporate meetings business was not to emerge as a significant sector until the booming '80s), were extremely interested in the new presence. For the first time, here was an identifiable 'group' of practitioners who, together with a dedicated industry trade magazine, formed a unit which could begin to be called a conventions or meetings industry.

But that industry 'group' had to be formalised if it was to become the recognisable and independent industry forum envisaged all those months before by bureaucrats and corporate players such as ATC's Ian Kennedy and Qantas' Bob Westcott. The stage was set and only awaited the players.

On December 11, 1975 a meeting was held at the Sydney Hilton to establish the formation of an association to be called the Association of Conference Executives (Australia). Bravely, the fledgling association set out its objectives: to create high professional standards within the convention industry; to suggest guidelines and provide education for convention and meeting planners; to develop (sic) trends and growth patterns for the industry and to act as advisor to groups (associations and obdurately disinterested governments) on trends. Foremost amongst ACE (Australia)'s objectives was the creation of a common platform where buyer and seller could come together and establish direct communication links. But from the beginning, the buyers didn't come - at least, not in the sorts of numbers dreamed of by the supplier members.

The 12 men and one woman who gathered to establish a preliminary committee included: Merrill Barker of TAA, Wal Brander of Ansett Airlines, John Daley of Noah's Northside Gardens, Keith Finney of IREE, Ruth Inall of Science House, Bob Westcott of Qantas Conventions, Rob Yeomans of The Convention, Tony Bowden of Watson Victor Limited, Rodger Chippendale of Davidson & Mein (Yeoman's accountant at the time), Tony Farrington of IPC Exhibitions, Ron Hewett and Ian Kennedy of the Australian Tourist Commission and Ulrich Wolfram of the Sydney Hilton Hotel.

There were three apologies, from members of the Australian Veterinary Association, Flight Engineers and the Employment Federation - all representative of buyer interests.

This Foundation Committee (later amended in the minutes to 'Foundation Members') was set up to represent a ratio of approximately two-thirds buyers to one-third sellers. As first President, Keith Finney, General Secretary of the Institution of Radio and Electronic Engineers (IREE) was elected. Also elected were Tony Bowden as Vice-President, Rob Yeomans as Secretary and Rodger Chippendale as Treasurer.

Four additional members were elected as the following representatives: Australian Tourist Commission, Ron Hewett (Deputy Ian Kennedy); Buyer, Ruth Inall (who would also draft the Constitution); Airlines, Bob Westcott, with assistance from the two domestic carriers and Hotels, Ulrich Wolfram.

Passed unanimously at this meeting was the motion that the construction of the Association be based on the member categories of ACE (UK). Full membership status at a favourable entry cost and annual subscription fee was to be available to eligible members usually employed by a company, association or other organisation, provided they were not employed by organisations which supply conference services for commercial gain for other organisations.

The wooing of the buyer had begun.

Sellers could however aspire to associate membership, at a higher entry and annual subscription fee, provided they were conference organisers working for commercial gain, local authority representatives, national and local tourist boards and convention bureau representatives or those in universities and colleges responsible for the provision of conference facilities.

Also available at the same higher fees was the category of affiliate membership, which swept up and embraced representatives of individual hotels, travel agents, companies providing exhibition services, the relatively unknown and unexplored audio-visual suppliers and those who represented other auxiliary services for the conference and exhibition industries.

Finally, corporate membership status was made available to hotel groups, the rather quaintly termed suppliers of air, sea and land services and major conference and exhibition venues not managed by national or local finance.

Financing of the association began with an amount of \$1000 presented by the ACT's Ron Hewett, which, the ATC rather delicately hoped, would be returned to ATC if possible. Preliminary plans were discussed for a proposed ACE (Australia) Conference and Exhibition to be staged in 1976 or 1977 under the responsibility of Tony Farrington, Director of IPC Exhibitions. From the very beginning it was clear to those practitioners experienced in managing meetings that the fledgling association's own conference would provide an invaluable source of funding.

Few could foresee that the success of this strategy would sow the seeds for the dissolution of ACE (Australia) as a national organisation and put back the growth of the organisation for more than a decade.

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The Foundation Members and their fledgling association still lacked formal status and an inaugural general meeting was planned for early in the new year. Held at Noah's Northside Gardens in Sydney on March 4, 1976, the Executive Committee presented the Constitution of ACE (Australia) for ratification, together with themselves as office bearers for the coming year.

Finney and Bowden were re-elected President and Vice-President respectively, while Yeomans took on the dual role of Secretary/Treasurer. His former role as Secretary was left open until a part- or full-time secretary could be found.

The meeting ratified the ACE constitution and elected 13 of the 18-member executive committee. ACE (Australia) was now incorporated.

Buyer members were: Keith Finney (IREE), Tony Bowden (Watson Victor), David Harpen (Institute of Mercantile Agents), John Garrity (Associated Chamber of Manufacturers, Australia), Ruth Inall (Science House), Paul Gilchrist (Australian Veterinary Association) and Bruce Weston (Employers' Federation of NSW).

Seller members were: Rob Yeomans (The Convention), Tony Farrington (IPC Exhibitions), Ron Hewitt (ATC), Ulrich Wolfram (Hilton International), Bob Westcott (Qantas) and Barry Selgram (Kings Travel, Melbourne).

The five buyer positions still vacant on the Executive Committee were earmarked for interstate participation, but two months later only one had been filled by Sydney-based John Donlevy of the Honeywell Information Systems Division, a friend of Tony Bowden.

In his first address as President at the March 4 inaugural meeting, Keith Finney emphasised the need for national involvement. "If ACE is to function properly and effectively, then it must have the fullest participation from both buyers and sellers in the convention industry.

"And this has to be on a State-wide (sic) basis. For although ACE has been formed in New South Wales, it is by no means restricted to the chosen few on the Eastern seaboard," he announced.

What might be perceived as an initial lack of awareness and support for the new association by states other than New South Wales was understandable. Sydney, and therefore New South Wales was very much the driver of the neophyte meetings industry.

"I think it had a lot to do with the individuals involved," recalls Ian Kennedy. "They were somewhat different days in that there was a lot of 'personality' about the industry. The hotels were enthusiastic and their people were supportive. In 1966, the Wentworth Hotel was built with the first 'conference' flexibility designed into its ballroom floorplan. Qantas, with its conference department was based in Sydney in 1966 and it subsequently invested in the first commercial computer registration system, named 'Qanvene', based on its flight registration technology. But it wasn't solely a question of individual personalities. There was an infrastructure beginning to get established in Sydney which saw the emerging direction of a meetings industry and moved to support it."

It is also Kennedy's view that as a stronger meetings industry began to emerge in the '70s, Sydney was the only game in town in the minds and eyes of the buying public, particularly those international associations thinking of coming to Australia for a conference. Ian Kennedy: "To the internationals at that time, Sydney and Australia were synonymous."

But in terms of recognising emerging business opportunities, Melbourne was not dragging its heels. The Victorian government of the day, under Premier Dick (Richard?? or Rupert??) Hamer, was prepared to invest, if not financially, then certainly with an impressive level of interest. The Melbourne Convention Bureau started off not underfunded and developed strongly with early political backing -- far more political backing than its Sydney equivalent ever had.

At the Melbourne Convention Bureau, an enthusiastic young English migrant called Sue Wood was quick to recognise the potential of the new association and the role it could play in what was promising to become an exciting growth industry.

In a call from fellow British ex-patriot Tony Bowden, former ACE (UK) member and newly-elected Vice-President of ACE (Australia), Wood was asked if she would be interested in setting up the Victorian chapter of the new national association. She quickly arranged a lunch meeting with Michael Raine (?) who was looking after a number of associations at the Victorian Chamber (of Commerce ?), including what was then the Society of Association Executives. Together they discussed the value of forming a Victorian chapter, with Wood then deciding to set it up.

She called on people that she knew in the industry who could help her -- people like Walter Kranendonk who was then Sales Manager for Federal Pacific Hotels, and Helen Jennings, then Director of Sales at the Melbourne Hilton.

"Everything had to be explained because everybody thought that ACE (Australia) was just another Melbourne Convention Bureau activity," explains Wood, echoing the Australian Tourist Commission's concerns of a year earlier. In fact, an initial stumbling block was the very real question of why the industry need two organisations (given that the Society of Association Executives, of which Wood was Vice-President, was moving along nicely). Confusing everyone still further was the fact that a third association, the Hotel Self-Management Association, had also just been established within the past couple of years.

Wood's frustration was palpable. It was her perception that, with the exception of astute hotel professionals such as Kranendonk and Jennings, the Melbourne of the day had little understanding of "meetings" as an industry - in fact, there was hardly any industry at all. By the mid '70s there was really only a bare handful of meetings organisers in Melbourne, and association managers - their principal target market - saw themselves as handling all aspects of their associations' needs, including the organisation of their own conferences. There was even the occasional perception that professional conference organisers were really 'rip-off merchants' trying to make a business out of them, to their associations' detriment. Wood recognised that the education process for both clients and practitioners alike had a long way to go.

In August 1976, Wood, in her role as Marketing Services Officer for the Melbourne Convention Bureau, set up a meeting at the Melbourne Hilton, at that time probably the first serious venue built to house conventions in Victoria. With Walter Kranendonk, Helen Jennings, New South Wales' Tony Bowden and herself forming a panel, they faced a small gathering of about 30 curious participants and explained what it was they wanted to do. The group found itself calling for questions from an audience puzzled as to why they would want to form yet another association at all. The four left that meeting with what appeared to be small support, but the Victorian chapter of ACE (Australia) had made a start.

"We were determined by that stage, that we would go ahead with it," recalls Wood. "I was passionate about conventions and the industry because to me it was extremely important for people to be able to communicate properly and that was part of what conventions were set up to do -- to enable people to communicate face to face. So I was quite passionate about that.

"And I really had a strong feeling for Australia and the future of conventions here. I was a migrant from England, and so I didn't take anything for granted in this country. To me there was great excitement generated by the industry's potential and there was great need for development of new business in Australia -- all of those things. So I was quite fired up about it!"

Also working with Sue Wood at the Melbourne Convention Bureau was Sue Calwell. Astute, and with valuable political connections to help keep the new association viable in Victoria, Sue Calwell argued a strong case for a higher Melbourne profile in the meetings industry to both government and the corporate sector, with long-lasting success.

Realising that the ACE (Victoria) chapter needed someone with widespread credibility as its first Chairman, the invitation went out to Ian Spicer, then Executive Director of the Victorian Employers' Federation. With respect for Spicer's credentials paving the way a committee was quickly assembled and made up of members drawn from associations representative of a wide range of professional interests, from confectioners to concretors. Committee members recall with pleasure the boxes of chocolates which made frequent appearances at the board table, although no-one recalls getting free bags of cement!

Almost immediately, rivalries began to emerge between ACE (Australia) in New South Wales and its first state chapter ACE (Victoria). Although, with the then tireless help of the two domestic airlines, there were frequent flights between Melbourne and Sydney to attend national meetings, the historic, political and sporting differences traditional between the states since before Federation began to colour the workings of the two groups. It was not so much a matter of eyeing off each other's business - rather that the ways of doing that business were simply different. The curious bias towards there being mainly male players in the NSW-based national group and the presence of strong female players in the Victorian chapter may also have added another dimension to the differences, while there was also a tendency for the Victorians to see ACE (Australia) as being, in reality, a de facto ACE (NSW).

In the meantime, ACE (Australia) was having slow success in encouraging other states to become involved. Following the first general meeting and luncheon of the new association on May 21, 1976 at Sydney's Sebel Town House, a meeting which attracted over 100 participants, 40 of whom had been flown in from interstate by Ansett and TAA, Ken Mackenzie from the Asphalt and Pavement Association of Victoria was elected to the Executive Committee. Seller representation had long been filled but there still remained three buyer vacancies. ACE (Australia) President Keith Finney was publicly hopeful that these would be filled by people from Adelaide, Western Australia and Queensland.

Australia wasn't alone in its sectional parochialism. A similar scenario was being played out in Europe with ACE (UK) now renamed ACE International (UK) and endeavouring to get other ACE groups started throughout Europe. While the London-based parent organisation expressed its delight at Australia's move to replicate the ACE structure on the other side of the world, it was not enjoying the same success amongst its European colleagues. At the time of ACE (Australia)'s formation, Italy was being courted with only marginal success.

Following his talks with Sue Wood and his visit to Melbourne in August of '76, Tony Bowden toured South Australia and Western Australia, where he had discussions with both buyers and sellers on the formation of state chapters. By September, an ACE 'contact' had been established in Perth and a state chapter formed in Melbourne, with Barry Salgram, Conventions Manager for American Express announcing a first for Victoria at the inaugural Victorian chapter meeting, with the jubilant observation that a NSW state chapter had not yet been formed.

Before the end of that year, membership of ACE (Victoria) included Ansett Pioneer, Thomas Cook, Mary Kaye Cosmetics, Melbourne Harbour Trust, Riddell Exhibition Promotions, Australian Society of Accountants, Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria and others.

Early members of ACE (Australia) at this time now included Ann Pugh of the Institution of Engineers, Max Krumbeck of the Australian Federation of Travel Agents, Alan Coningsby of the Menzies Hotel, Joseph O'Sullivan of the Adelaide Convention Bureau, Sue Marsh of the Hong Kong Tourist Association, Ken Scheller of International Management Services and Margaret Shellam of the Perth Convention Bureau.

Twelve months prior, ACE (Australia) did not exist. By November 1976 it was a national association registered in Canberra with a membership in excess of 60 organisations and a full-time secretariat administered by Gordon Small from the Employers' Federation of NSW.

The fledgling association was off to a good start, but it was to prove to be all too fast. State chapters had no legal entity and national funds were perceived to be in the control of NSW and farmed out to the states on a needs basis, exacerbating state resentments. The association's passage was to prove more problematic and infinitely more time consuming than anyone could have imagined.

## Chapter 5

Structuring and delivering an outstanding annual conference was always on the agenda for the early ACE (Australia) organisers. Like most similar organisations, the educative role of the association was a major platform, and there was always the promise that here was a means of building up the rather precarious finances of the young association.

At the December 1975 meeting of the Foundation Members, it was decided to hold a conference and exhibition within 12 months which would 'illustrate how conventions should be organised and run'.

However it wasn't until eight months later that a planning sub-committee was formed and tentative dates drawn up, with exhibition company IPC Exhibitions given the go-ahead to start marketing an ambitious 40 stands to airlines, hotels, government bureaux and others.

Early in 1976, recognising the growing demands of demands of convention business and the trend towards incorporating related exhibitions, Director of Sales at the Sydney Hilton Ulrich Wolfram had succeeded in lobbying for an extra level of exhibition space to add to the hotel's convention facilities. Office facilities planned for the floor above the hotel's convention area were converted to exhibition space, involving the installation of a new staircase. It was decided that the Sydney Hilton would be the venue for ACE (Australia)'s first national convention and exhibition

In the time-honoured tradition of conference planning everywhere, expected attendance was put at an ambitious 400 delegates and to this end, nearly 4,000 brochures were mailed to associations and corporations nationally.

The three day event was held towards the end of July. With a conference theme of 'Profit Through Communication', the ACE '77 1st National Conference & Exhibition was stage-managed by a rather exotic-looking young David Beal of the audio-visual company Audience Motivation.

Speakers included the slim young advertising whiz, John Singleton, then Managing Director of Doyle Dane Bernbach Advertising; Pat Fitzpatrick, Industrial Relations Consultant for IBM (UK); Professors John Hunt and Alf Mayfield discussing factors which interfere with effective communication, while taking on the role of Master of Ceremonies was stage and radio actor Stuart Wagstaff.

The confirmed presence of Alan Davis, Chairman of ACE International (UK) was cancelled at the last minute and his place was taken by ACE International's Secretary, Peter Cox, starting a decade-long tradition of ACE conferences which drew security from the expensive importation of international 'expertise' and high profile entertainers as the Conference MC.

What also became a more enduring tradition was the establishment of high standards of audio-visual support and innovative learning processes. Speaker David Hamilton of the British Tourist Authority wrote and presented his paper on the pitfalls of poor conference planning as a humorous role-playing exercise utilising five professional actors. IBM's Pat Fitzpatrick rehearsed his presentation four times with Audience Motivation's David Beal, who reported that Mr Fitzpatrick's script included "intensive use of 35mm slides and multi-screen presentations."

For those delegates who attended ACE '77, the conference was an outstanding success. Such was the excitement it generated that for months afterwards, stimulated conference industry workers would refer often to the flair, innovation and content demonstrated at this meeting. A young Sydney-based businesswoman, Ros McLeod, who had recently expanded her destination management company to include conference business, became so intrigued by the positive reports that she determined to attend the next conference in Melbourne in 1978 to see for herself.

But despite the success of the conference, an inflated expectation of interest meant that the final participant attendance of 157 delegates was disappointing. Of the proposed 40 exhibition stands, little more than 18 were sold. Where most disappointment was expressed was in the failure to attract the attendance of conference consumers - the buyers who could have benefited most from the technical program.

Tony Bowden, 1977's newly elected ACE (Australia) Federal President summed it up at the forum concluding the conference with a strongly worded suggestion that sellers were afraid of exposing their clients to competition. "Buyers are sitting on the fence, and it is up to the suppliers to put their buyers in the hat," he announced with vigour, probably doing more for the mixed metaphor than the association's buyer base.

'Maximising Attendance' became the theme for the next ACE conference scheduled for October of the following year in Melbourne, with ACE '78 setting out to examine the latest techniques used to attract delegates and provide a testing ground for many of these techniques.

"Victoria wanted to stage the next ACE conference and we set out to make it very innovative," recalls Sue Wood who was conference chairman. She introduced 'energy breaks' and health menus, which she had first observed in the USA, into the day's programming and Melbourne audio-visual specialists Armstrong Audio Visual (AAV) produced a multi-screen presentation on Melbourne using three huge screens. It was 1978 and few conference industry workers in Australia had seen anything like it before.

Held at the Melbourne Hilton Hotel, ACE '78 was opened by the Hon. Richard (?) (Rupert??) Hamer, introducing the then Victorian Premier to the convention industry and establishing what was to become an enduring political profile for the Victorian convention industry.

Leading television personality of the period, Bobby Limb, was flown down from Sydney to chair the conference. Interested and involved in conference business at that time, Limb also wanted to direct the theming for the social events as well (and 20 years later has re-emerged with periphery involvement in providing entertainment and venues for conference industry social programs).

However, Limb's involvement with ACE '78 was short-lived. At 7.00am on the second day of the conference he telephoned Wood ill and scarcely able to speak. Unable to continue, he was leaving Wood and her fellow organisers without a conference MC.

In a foretaste of the growing depth of industry expertise, Wood looked to her on-site resources. Registered for the conference was a talented sales motivator and conference organiser called Ron Tacchi, Managing Director of Ron Tacchi and Associates. At a hurried word from Wood the young ex-patriot American took over as Master of Ceremonies and ACE '78 proceeded seamlessly.

Guest speaker Joe M. Baker Jr, Chairman of the American Society of Association Executives proved such a hit with his knowledge of conference management that he was later used by Qantas on an internal speaking circuit. Heading up the Washington-based association, Baker was later persuaded to bring one of his groups to Australia, such was the success of ACE '78.

The hallmark of the ACE '78 conference in Victoria was a wealth of wonderful ideas showcased throughout the event, such as the themed Victoriana Ball - the conference dinner - complete with formal Victorian dance cards. While 'The Gentlemen's Excuse Me Dance', 'The Lancers', 'The Geisha Quadrille' and 'The Ladies Choice' attracted little interactivity (nobody actually knew how to dance these! It was the rock 'n roll band which got everyone moving), the social programs set a standard for imagination and enjoyment which provided a benchmark for the value of networking through socialising at large conferences.

"I think as ACE (Victoria) we had a very clear vision of what this conference needed to be," recalls Sue Wood, now Managing Director of Convention Network in Melbourne.

"We wanted to educate people. Everyone was so new in the business. No-one knew anything. It all went back to the communication thing. If you want to deal with people you have to understand their side of it. If you are a supplier and you want to provide services for a certain market, you have to understand what it is that market does as its business. Otherwise you don't know what it is you're supplying.

"And as for the market, unless it understands how its suppliers operate and work, it also doesn't know how to deal with them. As we demonstrated through the structure of ACE '78, the idea was that we educated from both sides.

"Probably the sellers needed more educating than anything else, because at that time, few of them had very much of an idea of what a conference was and what was required to put one together."

The impact of the second national conference became apparent straight after ACE '78. In an era of talking heads, there was suddenly a proliferation of people using multi-screen presentations where they could; organisers were more aware of the need to add polish to their events; they all 'did' energy breaks, and then there was the impact of the ebullient Joe Baker whose presentation on 100 ways of cutting costs caught everyone's attention.

ACE'78 proved to be a financial success also, with nearly 75% of the total ACE (Australia) membership attending at an estimated ratio of 'sellers' to 'buyers' of two to one. This was considered to be very favourable, particularly in view of American counterpart organisations' average of four to one, as quoted by visiting speaker Joe Baker.

However, while there was a slight acceleration of interest and membership in ACE (Victoria) generated by the conference and continuing for a short while afterwards, numbers within the industry still remained low. Wood was to maintain her involvement for another three years until frustration at the slow pace of change, combined with her own professional commitments, accelerated her withdrawal from ACE. In the meantime, the Melbourne Hilton's Helen Jennings continued to be a committed, driving force within the state chapter, while Neil Weatherill, who had joined the chapter the year of the Melbourne conference became Treasurer in 1979, a position he was not to relinquish until 1993!

The financial success of ACE '78 was, however, to prove to be the beginning of the fragmentation of ACE (Australia) as a national body. By 1978, despite the New South Wales chapter of ACE having now been formed and ostensibly separate from the national body, Melbourne was reluctant to hand

over hard-won funds to a national organisation perceived by some to be just a de facto state chapter, and an old rival at that!

This perception was reinforced by the minimal presence of any other state chapters, making ACE (Australia) in reality a two-horse race. By the beginning of 1979, there were state chapters formed by NSW and Victoria, but other states' ACE involvement took the form of an 'ACE contact', provided by the Adelaide Convention Bureau in South Australia and the Perth Convention Bureau in Western Australia. Peter Schrader from the Institution of Engineers, Australia, provided the 'ACE contact' for the ACT in Canberra, while Queensland had no ACE commitment at all.

With Queensland continuing to adopt a 'wait and see' attitude about taking steps to form a state chapter and despite the fact that the new federal President, Michael Pinnock, was from Victoria, there was still a lack of real working cohesion between the two major state players.

For many in the Victorian chapter, the position was clear. The state chapter had made money on ACE '78 and no-one wanted to give it to the federal body - perceived as tantamount to putting it straight into the coffers of NSW.

In an effort to break the Victoria/New South Wales nexus, the tiny ACE (ACT) group was pushed to stage the 1979 third national conference, with very mixed results. Attracting a healthy 130 delegates, the three-day November conference proved to be a disappointing performer in comparison to the impact of the vibrant Melbourne effort a year earlier. With its conference theme of 'Seeking Clarity' outstanding in its obscurity, many delegates expressed disappointment at the business program that was put together in some haste by the beleaguered Canberra members.

The lack of direction at national association level was reflected in the eccentric national conference program. One memorable feature was the morning tea break themed to feature an overly well-endowed female stripper. Whether the Institution of Engineers, heavily co-opted to organise the conference, was influenced by its experience of catering for mostly male delegates or whether the organisers became carried away in their search for greater visual impact in presentations, the stripper proved too much for most delegates to swallow with their morning tea.

But for some, it was a delight: "It was so exciting! I'd never seen things like this before at a conference," recalls Ros McLeod, Managing Director of the then young, Sydney-based meetings and inbound tour management company Tour Hosts Pty Ltd. "Peter Schrader's Institution of Engineers, Australia was all male and he would do the things that perhaps you would do for an all-male conference, but you wouldn't do for mixed company. Anyway I thought the fat stripper was great fun. But the general reception was that they hated it. They were all aghast!"

Immediately following the stripper's departure, the task of introducing the following speaker fell to a by now slightly unsettled Sue Wood. As she moved from the standard 'thank you' for the morning tea entertainment to the next speaker's name - a Mr Hooker - the normally cool Ms Wood completely broke up!

By the time the conference was over, ACE members' equanimity was not the only thing in the process of breaking up. An attempt to develop a National Constitution proved to be unsuccessful and was held over for further, and subsequently abortive discussion. At the close of the 1979 conference in Canberra it was announced that under the direction of South Australia's Muriel Ellis, ACE '80 would be held in Adelaide in October or November of the following year. However, this was not to be. Almost immediately, ACE (Victoria) began a strong move towards autonomy and independence from the federal body. Less than four years after its formation, ACE (Australia) was breaking up as a national organisation.

## Chapter 6

As the meetings industry expanded worldwide, so did the infrastructure to support it. Hotels in the key international regions with substantial tourism and conference business - Europe and the United Kingdom, the United States and to a far less degree Australia and South East Asia - began to convert or specifically design more and more of their space to suit conference needs. In Australia, 'international'-style hotels started to appear in a movement away from the older style hotels and pubs. The Wentworth and Menzies Hotels opened in the 60s in Sydney and were amongst the first Australian hotels to incorporate design facilities such as closely-linked rooms suitable for meetings breakout space. International hotel chains such as Hilton established themselves in Melbourne and Sydney not long after.

By the mid-seventies, with the capacity of the 747 'jumbo' jets driving the staging of large international scientific and medical meetings on a regular basis, there was growing worldwide recognition that international hotel facilities were inadequate for the increasing number of meetings attracting more than 1000 delegates. The need for dedicated convention facilities was readily recognised by meetings industry practitioners worldwide, but the costs involved moved the concept out of the private and into the public arena. It was time for governments to intervene, but political enthusiasm for spending what would be very significant amounts of public monies was limited, particularly in Australia.

For one Australian meetings practitioner, it was all too slow. Such was Ron Tacchi's frustration at the lack of a suitable, dedicated and flexible conference venue for a national sales congress in the February of 1977, that he set in motion plans to build his own.

The congress was set up to recognise the top 50 salespeople for 1976 as nominated by their companies and at least 1500 delegates indicated their intention to attend. Said Tacchi, as quoted in the September '76 issue of *The Convention*:

"The keynote address will be given by Zig Zigler, the man billed as the 'greatest salesman in the world' and the author of the famous book on the art of selling - *Biscuits, Fleas and Pump Handles*.

"This sort of person is in such great demand all over the world that I was lucky to get him for this congress," said Ron.

"It's the first of this type of thing in Australia and it's proved quite a problem. Not in getting the response, that has been fantastic. Just in getting somewhere to hold it.

"I want to hold the event in Sydney but there is just nowhere decent which can cope with the numbers who want to attend."

Ron said he could have held the event at the Sydney Showground or at the Hordern Pavilion. "But there's just no atmosphere in these places and I'm not interested," he said.

He has made several attempts to book the Opera House for the event.

"We only need it between 9a.m. and 4.30p.m. so we would not be interrupting any activities the Australian Opera Company might have planned," he said.

"If it meant dismantling and then re-erecting scenery for a performance by the Opera Company in the evening, then we would be quite prepared to do this at our expense. But so far we have come up against a closed door which is a shame as the Opera House is quite well suited to this type of one-day event."

As a last resort, he even considered hiring one of the cruise ships whilst it was in port.

"But my great fear was a strike, or that the ship would be delayed, and then I would stand to lose my shirt," he said. "Companies are spending thousands of dollars flying their top men into Sydney, and I just can't afford anything to go wrong."

Ron has currently settled on the Wentworth Hotel as the venue, but has been forced to cut the numbers attending by about a third. However, he has not taken the situation lying down.

For now he plans to build his own Convention Centre - in fact not just one, but two of them. And what's more, he already has financial backing for both projects.

Ron said plans have been drawn up for the centre, and he is currently looking for a suitable site in the Lane Cove/Chatswood area (suburbs) of Sydney.

He hopes it will be operational within two years.

His second plan is for a large convention centre resort which will take about five years to complete. It will be built in the Orange/Bathurst area, and will have a lake and full facilities including a golf course.

The convention centre will be capable of accommodating at least 1500, but that figure could be higher.

Ron admits this second scheme is still in the very early stages, but says he already has financial backing from both Australia and overseas.

History shows us that like many good ideas, Ron's plans for a dedicated convention centre at this time came to nothing, but he was not alone in this. The New South Wales Government paid lip-service to the need for a Convention Centre as early as 1976, but it was to be over a decade later before the conception became a reality, for the state of New South Wales, at least.

At a business lunch organised by ACE (Australia) in August of 1976 at Randwick Racecourse in Sydney, guest speaker Mr R. Murdock, Director of the NSW Department of Tourism confirmed that both the NSW Department of Tourism and the State Government were acutely aware of the need for an international convention centre in Sydney.

Murdock told guests at the luncheon that current thinking rated the Overseas Shipping Terminal at Circular Quay as being the most viable proposition. Plans for the re-designing of the terminal were

already on the drawing board, said Murdock, and he was more hopeful now than ever before that something would start moving!

But in fact, nothing 'moved' in Australia for quite some years. The powerful European meetings market was forging ahead and barely three years after Murdock's ponderous but unproductive pronouncement about the possibility of a dedicated convention centre for New South Wales, Europe saw one of the first of the large, modern, purpose-built convention centres - the massive ICC Berlin - open on 2 April 1979. It quickly became a model for the many dedicated conference and exhibition centres which were beginning to be developed around the world, particularly in the fiercely competitive European countries and in the United States of America.

Rising like modern-day temples throughout the developed world, these dedicated convention centres were designed to service what was becoming the new conversion to conventions by tourism and associated corporate business. But Australia's entry in the convention centre building stakes continued to remain a non-starter. Four years after the convention centre possibilities of the Overseas Shipping Terminal were mooted, there was still little indication that the governments of either of the two states most strongly involved in conventions business - New South Wales and Victoria - would quickly resolve the need for dedicated convention facilities.

But by 1980, the struggling meetings industry in Australia was dealt another blow. ACE (Australia) as a national organisation, was collapsing.

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"ACE as an organisation was just too small in those days," recalls Roslyn McLeod, former President of ACE (NSW) in 1982 and '83. "It didn't start off with autonomous state chapters and work up to a national body. It set up a national committee which essentially had representatives from Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney only. It was exciting, but by 1980 the national body was really struggling - it was struggling on a state basis just to stay alive, and it was dying fast."

Exacerbating the struggle was a telephone vote held among all executive members of the Victorian chapter on August 26, 1980 which resulted in the unanimous decision to hold over any agreement on an ACE Federal Constitution, with the recommendation that both the NSW and Victorian chapters prepare and adopt their own local constitutions in the meantime. Also recommended in a firmly worded communication distributed by Victoria to all state chapters and contacts as well as to the national president, was the proposal that each state should operate independently for a trial period of approximately six months until the federal annual general meeting scheduled for March, 1981. At this time, any return of funds or changes in the structure of the federal body would be discussed and a decision made on whether ACE should remain federated. In the meantime, suggested Victoria, there should be no further financial contributions from any of the states.

The pragmatic Ros McLeod was convinced that the association had run before it could crawl. Secretary for the NSW chapter in 1981, McLeod was elected president in 1982 and quickly came to the conclusion that she could not adequately divide herself between a national organisation and a state organisation. Before the end of her first year of presidency, and spurred on by the disenchantment of the Victorian state chapter executive, McLeod set about the disbanding the national organisation.

"Good, bad or indifferent, my argument to the other states was that we had to focus on our own states. We had to get the whole act together in our own state. We had to start building the finances, the continuing education programs and the infrastructure needed for an expanding meetings industry on a state basis," recalls Ms McLeod.

The association's precarious financial base was indeed cause for concern. By the end of the 1981/82 financial year, the NSW state chapter had accumulated funds of little more than \$5000 and a membership base which nudged 100 on paper but of which only 62 were financial.

Thus it was that McLeod's presidency saw a shift from concentrating on a national effort to refocussing on a local effort.

"It was nothing to do with NSW being the stronger state and seeing a lot of its resources and energies going out to other states," says McLeod. "People were coming and going in Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney. People were disappearing. There was no real difference between the meetings industry and the attrition rate that goes on in any industry, but with that attrition was going the enthusiasm, and the dedication, and everything else."

For McLeod there was the strong perception that the industry, small and jealously guarded by gatekeepers and old-guard practitioners, was not empowering nor encouraging new blood.

"I believed that it was a network and, in a sense, a 'closed shop', and as people dropped out of that 'closed shop' the numbers became fewer, and the energy levels just weren't there to drive the industry forward," recalls McLeod.

McLeod convinced the most influential of the NSW meetings industry players around her - Ray Bate, Bob Westcott and Geoff Jamieson from Qantas, a young and enthusiastic English committee member called Annabel McCarthy (soon to become Annabel Davis) and Wael Foda, head of professional conference management firm ACMS - to really concentrate on NSW, because the association as a national organisation just wasn't working.

Ironically, part of the problem lay in the fact that few people in the industry were experienced in association management. Foundation Member Ruth Inall had originally managed the association using the resources of her staff at the Sydney University's Science Centre, but as the demands on the association grew, the limitations of a part-time secretariat began to be felt. No real strategic management advice was available until Wael Foda took on the task under McLeod's presidency, when his tremendous energy levels, ideas and sound business management rubbed off on all of the committee members and their practices. But the toll was high for any full-time industry practitioner and taking on the management load after Foda, Rhonda Traversi also ultimately found the task of secretariat, in conjunction with full-time work, too much.

With disaffection felt by both the NSW and the Victorian chapters for any further input into a national organisation, no federal constitution was ratified and ACE (Australia) faded as a separate entity. The Canberra chapter virtually closed down after the critical and much criticised Ace '79 conference. There were debts arising from the staging of the '79 conference which the NSW chapter found itself handling for some time afterwards. McLeod found that there was little support from government bureaux and other infrastructure in Canberra to stimulate either support from the city itself or a meetings industry.

Nineteen eighty and 1981 passed without a meetings industry conference and in 1982, McLeod encouraged Roger Membrey (name?), then president of ACE (Victoria) to stage a conference for ACE Australia-wide.

Victoria staged the conference at very short notice, primarily to try to get an annual industry conference on the calendar again. Numbers were down, with no more than 60 attending what turned out to be very well-organised and curiously intimate conference. The few who attended really got to know each other and strengthen the meetings industry network and the conference proved to be a catalyst which helped shift the inertia which threatened to stalemate the state-structured associations.

Victoria's modest success inspired NSW to stage ACE '83 which attracted about 160 delegates, and the state's precarious finances took a turn for the better.

But eight years after ACE was established as the meetings industry's professional association, Australia's meetings industry was still too small to have any real strength. Whether it was Sydney or Melbourne (and seldom any other city), the frequency of major meetings, measured at that time at between 1000 and 2000 registrations, averaged barely two to four a year. Aside from a handful of hotels with convention facilities in the major capitals, very little meetings industry infrastructure existed.

"It wasn't until there was recognition that you needed convention centres to attract big convention business that we really got the whole ball rolling," comments Ros McLeod, "and then it takes several years to actually get a convention centre operating to its optimal potential."

For most of the early '80s, the meetings industry which had started out so full of promise the previous decade seemed to be treading water. ACE as a national association had virtually ceased to exist and the two major state chapters withdrew to focus on state interests and needs. Both states undertook a vigorous program of educational seminars and social activities but it remained a struggle to stimulate membership and maintain financial stability. Guest speaker Bob Ansett, later to become one of Australia's most celebrated bankrupts, addressed the NSW chapter in 1982 on "Building a business, having fun and making a profit", while later that same year, another guest speaker addressed the topic: "The Sydney convention industry in a climate of economic gloom". It was a grey period of contracting interest in the struggling association, with the focus of individual industry practitioners turned towards preserving territory in a climate of limited business opportunities. Business commitments in Bangkok removed the leavening larrikin presence of the ebullient Bob Westcott and original Foundation members turned away with regret at the loss of their original vision for a national industry association.

Early in the '80s the Academy of Science, a significant part of the international scientific meeting scene in Australia in the '70s, closed down its conference organising facility, creating a major stumbling block to Australia's success in attracting international scientific meetings. To the scientific world, the Academy of Science provided credible endorsement of Australia's capacity to handle large scientific meetings and its loss was keenly felt. While scientific meetings did not cease to happen in Australia, the winning of them in a fiercely competitive international marketplace became significantly more difficult.

Nineteen eighty-four was a year of sadness with the death of Ken Scheller, one of the earliest committee members of the original national ACE (Australia) and head of probably the oldest professional conference organising company in Australia, ICMS Pty Ltd. The gentlemanly Scheller had been a significant influence in the growth of the new industry, not only as one of the country's leading practitioners, but also for having produced one of the first detailed manuals on the nuts and bolts of organising a conference. His company proved to be an incubator for the industry, training and educating a number of young professional conference organisers (PCOs) who continue to dominate the industry today.

But while 1984 saw the death of Scheller and the state chapters still wrestling with survival, the climate for meetings industry growth in Australia was changing. An entrenched federal Labor government appointed John Brown as Minister for Tourism and the famed old mates' network of the Labor Party, of which Brown was an integral part, ensured that his portfolio received significantly more funding. The result was a leap in the profile of tourism with international advertising campaigns, particularly the Paul Hogan television advertisements to the United States and Japanese markets, driving awareness of Australia as a destination to new heights. A year later, the flood of Japanese tourists began in earnest.

A boom in overseas investment, particularly in new hotel construction, saw the first of Queensland's five-star hotels and resorts begin to open up, all with some level of meetings facility and all promising a taste of warm, tropical holiday Queensland as a major attraction. Bob Westcott returned from Bangkok, having left Qantas and taken over Ken Scheller's company, ICMS Pty Ltd, with Geoff Jamieson, also formerly with the Qantas conventions department.

But perhaps the most significant occurrence of 1984 happened in beautiful but isolated island Tasmania, lying quietly south of the mainland and rarely featuring in anyone's conference plans. The Wrest Point Casino, Australia's first casino in 1973, opened Australia's first dedicated convention centre, and the playing field was forever changed.

"Through the early '80s we were probably riding on the good work done by Qantas and the bureaux," comments Ros McLeod. "There was David Hall at the Adelaide Convention Bureau, Sue Calwell in Melbourne, David Worland at the Sydney Convention Bureau which was in fact Australia's first convention bureau, and then Colin Barnes followed on at Sydney and agitated quite hard to get the message across that we needed dedicated conference facilities to attract bigger business. We were riding into a time where, with the opening a convention centre in Hobart (Tasmania), the infrastructure was starting to fall into place."

Barely three years later, driven by the vision and enthusiasm of David Hall at the Adelaide Convention Bureau, the city of churches built and opened the Adelaide Convention Centre, a facility dedicated to the staging of conferences and exhibitions and promising to be so successful that it stimulated cities around the country to become serious about building convention centres.