



the IPA review

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The CHALLENGE

THE progress of Australia in the first half of the 20th Century (shown statistically in the special 4-page supplement included with this issue) is something in which Australians can take a justifiable pride. If it falls short of the spectacular, this may be due less to any deficiencies in the make-up of the national character, than to the remoteness of the Continent from the main centres of world population, and to the fact that the Continent itself is a strange old land mass presenting problems of development which are in many ways unique.

But should we fail to realise our full potentialities in the fifty years now before us, we will not be able to plead these two drawbacks as an excuse. Modern high-speed communications have annihilated distance, and geographical remoteness is no longer an insuperable handicap. And we now possess what fifty years ago we lacked, a vast and hard-won store of experience about the Australian continent which can be applied to good purpose in meeting the challenge of the era that stretches ahead.

What is the challenge?

For Australia, the middle of the 20th Century marks not merely a turning point in historic time, but a climacteric in its development as a nation. We have lately come of age. There are unmistakable signs of a growing national self-assertion. We have begun better to know ourselves, our peculiar weaknesses and strengths. To self-knowledge has been added a greater understanding of the peoples of other countries, which in turn has sharpened our awareness of our own distinctive national characteristics and of what we—and possibly only we—can contribute to the sum of the world's progress.

IN the next fifty years, Australia will either grow to national maturity and greatness (as the United States has done), or it will cease to count for much at all in the world scheme of things—greatness, not merely in size, but in wisdom and understanding and in capacity to bear responsibilities. It will no longer be sufficient for us to copy and follow: we will be required to initiate and lead by independent example and achievement and our own native resource. The next fifty years, in other words, will decide whether Australia is to make a big mark in the world, or whether as a people we are no more than second-rate, incapable of grasping the magnificent opportunities presented to us by a favourably disposed Providence.

These opportunities are worth a moment's thought. Australia is one of the few modern industrial nations with great undeveloped resources. It is one of the few areas left on the surface of the earth which is still patently under-populated. The possibilities of economic growth and expansion are almost breath-taking. Those who have visited overseas countries cannot fail to be impressed by the manifold advantages of living in Australia, particularly by contrast with the older countries of Western Europe. We have the space to absorb a vast accretion to our population without incurring the physical discomforts and economic handicaps of over-crowding so manifest in the older nations. This is no small thing.

Our undeveloped resources are substantial, although not limitless. The full extent of our stores of mineral wealth is as yet unknown. Much of our known and tabulated wealth is still to be exploited. The advance of science and the harnessing of water resources is sure to add progressively to the

productive and carrying capacity of the soil. New, vast areas will be brought into economic cultivation.

To a heritage of great primary industries has been added in recent decades, and in the face of much wrongheaded criticism from abroad, an astonishing, although as yet not fully mature, structure of manufacturing industries. Australia is developing to that desirable, and, in the modern world, very essential state of a balanced economy, neither weighted too heavily in favour of the products of the farm on the one hand, nor of the factory on the other. In the main we don't have to import the basic necessities of life; we are able to export them to less fortunate peoples. And there is every indication that in a time not far distant we will supplement, on a large scale, our traditional exports of wool and wheat and base metals with the products of manufacturing industries, the technical efficiency of which can be expected to increase with the expanding domestic market provided by a rapidly increasing population.

The spate of huge post-war developmental projects, of which the giant Snowy River Scheme is the master symbol, being carried out only at sacrifices to the present generation not yet fully appreciated, opens up vistas and horizons whose ultimate implications cannot be more than vaguely assessed. Certainly together these large projects will eventually form the foundations of a great enlargement of the economic structure of Australia.

THE economic prospect is thus little short of staggering. What of the political prospect? Perhaps this even surpasses the economic. It is, of course, inevitable that the passage of time must bring with it some shift in political power and responsibility from Britain to the Dominions. This is a natural consequence of the growth in political understanding and economic strength of the younger parts of the British Commonwealth. But this natural, and, up to the present fairly gradual, process is, in the next few decades, certain to be greatly accelerated by Britain's own restricted economic situation traceable, fundamentally, to the pressure of population upon severely limited resources. The Dominions, too, fortunately free of the social and psychological encumbrances of past centuries, are in some ways better fitted to comprehend

and to meet the problems of the democratic, nationalistic 20th Century.

In this process Australia seems more suited than any other member of the British Commonwealth to assume some of the burden of leadership hitherto carried by the mother country. Its only serious rival could conceivably be Canada, but Canada, partly because of a large mixed population part of which has preserved its own language, traditions and customs, and partly because of its proximity to the United States, is less distinctively British than Australia in temperament and inclination. Moreover the Canadian financial and economic nexus is with the dollar area, not with sterling.

But that is not all. Australia's geographic position, close to the doors of a resurgent, nationalistic Asia, imposes on it special obligations of leadership of the white races in the Pacific, along with the United States.

Australia, then, in the next few decades may find itself elevated to a position of political prominence of which it yet hardly dreams. But it is by no means presumptuous, or overstepping the bounds of probability, to think that Australia will, in no distant time, share the leadership of the British peoples on a basis of equality with England itself. The controversial picture drawn by the novelist Nevil Shute in his book, "In the Wet", in which he prophesies the drift of political power from Britain to Australia, is no doubt intentionally a caricature, and as a caricature an exaggeration, but it contains much more than a small substratum of truth.

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THERE, then, is the challenge and the opportunity! Will we rise to the level of the occasion? Can we achieve, in the next few decades, the political and economic stature that our position in the world demands?

The answer must be sought in the ultimate verities of national character. The Australian character and temperament are today distinctively a product of the Australian environment; they bear little resemblance to those of their forefathers shaped by an utterly diverse social and physical habitat. The vast spaces, the rugged and often harsh character of the Continent, the demands on those who pioneer, the irresistible out-of-doors climate, have combined to mould the unmistakable Australian. His easy-going casualness hides a capacity

for great physical effort and concentration when he thinks the occasion demands. He does not value highly the finer social graces and the smaller courtesies. He detects humbug with an almost uncanny penetration. His abruptness conceals an inner kindliness and an ability to feel sincere sympathy for those in stress. He refuses to recognise social superiority. He can turn his hand to almost anything and produce a result that will work, even though the polish and the finish may be lacking. He has a positive genius for practical improvisation. He excels in invention but is not so gifted in the fundamental research which calls for laborious and long-continued analysis. He will respond readily to the truth, but he will not always take the pains to discover what it is. The Australian has abundant initiative. He has the very necessary quality of aggressiveness, which he sometimes carries too near the surface. In the world of physical sport he has probably no superior.

So much for his qualities! What of his defects? He has three which are serious.

The Australian values far too lowly the things of the intellect. He respects the doer rather than the thinker, and is indifferent to the qualities bestowed by higher education. He is impatient with abstractions, but abstraction is one of the two paths which lead to the discovery of truth.

Second, the Australian is the Great Leveller. He takes a perverse delight in putting down the mighty from their seats. But, how can a people expect to advance to national greatness, if it is not prepared to applaud exceptional achievement and quality among its own members? A country that worships at the shrine of mediocrity makes it impossible for itself ever to rise above mediocrity.

Just as serious, in the present phase of Australian development, is an almost obdurate conservatism, a strange anomalous quality when you consider him as the product of a new, young country. Quite unlike the American, the Australian is intensely suspicious of change. He harps too much on what the past has done; he speculates too little on what the future can bring.

Whether as a member of a State, or of an association of employers or employees, his loyalty to that which is closest to him often blinds him to the imperatives of the greater

national interest. But, above all else, it is this national conception that Australia now needs.

This combination of sectionalism and conservatism is almost more pronounced in the ordinary trade unionist than in the convinced rightist. It leads the Australian to delay and procrastinate in making very necessary changes to policies which have ceased to be relevant and to institutions which were established to cope with horse-and-buggy conditions and which have long outlived their usefulness. He continues, for instance, to saddle himself with an unhappy system of industrial settlement which nevertheless borders on the comic and the Gilbertian, and which does poor credit to his down-to-earth good sense. Another example: in spite of the economic and social revolution of the past twenty years, it is difficult to detect any noticeable change in the basic ideology of Australian trade unionism.

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IT is here that we must seek the answer to the query whether Australia will rise to the challenge of the next few decades, whether it is destined to assume a great and honoured place among the nations. *Can it adapt its thought, its policies and its institutions to the demands of the times?—for no nation can expect to move forward confidently and surely in an age of atoms and jets with horse-and-buggy social machinery and ideas.* Can it live as adventurously in the realm of ideas as it has done so splendidly on the battle fields of war and the playing fields of sport?

This necessary adaptation of ideas and institutions may depend on the appearance of the highest type of leadership of which there is at present a disturbing insufficiency. In politics, Australia desperately needs the far-visioned statesman instead of the demagogue; in business, the embracing national mind as well as the money-making tycoon; in the trade unions, the man with the larger inspiration rather than the petty, small-time official; in the press, the imaginative, cultured thinker as well as the circulation expert.

And, among the people as a whole, we need a comprehension of the challenge which faces us; the pure glowing vision of what Australia can become; and the surging national pride which would make us feel a deep, abiding disgrace in failure.