

# The Vanishing Race

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**S**INCE 1939 the position of a large and important section of the middle-income groups has undergone an ominous deterioration. This section comprises most of the professional and expert skill and intellectual talent of the state—teachers, university professors, doctors, lawyers, clergymen, scientists, engineers, architects salaried executives and administrators.

To say that these people have been harshly dealt with by economic fate and political neglect since 1939 is to understate the case. The bare truth is that the whole position of this key and indispensable section of the community is now seriously endangered. Their material position has been weakened; their customary way of life undermined; the leisure time available to them for cultural and intellectual pursuits and for voluntary service, severely curtailed.

## INFLATION AND TAXATION

These sections of the community are always hard hit by inflation. Unlike those of the wage-earning masses, their incomes do not readily respond to rising prices and, as a consequence, their purchasing power is steadily eaten into by inflation. It is true, of course, that the average level of money salaries has increased quite substantially since 1939, but there is equally no doubt that this increase has been far outstripped by the rise in prices since that time. The middle-income groups have a wider range of expenditure than the wage-earner, and many of the things they are accustomed to purchase have risen much more in price than those commodities and services which absorb the great proportion of the wage-earner's income.\*

Moreover, the middle income sections, both during the war and since, have borne much more than their just share of the tax burden. The rich and the well-to-do have suffered severely from heavy taxation, but, unlike the middle incomes, they have been able to some extent to maintain their accustomed standards by drawing on their reserves of capital. The net income of the wealthy investor is meagre indeed when

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\*One of the main objectives of price subsidies has been to protect the standards of living of the wage-earner by keeping down the prices of the essentials of life.

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placed alongside his pre-war income, but, by comparison with other sections of the community, he has received some assistance from the considerable appreciation over the last seven or eight years in the value of his investments. Share values are on average about 50% higher today than in 1939—although this hardly compensates for the reduced purchasing power of the £1 brought about by price inflation.

## AT THE EXPENSE OF THE MIDDLE INCOMES

There is no hiding the fact that the improvement in the position of the wage-earning sections of the community since 1939—and it has been considerable—has been very largely at the expense of the middle income groups. The average wage-earner's income in real purchasing power has risen fairly appreciably, he is enjoying more leisure—the working week is shorter, holidays longer—he is more secure in his employment, he works under better conditions, and he has benefited notably by the great expansion of social services of which he is the main beneficiary. But this advancement in the general economic status of the wage-earner, while altogether desirable, has been financed not out of the proceeds of improved productivity—there are virtually none—but at the expense of other sections of the community, and particularly of the more highly-educated middle-income groups. The 40-hour week is imposing additional burdens on these groups. The wage-earner is not nearly so adversely affected by the higher costs of the 40-hour week as those whose incomes lag behind increasing prices.

It is impossible for the parent, receiving say an annual income in the region of £1,000, to look forward to providing his children, or at any rate, more than one or two of his children, with a public school and university education. The £1,000 income of 1948 is equivalent to little more than the £500 income of 1939, while the cost of education has risen. In education, and in other matters such as provision for sickness, old-age and retirement, the members of the administrative and professional sections will be forced more and more in the future, if the present trend continues, to fall back upon the bounty of the state.

## DECLINE IN HOME STANDARDS

The standards of home-life of many of these people have fallen tremendously since 1939. Housewives and mothers in this section of the community find it impossible under today's conditions to maintain the standards and way of life of the pre-war years, or those which were accepted as the natural order of things by their parents. Domestic help and nursing assistance for the children, even if they were obtainable, are now beyond the reach of the many members of the middle-income grades. The average mother is subjected to an unceasing routine of domestic chores, and is restricted to very limited social contacts and a minimum of recreation and entertainment. Nor can her husband—no matter how important his occupation to the community—escape his share of house-cleaning, shopping and tending and minding the children. The business executive with a responsible post must forego work for several days to look after his wife in bed with influenza. The rising young doctor, after performing an exacting operation, returns home to wash the dishes. This is not exaggeration. These things are happening every day. The work of running the home is making serious inroads into the time which in other days used to be devoted to charitable work, and to study, reading, discussion, in fact to all those activities which enrich the mind and enlarge the mental perspective.

Those who would argue this new state of affairs is superior to the old should be left in no doubt about its implications. For in the past, the standards of comfort, the leisure time, the social and intellectual contacts which representatives of the administrative and professional groups have enjoyed, have been in large part responsible for the contributions they have been able to make to the national life. We cannot expect to obtain the highest type of leadership if we destroy the conditions that make that leadership possible.

It is to claim no special indulgence or superior merit for these sections of the community to assert that this deterioration is a serious thing for Australian society. For in common with other sections, the professional and administrative group makes its own special contribution to the enrichment and variety of the life of the state.

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## POORLY REWARDED

These people, unlike the wealthy, are compelled by their economic position to make their own way in life. Unlike the manual worker, they cannot, if they wish to succeed, work to the clock. The 40-hour week does not enter into their scheme of things. To acquire their skill and understanding, and at considerable financial sacrifice, they go through a long period of arduous and expensive training and education. In some cases, for instance those of the medical and legal professions, it may be the best part of ten years before they can hope to make a worthwhile living.

Sections of the professional group, notably school teachers and university lecturers, clergymen and those possessing qualifications of high cultural value are notoriously poorly rewarded. Australia has not been generous to its educated sons and there are possibly few if any nations among the more advanced, where the man with a university degree has been less appreciated or worse treated. Not a few of our very best brains have migrated to other countries where the avenues of opportunity are broader and the possibility of a satisfying career immeasurably greater. Outstanding talent and educational qualifications are a form of export that Australia cannot afford.

The business community is to some extent to blame for this. It has, on the whole, been slow to realise the potentialities of the highly-educated man, slower to reward him generously, and reluctant to grant him that status to which he is entitled by virtue of his knowledge and talents. It is paying today for this neglect. In recent years, not a small part of the appeal of socialism for the university-trained man has sprung from the fact that the Labour Party has been prepared to find satisfactory opportunities in public service for people highly educated in the social sciences, when the avenues elsewhere have been virtually closed.

These professional sections of the community have now been cruelly hit by heavy taxation and the war and post-war inflation. The rewards for the possessor of say a high scientific qualification and for the relatively untrained have been dangerously narrowed. A qualified biochemist may expect a salary of around £400 a year, which is no more than, and

possibly not as much as, can be obtained in many ordinary clerical posts. Newspaper advertisements show that a demonstrator in zoology is offered £320, while a domestic assistant £260 plus keep. The examples could be multiplied. Unless these conditions are changed, the young, intelligent ambitious man will more and more ask himself why he should undergo a difficult and expensive educational course to acquire some advanced qualification, when, by starting immediately in routine commercial employment, he can earn a comparatively lucrative salary. This state of affairs in the long run can only be disastrous for the community which fails to correct it.

The general outlook for the educated man has become infinitely worse since the late John Buchan (Lord Tweedsmuir) felt constrained to write eight years ago in his autobiography "Memory-Hold-The-Door":

"I have had much to do with young men on several continents and in many countries, and I regard this shrinking of opportunity as one of the gravest facts of our age. It will remain an urgent matter long after the guns are silent. Somehow or other we must make our social and economic world more fluid. We must widen the approaches so that honest ambition and honourable discontent may have elbow-room. If not, youth will cease to be young, and that will be the end of everything."

## POLITICAL ROLE

In their political outlook, both because of their experience and their intellectual qualities, the professional and administrative sections—particularly in Australia—tend to cynicism. Their experience so far has taught them to expect little consideration from the major political parties, while their mental abilities preclude them from accepting blindly much of the political nonsense and half-truths that emanate from partisan political quarters. This section stands, as its name denotes, not only in the middle of the social and economic gradation, but also in the middle so far as political policy is concerned—between nationalisation and unrestricted private ownership, between unlimited state control and untrammelled free enter-

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prise, between gross inequality and drab equality. It is a stabilising influence in the inherently unstable world of politics, a safeguard against the violence of revolutionary doctrines, and an assurance that democratic values and institutions will prevail.

## INDEPENDENT AND INDIVIDUALISTIC

In another sense, too, this section is a great force for the ultimate triumph of democratic values and the democratic way of life. The essence of the democratic creed stems from a belief in the integrity and inherent virtue of the individual person as an individual. And it is in these sections that are found many of the most individualistic members of the community, both in political thought and in economic station. Within the professional and administrative groups exist wide divergencies in political thinking. A scientist, working shoulder to shoulder—and with more or less complete intellectual agreement on the problems which confront him—with his brother scientist, often holds widely different political views. The educated sections are, on the whole, the least organised politically of any part of the community and they neither think nor vote as a mass.

Economically, they have been up till recently independent both of the bounty of the state and of the charity of the rich. They pay for their own medical expenses, for the education of their children, they largely provide for the needs of their retirement and old-age. In this section of the community the virtue of thrift is most vigorously exercised. They save by restricting their current consumption and in order to build up and protect their standards of life and provide the best possible opportunities for their offspring. To compel this part of the community, which has so far "paddled its own canoe" with inestimable benefit to the whole state, to fall back on government benefits or on the patronage of the wealthy is to destroy that sturdy independence, individualism and thrift, which are their peculiar contributions to the well-being of society as a whole.

## A MORE DYNAMIC ROLE

But if the educated class has peculiar virtues, it has also peculiar defects. If it is the possessor of considerable technical and professional skill, it has not always shown a corresponding creative or imaginative capacity. If it is a stabilising element in our political life, it has not always revealed that dynamic which is the mainspring of progress. It has, perhaps, up till recently been over-conservative toward political and social change. Moreover, it contains within itself vested interests which are just as sticky as other pressure-groups when their own way of life or mode of doing things is threatened. If these sections are to some extent weak and unorganised politically, they have themselves partly to blame. They have tended to be apathetic and insular; while getting on admirably with their own job they have often shown themselves to be insufficiently active in some of the wider political, economic and social concerns of the community of which they are part.

The threat which has now arisen to the economic station and to the traditional privileges of the members of the professional and administrative classes, while in many respects to be deplored, may at least serve the purpose of stirring them to a more dynamic and vigorous role in the life of the state. For the stark fact now is that they can no longer, because of the changes for which the war is responsible, afford the luxuries of indifference and apathy.

