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Newsletter

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Newsletter

SOUTH AUSTRALIA AND A PLAN FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

by Don Dunstan, Premier of South Australia.

The South Australian Government is the only Social Democratic Government in Australia. As such it is in a sense on trial. We have come into power with an ideology that stresses progressive social reform, the establishment of equality of economic and social opportunity, and a belief in the concepts of freedom underlying democratic forms of representative government. Our programme, or platform, is wide ranging. It touches on all facets of life in South Australia, from the development of the arts, through to criminal law reform, the establishment of high-quality design industries and effective environmental control. But like all moderate and progressive social governments, we suffer politically from what could be considered by some a major political weakness. We can never be as authoritarian or administratively rigid as people on the Right expect Governments to be, nor as politically radical as some on the Left demand.

I often feel that Australians in particular are afraid of freedom and the kinds of broad social responsibility it demands. Hence our absurd censorship laws and regulations, our antique criminal law provisions, and the sepulchreal hush which descends whenever the words 'law and order' are uttered, regardless of what law

2.

or which order. The law and order a Social Democratic Government works for should be enlightened by reason and ennobled by moderation. It should strike a balance between individual freedom and social cohesion. It should never be motivated by either political expediency or moral or social prejudices.

In South Australia we have now embarked on a course of social and industrial planning which could place the State once more in the position of leading Australia in progressive legislation. South Australia has a tradition in this regard: it introduced the secret ballot and female suffrage decades before these forms became accepted elsewhere in either Australia, Europe or America. In the 19th century it set the pace in land reform and industrial legislation. Under Labor, we would like to see it lead again. We want it to be the social reform, the artistic, and the design and technological center of Australia. But of course it is impossible to lay down binding rules for future social behaviour and development. Changing social and economic conditions will always thrust new problems before the populace and its government, and so it is necessary to endeavour to establish administrative and legislative structures that do not rigidly determine future development or deny future options. Governments in Australia, when they think at all, tend to

3.

think within a rigidly confined framework, of convention and conventional wisdom. In such situations, the really creative work, if it gets done at all, is done by those public servants possessed with sufficient vision to see future problems or the necessity for rethinking present courses. This is unsatisfactory Government at its best. It relies on a great many trips down or conversations in the corridors of bureaucratic power before the politicians realise a decision has to be made.

In South Australia we believe it is possible, with thought and careful planning, to allow for alternatives while predicting and providing for future trends in both the long and short term.

One of the most important subjects we have to examine is demography: the growth and distribution of population, and the environment in which it lives. It is essential that we consider our total environment - physical, social and cultural. Where and how people live is just as important as where and how they work. And this applies just as much to housewives and children as it does to industrial workers and clerks.

Therefore, we have in our 3½ months of Government begun to plan for a complete transformation of urban transportation, for the control of pollution, for the prevention of disfigurement of our hills and rivers, and for the

4.

redevelopment of city and suburban areas. In all of these things we have sought and are retaining authorities with the kinds of expertise able to give us effective advice, and who are encouraged to range as widely as possible in their studies.

With the arts, we plan an entirely new approach to the disbursement of government funds so as to ensure that those doing the best creative work are supported. The new Festival Hall in Adelaide will provide excellent facilities for major performances of opera, ballet, theatre and music, but in addition we intend to establish adjacent to it a theatre suitable for the use of the South Australian Theatre Company which, as a newly organized statutory body, will have both its existence assured and the ability, given effective administration and talent, to perform to a high international repertory standard. In line with these plans we also intend to encourage experimental arts activity in South Australia. A Performing Arts Center to assist in this is to be built at North Adelaide from the funds provided by an authentic Art Union given prizes of works of art, architect-designed houses, and overseas art tours. The center will provide facilities for two dance companies and two theatre companies.

In all this planning the aim is to transform the Adelaide Festival of Arts so that instead of being an oasis of arts activity in what is otherwise a cultural desert, it will be the culmination each two years of the community's total artistic effort.

In addition, assistance to professional and semi-professional companies and to children's theatre will be contingent on their giving performances in both country areas and schools. And this is part of a broader programme to ensure that the creative instincts of young children are given the greatest encouragement, primary schools are now being provided with open space teaching units. Each of these has a central area where children work in small or large groups, and there are withdrawal areas, which are separate small rooms, where groups of children can read, write things, or perform their own plays. In addition hard floor practical areas for painting and craftwork are being provided.

Not only should all children be able to participate in cultural activities, but they should have equal educational opportunity. We have already increased the amount spent on education. This year's Budget provides for a 23% increase over last year, and we have also made an additional grant

of \$250,000 for independent schools catering for primary students. Further, a Committee has been set up by the Minister of Education, Mr. Hudson, to establish the criteria under which independent schools can be graded according to their need. They include:

- the ability of the schools to gain revenue by charging fees;
- staff-student ratios in the schools;
- average salary costs per staff member;
- revenue sources for the school other than fees;
- expenditure commitment for capital expansion;
- likely demand for places in the schools due to expanding population in their particular areas.

These financing arrangements for independent schools will involve a marked new development in moving towards the provision of equal educational opportunity for all children regardless of their background.

But although a State may provide environment planning, quality development and human and community services, they amount to little unless citizens have the rights of citizenship and a voice in the processes of Government.

In South Australia, our citizens do not have equal rights. There has been a redistribution of electorates for the House of Assembly, but we still have nothing like one vote-one value. Although nearly 70% of South Australia's population lives in the city, the electoral system is

still so weighted that the votes of three countrymen are equal to those of five city dwellers. This situation is inequitable - it flies in the face of the basic tenets of democracy. Combined as it is with an Upper House which is pledged to elitism and which would like to confound the Government at every available opportunity, an intolerable obstacle is imposed between the people and the putting into effect of their wishes. As for our Lower House jerrymander, while it may not now be as serious as that which afflicts the Victorian electoral situation, it is nevertheless in its degree just as deplorable.

We intend to do all we can to alter this situation.

Universal suffrage and compulsory voting Bills are to be introduced and we intend through these to break the Council's hold on legislative processes. Until this has been done the people of South Australia cannot exercise basic democratic rights, particularly the right to vote regardless of status, profession or ownership of property.

With social legislation it is clear that a responsible government in Australia has a very large task ahead.

In every State the criminal law is top heavy with antique and absurd provisions which need to be examined in the light of modern criminological and psychological knowledge.

In S.A. we intend to appoint a Commission to investigate and make recommendations on the proper basis upon which the criminal law should operate - we believe the criminal

law should be there to ensure the protection of people and property from harm by others, not to impose a set of absurd restraints that only aggravate the overall criminal picture and confuse the serious statistics.

Another of the main concerns of the South Australian Government lies in the field of consumer protection. The law of contract, for instance, is at present based on the assumption that both parties to a transaction have equal bargaining powers. This is patently not the case in H.P. contracts in which finance companies are involved. The buyer at the moment is very much at the mercy of the seller-owners.

We plan legislation to vary the terms of contracts to ensure that injustice is avoided and to prevent exploitation by some hire-purchase and insurance companies.

In the fields of industrial development, design and organisation, we are looking to such countries as Scandinavia, Northern Italy and Israel in particular for guide lines in development.

At the moment South Australia suffers from the problems which flow from having too many eggs in one basket - and in industrial terms that means we are far too dependent on consumer-durable industries. Of course, with modern industrial planning methods we intend to diversify employment so that credit squeezes and such like no longer hit the State as hard as they have. This means industrial development that is designed to strengthen and expand what we have now -

a highly skilled work-force, a low-cost structure, and the country's best working conditions. We intend, through planning and direct Government involvement with industry to provide an industrial base that is as technically advanced as it is diverse and economically viable.

Finally, to complete this very brief outline of the S.A. Labor Government's policies in some key areas I should mention succession duties. We intend to alter the incidence of succession duties to give remissions to a spouse inheriting a house, to the inheritors of smaller estates and to inheritors of primary producing property. Other remissions will be removed, successions will be aggregated, and rates of duty on larger successions will be increased. No longer will the poor pay too much and the rich too little in South Australia.

All of the new S.A. Government's proposals are intended to benefit the whole State - all sectors of the economy, all sections of the community. If this were not so, then we should forget the title of a social democrat.

We are planning for S.A. to set the pattern and the pace for the rest of the nation and, in the interests of the nation as a whole, we hope the rest will follow the lead.
