

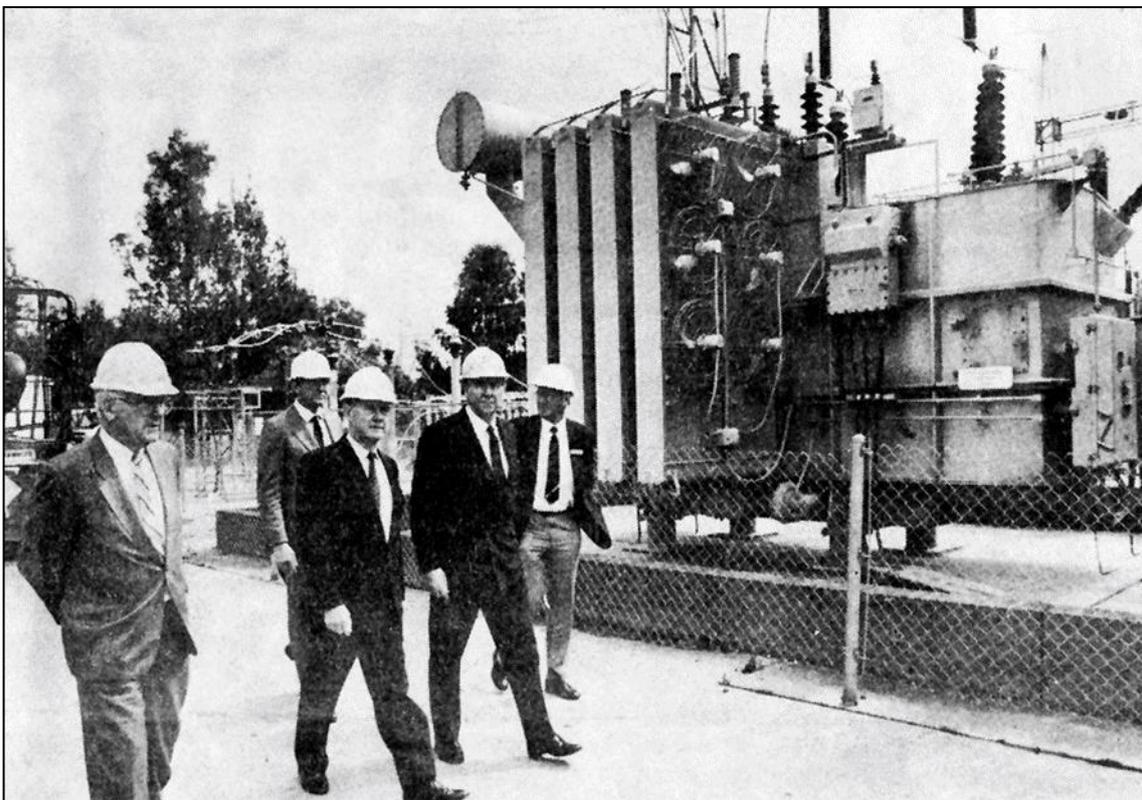
Albury's Big Blackout

Greg Ryan

Thirty-two years ago, in the late afternoon of Sunday September 10, 1989, the sky lit up over North Albury. Two transformers at the electrical substation at the eastern end of Union Road had exploded and started a massive fire fuelled by 9000 litres of oil.

The *Border Mail* reported that “a mini tornado shook houses and rattled windows” and “the explosions sent a wave of terror through the neighbourhood ... children were petrified by the hideous glow in the sky.” The “hideous glow” could be seen right across the city.

The result was that “the entire Albury and district power system immediately collapsed, plunging everything into darkness.” For over five hours there was a complete blackout, before limited power was restored from a third transformer that was not damaged.



Inspecting the damage, front from left: NSW Electricity Commission general manager Barry Flanagan, Member for Albury Ian Glachan, NSW Energy Minister Neil Pickard (*Border Mail* 15/09/89)

With two of the three transformers at the site destroyed, immediate action was required. As the one remaining transformer had to supply the city and surrounds, to survive the crisis severe restrictions on power usage were put in place.

Tim Cornwell, Murray River Electricity (MRE) marketing chief outlined the restrictions – swimming pool pumps, dishwashers, clothes driers and any electrical equipment used for hobbies were banned. Use of all other household appliances was to be minimised.

Businesses were asked to turn off air conditioning and space heating, all illuminated signs and display lighting and use only 50% of general lighting.

In the meantime, an urgent call was put out for replacement transformers. Late the following Wednesday, the first replacement arrived and installation started the next day. By Sunday the new transformer was installed, full power supply restored and power restrictions were lifted. MRE reported that within five weeks, two more transformers would be installed for “back-up” and “in 12 months-time we hope to get everything back the way it was before the storm hit.”

Albury was experiencing a massive storm that was doing its own damage. There were several versions of what caused the fire. Some speculated that a wayward bird or a flying fox set off the substation fire.

The most logical theories came from electrical engineers. Initially it was suspected that lightning had struck power lines outside the substation sending a power surge which heated copper windings in the transformers, starting the fire. This theory was later discounted with engineers concluding that a flying sheet of metal from an unroofed house or shed was responsible.

An early estimated cost of repair and replacement was \$2.2 million.