

# TWENTY YEARS AFTER

The Australian Political Scene—By K. C. WHEARE

● After a distinguished academic career at Scotch College and the Melbourne University, Kenneth C. Wheare became Victorian Rhodes Scholar for 1929. A brilliant course at Oxford University followed. Very soon he gained a reputation as a vivid and stimulating lecturer on constitutional problems, and at the request of the Rockefeller Foundation he delivered a series of lectures at Harvard and other prominent universities in the United States. In 1948 he acted as constitutional advisor to the British Government at the Congress to discuss the future status of Newfoundland. Professor Wheare has written several books, the chief of which are: "The Statute of Westminster and Dominion Status," "Federal Government," and "A Life of Abraham Lincoln."

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Toward the end of last year Professor Wheare paid a brief visit to his home country, and at our invitation he has recorded here his impressions of Australia's changing political structure, with particular reference to the relationships between the Commonwealth and the States.



It is very difficult for an Australian returning to his home country after twenty years to discern accurately and with a sense of proportion what changes have occurred in the political structure of his country. It is also foolhardy of him to publish any views which he may have formed on this subject because it is certain that what he has to say is bound to be regarded by many people as impertinent, ill-informed, and out of touch with realities. In my own case I am particularly liable to fall into error and to incur well-deserved criticism because after twenty years' absence I spent only six weeks scampering about the country, and that clearly is a very slender foundation on which to build any impressions that can

claim to be more than superficial. However I find it difficult to refuse the invitation of the Editor of the *Review of the Institute of Public Affairs* to write down a few of the impressions which I formed in this short flying visit.

When I left Australia in August, 1929, Mr. Bruce was Prime Minister and was about to give way to Mr. Scullin. When I returned in August, 1949, Mr. Chifley was Prime Minister and was about to give way to Mr. Menzies. In the twenty years that lay between what a lot had happened to Australia! When I left, the Financial Agreement had only recently been approved by the electors at a referendum and become part of the Constitution. It is fair to say that few of us realised what we had done in voting "Yes" to that change in the Constitution. It was left to Mr. John Lang in the early thirties to draw out some of the startling implications of that amendment, in his conflict with the Commonwealth Government. The economic depression of the thirties imposed great strain on all governments in Australia, and few could foresee when I left in 1929, what modifications in the practical relations of Federal and State Governments would be brought about by the pressures of that great and successful economic struggle. And last of all, still ten years in the future, was the War of 1939, by far the most influential single force which has ever operated upon the Australian Constitution or upon the Commonwealth and State Governments. All these events had occurred in the years since I left, and it was therefore with great interest that I returned in 1949, and tried by discussion with people to find out what significant changes had occurred in the intervening years.

Needless to say, the first question I asked people was: "Is Australia still a Federal Government?" Economic crisis and war are two forces which are opposed to the smooth and effective working of federal government. If they are to be regulated effectively they require unitary or unified action,

and inevitably therefore Australian federalism has been weakened or diluted by the experiences of the past twenty years. I found that many people were ready to say not only that federalism was ceasing to be of importance in Australia, but also that it was out of date and ought to go. I found also that it was difficult to discuss this question with people because they were usually inclined to make it a question of party politics. There is no doubt that it has a party aspect in Australia, as in all federal countries, but it can be discussed apart from party politics and it was on that level that I tried to discuss it. For, after all, do the parties, once they are in power, in the central government, differ very much in their desire to exercise their powers to the full? Experience in the United States and Canada suggests that they do not, and I think Australian experience is not much different.

I put this question to the people I met: "How may the functions of government best be distributed in Australia? If the States did not exist would it be necessary, or wise, to create them? If we are not to have the States, with their independent legislative and administrative spheres—in the law of the Constitution at any rate—what kind of regional or provincial authorities should there be? It was generally agreed by everybody I talked to that of course Australia could not be governed completely from Canberra. There must be decentralization of government, and in fact as everybody knows there is decentralization of government. The functions of the Commonwealth Government itself are not performed exclusively from Canberra, and they could not be. I found many officials of the Commonwealth Government who were thinking a great deal about the question of the best way in which to carry out administrative decentralization of Commonwealth functions. It seemed to me that they were well aware of the dangers of excessive centralization and that they realised that good administration involved decentralization.

But this is of course quite a distinct question from the one which seemed to me to be more important, namely whether certain functions of government should be handed over to regional authorities. I found many people ready to agree with me that federalism was in practice being considerably modified in Australia and that considerable unification was taking place. But when I asked them whether anything should be done to stop this, or what the consequences would be if it went on unchecked, they seemed to me to be uninterested or unconcerned about it. They wished to see certain things done and they found that the Commonwealth could and would do them, and they were not interested in the consequences for democratic government in Australia of a gradual withdrawal of authority from the States. Yet it seemed to me that one of the important problems in Australian government today is how to give some life to regional authorities, whether they be called states or provinces or something smaller than that, so that people may be able to be closer to those who govern them than they will be if all the important functions of government are to be controlled in the last resort from Canberra.

This lack of interest in the general question of how best to decentralize government in Australia was all the more disquieting because on all sides I found people ready to agree that local government did not count for much in any Australian State. I thought this was probably something of an exaggeration, and that there was perhaps a lack of appreciation by people, especially in the cities, of the valuable public service that is done by borough and shire councils in the country in all the States—voluntary service that is often overlooked and forgotten but is none the less faithfully and cheerfully performed. It is true, however, that the powers of local authorities in Australia are very limited, and that if we hope to preserve democracy by decentralization and if we are going to allow the States to wither away, a very great reform indeed

would be needed in local government before these units could be effective as institutions of decentralization.

Looking back on my discussions now, I do not think that I agree with those people who told me that federalism was finished in Australia. I think that is an exaggeration. It has certainly been modified but, in my opinion, these modifications are great improvements. In Australia federalism has been modified and supplemented by a process of intergovernmental co-operation, especially through such institutions as the Premiers' Conference and the Loan Council, and these modifications constitute a great advance in the working of federal government. In Canada and the United States they have not yet been able to achieve this degree of co-operation, and in my opinion Australia is in advance of these two countries in its adaptation of federalism to the needs of modern society. It seems to me that a development of these co-operative institutions and the preservation at the same time of the federal principle are the best lines on which Australian government could advance. This is modification and adaptation *within* federalism, not the elimination or abolition of federalism; it makes the best of federalism in more senses than one! It is preferable to unification because it preserves the advantages of independence in the States while at the same time it gives plenty of opportunity for unified and united action in those matters and at those times when unity is essential.

Another topic in which I was greatly interested in my visit was the development of the Civil Service, and here I am bound to record that it seemed to me that the higher Civil Service of the Commonwealth will stand comparison with that of any other country in the British Commonwealth or outside. I found that when I remarked upon the high quality of the Commonwealth's Civil Service, many people shrugged their shoulders and made derogatory remarks about "bureaucracy." Well it may be that there are too many civil servants

in Australia, but that is not the point which I was making. What impressed me was that there were very good administrators in Canberra, and I think that we Australians should be glad that that is so. Though I have no expert knowledge on the matter, my impression is that in the twenty years since 1929, there has been a very great improvement in the quality of the Commonwealth Civil Service. People should not object to that. It is sometimes said that government is a necessary evil, and I think that most Australians in 1929 agreed with that. In fact government is a necessary good, though it must be freely admitted that too much government is an evil, and an unnecessary evil at that. It looks as if we have come, reluctantly perhaps, in Australia to realise at last that government is necessary, and that in that case it had better be good. No one believes that the administration of business and commerce should be entrusted to inferior people. We think it right that private affairs should be in the hands of the best administrators. Surely the same is true of the country's affairs.

This is not to say that there may not be a good deal in the criticisms of those who say that Australia is over-governed, and that there may be too many people organizing the affairs of their fellow-citizens. It is not easy to discover the truth on that subject even after a long enquiry. I express no opinion about it, but I do reiterate that proposition that a good Civil Service is a good business proposition, and that the Commonwealth has gone a long way in the last twenty years to achieving this. Can the same be said of the States?

So I return in conclusion to the problem which worried me a good deal during my visit, and that is how to ensure the right kind of decentralization in Australian government. If we allow centralization to go on unchecked, and if the quality of the Commonwealth Civil Service improves in the way in which it has in recent years with no corresponding progress in the States, Australian government will become a cen-

tralized bureaucracy—perhaps an enlightened and benevolent bureaucracy but a bureaucracy none the less. The participation of people in the government of their own affairs will cease to be of any significance, and healthy and vigorous political opinion and political activity will disappear. I confess this seems to me to be so remote a possibility as to be hardly real; I find it difficult to take it seriously; and yet I found so little interest in the question of decentralization and so little serious thought being given to the problems raised by the changing position of the States in the last twenty years, that I began to wonder whether in fact Australians had become reconciled to the idea of being governed by a bureaucracy. I have ventured therefore to put down these few random reflections, if only to illustrate the sort of impression that can be formed by one who moved about the country a good deal and discussed these matters with people fairly closely concerned with government and politics, in the hope that they may provoke some discussion and perhaps lead to contradiction. I hope very much that in this statement of my misgivings and forebodings I may be proved to be wrong.

