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WHAT FUTURE FOR AUSTRALIA?
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In accepting The Australian's invitation to forecast the political and social trends of the next ten years, I must begin with a note of caution. Special pleading and wishful thinking make politicians notoriously unreliable prophets. Who would have predicted, when The Australian was launched ten years ago, the chronic political instability that was to follow the retirement of Sir Robert Menzies? Who would have foreseen the continuing rise of the D.L.P. and, more recently, its even more sudden and extraordinary demise? Who would have predicted, only 18 months ago, that a democratically elected Government, comfortably installed with a working majority after 23 years in opposition, would be driven to the polls again half-way through its term, with important sections of its program under challenge?

I do not wish to begin on too partisan a note. My point is simply that of all human activities, politics is the least predictable. Compared with the changes we have seen in Australia, the changes on the world scale in the past ten years have been incomparably more vast and far-reaching. Traditional forms of democratic government are under challenge. The growth of world population, the depletion of the earth's natural resources, man's new awareness of environmental hazards, rising crime rates, growing pollution, greater civil and industrial unrest, worldwide inflation, a rising tendency to alienation and job dissatisfaction

in industrial societies, and a growing recourse to violence as a political weapon - all have compelled politicians to look afresh at their methods and priorities.

Australia, however, is still happily insulated from many of the evils and neuroses afflicting other nations. That may seem an oddly complacent view to anyone who values internationalism; nevertheless, I take some comfort from it. There is a steadiness, an equanimity, a fundamental decency and good sense in our makeup that enables us to look ahead with some confidence in our judgement and some faith in our power to do good. We are better placed than most nations to withstand the effects of any general economic or social hardship on a global scale. We are one of the few countries whose material and agricultural resources would make us self-sufficient in a global emergency. I do not for a moment suggest that self-sufficiency should be an aim of Australian policy; and it is true that our isolation has often deprived us of much that is good. I am inclined to believe, however, that in a world racked by uncertainty, ^{and} by violence and mindless fanaticism, the advantages of our limited isolation still tend to outweigh the ills.

For these reasons, therefore, I am an optimist -though a rather anxious one. I retain the humanist's belief in progress, in man's innate tendency to self-improvement. I retain the democrat's belief that this tendency is best directed through the forms of a free and open society. I retain the parliamentarian's belief that free societies are best governed through a two-party system, where the rights and procedures of open debate are reposed in elected legislatures.

In short, I believe that, in the absence of nuclear war, worldwide depression or a major environmental catastrophe, Australia will remain one of the world's more fortunate nations. I expect a steady rise in her standards of living and a more equitable sharing of the material benefits and opportunities of advanced civilisation. I see these conditions, not so much as ends in themselves, but as the essential pre-requisites for a fuller life. Real poverty is a poverty of the spirit; real riches consist in the enjoyment of non-material rewards, in the intellectual, artistic and cultural opportunities available to free minds cultivated by a rational system of education.

I believe, therefore, that party politics in the next ten years will be increasingly concerned with improvements in social and living standards. The debate will be not so much about whether change is desirable, but about the rate of change. This, indeed, is already happening. The traditional conservative parties will be driven increasingly to accept the legitimate aspirations of free people for greater opportunities, greater equality, greater material security and higher standards of living. In other words, I see a steady shift to the left; and I believe that such a shift has been the dominant feature of democratic politics in the west since the end of World War II. Such a shift, of course, is accelerated by the election of radical, reformist or left-of-centre governments. I have no doubt, for example, that our opponents have adopted more enlightened policies as a result of Labor's victories in 1972 and 1974. I believe the greatest danger in left-wing governments is their tendency to authoritarianism, and the greater danger in democratic conservative governments is their tendency to complacency.

I have no doubt that the main problem for the Australian economy in the next 10 years will be the worldwide growth of inflation. It seems to me that growing populations, diminishing resources and ever-rising material expectations make a measure of inflation inevitable. Provided we devise machinery to protect the weaker members of society, and provided the burdens of sacrifice are fairly shared, it may be that the world will learn to live with inflation on a higher scale than it has known in the past. This does not mean that strong measures will not be needed to check inflation from time to time.

I expect the Australian economy to become increasingly mixed; that is to say, the management of our resources will be more equally divided between government and private enterprise. Governments including local government, will be expected to provide more and more services - sometimes because private enterprise finds them unprofitable but more often because they have not in the past been provided at all. I believe private corporations will be submitted increasingly to public supervision in the interests of the nation as a whole, and that many of the abuses of unrestrained free enterprise will be checked. I have no doubt that the benefits of an advanced welfare state are fully compatible with those of an efficient and flourishing private sector. To my mind, capitalism is the best means yet devised for producing the material goods required by advanced societies; I therefore believe in free enterprise. At the same time, there can be no question that the injustices and inequalities of such societies must be redressed by government intervention; and for that reason I am a democratic socialist.

I believe Australia will continue to live at peace with her neighbours and the world for the foreseeable future. I accept the advice of our experts that no military threat is likely to Australia in the next 15 years. The same advice was given to our predecessors and accepted by them. I believe the next decade will see Australian politics further liberated from their old, stultifying preoccupation with ideological conflicts and cold war attitudes. Such a prospect is wholly encouraging. Australia will be better placed to play her natural role in Asia as a concerned, generous and enlightened neighbour.

I do not envisage any dramatic increase in our present population, and indeed I would not wish to see one. On the other hand, I expect to see a number of new cities well established in provincial regions during the next ten years - or at least the confident beginnings of such cities. I expect vast improvements in our roads and railways, new child care centres and health centres, better hospitals and schools and improved standards of public and private housing. I believe that in 10 years we will have fully accepted our responsibilities to the deprived and weaker sections of the community, and that the Aboriginal people of Australia will enjoy a new dignity and security.

These assessments rest on the assumption that the major reforms undertaken by the present Government will be irreversible, and that even if the conservative parties are returned to power, there will be a continuing popular consensus in favour of progressive policies.

In a world of totalitarian regimes and minority governments, such confidence may prove to be misplaced. I base it, however, on my expressed faith in the maturity and intelligence of the Australian electorate. I do not claim for the left a monopoly of wisdom and virtue, but I see in the Australian people a degree of sophistication and discernment that will lead them instinctively to political solutions founded in fair play, in justice, in moderation, and, I trust, in idealism.

I look ahead to a society whose democratic foundations, nurtured in a political climate uniquely free of hysteria and dogmatism, will be strengthened and refined. I believe the next ten years will bring a fuller sense of national pride and purpose, a determination to preserve the national estate and maintain Australian control of our industries and resources. I believe we will cultivate a more mature and distinctive Australian identity, a more vigorous climate in the arts, and a generation of young Australians determined to reject all that is shoddy and spurious, second-rate and second-hand, whether at home or abroad. It may well be that these hopes for a sound democracy, for a proud people equipped to lead their lives to the full in security and peace, will not be realised in my lifetime. I cannot believe, however, that such a goal is beyond our means or beyond our abilities, or that the creation of a model society, an example to the world, is too lofty a vision for a strong and united people.

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