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The Next Fifty Years

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Source: *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Jun., 1954), pp. 27-35

Published by: [Australian Institute of Policy and Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20633437>

Accessed: 23/01/2014 22:50

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By the Hon. Mr. Justice Sholl\*

## *The Next Fifty Years*

Those of us who have lived through the past fifty years may justly claim to have seen more amazing developments in the history of man's life on this earth than those who lived in all the long centuries of earlier recorded time. We have seen the tapping of the world's mineral oil resources and the consequent development of the internal combustion engine, giving us the motor car and the aeroplane; we have witnessed more lately the use of the jet engine, and the development of nuclear physics, giving man access to atomic power. We have seen wireless telephony, broadcasting, and now radar, television and the electronic brain. In medicine we have seen the astonishing results of new antibiotics, new anaesthetics, and new surgical techniques. We have seen in many white countries great improvement in industrial techniques, and, what is vastly more important, but largely a result of it, great changes in social conditions and a happier life for millions. We have seen the awakening of a social conscience, and the beginnings of the same social process, in many colored lands. We have seen the scattered congregations of the human race brought, by new methods of communication and by the existence of new weapons of offence and defence, almost literally elbow to elbow over most of the surface of the globe. In two vast wars we have seen mass destruction and even the practice of mass racial extermination; we have seen the effects of mass propaganda, and mass materialism.

It is indeed a commonplace observation today that in the past fifty years man's intellect has given him new and stupendous power over forces of the physical universe, which he may use, on the one hand, to prolong human life and make it vastly happier, or, on the other hand, to effect untold misery, destruction, and death.

Has man's capacity for spiritual inspiration and insight, and for moral judgment, been so far outstripped by the achievements of his intellect in the material sphere, that the misuse of this new knowledge—even by a small minority of the human race—may in

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the next half-century enslave or destroy a majority powerless to save themselves? Or will the "common sense of most" prevail, if not "till the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law", yet at least in such a way that the earth, and mankind upon it, may from year to year, and from age to age, become more kindly, and man's ordered happiness more universal?

That, I believe, is the first and most tremendous question which faces the world in the next fifty years. Man must and will answer it by finding in spiritual inspiration and in the general acceptance of moral values the will to use knowledge for good and not for evil purposes; because his physical capacity for evil is now so great that, if he chooses that path—

". . . Dragons of the prime,  
That tare each other in their slime,  
Where mellow music, match'd with him."

There are some whom, as we begin another new year in these amazing and stirring times, the contemplation of the next half century overwhelms with despair. Yet, fortunately for mankind, they are not the ones who will have to face its problems and make its vast decisions. For the most part, those who will have that task are those who are children, or young men and women, today.

The young of each age are the real strength of the world; they fight its battles; they do its hardest work; and they provide and partly mould its next generation. And they seldom look with pessimism or despair upon the tasks which await them. May I quote Emerson—

"So nigh is grandeur to our dust,  
So near is God to man,  
When duty whispers low, 'Thou must,'  
The youth replies, 'I can.'"

The future is theirs, but we who are in middle or in old age would be wrong if we did not hope and believe that we can still do much to guide them, and to help them to shape their ideals.

What will they not see by the year 2000? Almost certainly, man's first attempt to leave his own planet, and to reach the moon. Quite probably, the discovery of the true basis of human memory and thought, in terms of the electrical and chemical phenomena involved in the functioning of the brain, with results at present unforeseeable upon psychiatric medicine and the whole treatment of mental disease and crime. Inevitably, a further lengthening of the span of human life, but with it, fresh anxieties as the world seeks

to feed its too rapidly multiplying peoples. Inevitably too, a further breaking down of the color barriers which the white man has built up in the past, as races which he has been wont to regard as backward or inferior acquire and use the scientific and social knowledge which he has made available to them. Possibly, the beginning of new mass population movements into the more sparsely settled land areas of the globe. Undoubtedly, fresh records in human endurance and physical achievement, including the four-minute mile,\* and perhaps, a nine-seconds hundred yards. Almost certainly, vast man-made climatic changes, brought about by artificial rain-making, and by river-diversion such as the Russians have already carried out in Central Asia; or again, perfect synthetic substitutes for wool and many other natural fibres, with tremendous reorganisation of the economies of the countries which now produce the natural products. Possibly, even, some economically useful employment for the race-horse and the greyhound, and all who live on and by them. Probably, I fear, in one form or another, some kind of further war or wars, but fought with what weapons, and with what result?

The answer to that last question will depend, I believe, on what happens to so-called international communism, or as I prefer to call it, communist imperialism, in Asia—a question which of course vitally concerns those who live, and will live, in Australia. For on it depends the question whether at the end of fifty years Australia will still belong to Australians as we know them, or whether it will be a series of Asian colonies, or of small communities with the status of the lesser Central or South American states. He would be a bold student of history who, remembering the mass population movements of the past, would deny the danger of a spill-over into this empty continent, peopled by less than 10 million white people, of some of the 1000 crowded millions of the vast Eurasian lands which reach so close to us on the north. How nearly it happened in 1942! How much more powerful may be a similar movement if it is given political drive and direction by the so-called “religious” fervor of imperialist communism! Even today, the seeds of such a movement may be sprouting in Indo-China. Being built, at all events in its initial and at present its only practicable stage, on hatred, one of the lowest and yet one of the most powerful of the human emotions, and on materialism, one of the most cynical but one of the most widespread of human beliefs, such a creed as communism in its existing manifestations produces its passionate devotees, but

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\* This article was received in March, 1954, since when an Englishman has broken the 4 minutes for the mile.

has furnished no evidence that it can ever build a reign of peace and prosperity on earth. It may, however, bring, for a time, another Dark Age to all or some of the world, and Australia must face that danger in the next 50 years, and perhaps in the next 20 years.

But there is no cause for despair, if our ordinary men and women will think and act with responsibility and with moral strength and courage, and not as "the poor little street-bred people that vapor, and fume, and brag." The countless islands of Indonesia, over which at present one central government holds an infirm and tenuous sway, are, with few exceptions, sparsely populated, and may soon become, politically and physically, a vacuum which will absorb an Asian overflow. But much more important is it that, as mankind in what we know as the free world takes time to reason and to adjust its moral values, so the general will to resist by the force of mind and spirit the spreading power of an aspiritual and material creed will inevitably grow stronger. The greatest achievements of mankind have been based on spiritual things. Notwithstanding the countless crimes committed in bygone days in the name of religion, few would deny that the greatest advances in individual human happiness have followed on the teaching of the Golden Rule, the creed of love of God towards man, and of man towards man, which is the very basis of the Christian teaching, and which is to be found in all the other great religious creeds of the world.

Unless we believe in the ultimate reign of peace and love on this earth, what belief can man hold in ordered progress? What hope can he entertain of an ever-widening realm of human health and happiness? If we believe, with Dr. Huxley, that moral teachings such as those of the Christian religion are, as a world force, "on the way out", what substituted moral precepts shall guide those who wield power over their fellows? Unless we believe that such men are trustees of power, and answerable for its use, or abuse, according to a spiritual standard of equity, how can we defend and fight for the ordered freedom of the individual—body, mind, and soul? And what valid criticism can the purely material scientist offer of Hitler's mass slaughter in the name of eugenics?

Because the free world has tasted individual freedom it will, I believe, be victorious in the struggles which the next fifty years will see between its values and those of the pure materialists. There are indications that behind the Iron Curtain many still seek to satisfy man's need for spiritual inspiration—

“Poor vaunt of life indeed,  
Were man but formed to feed  
On joy, to solely seek, and find, and feast;—  
Such feasting ended, then  
As sure an end to men.”

What Australia, in common with the rest of the Western World, can achieve in the next fifty years by way of protecting and developing its own way of life depends in part at least on what spiritual leadership it enjoys, and what can be done to improve the working of democratic institutions as a means of government.

Though men still believe that right must fight against wrong, whatever the odds, and that each human being is one of God's own creatures, with individual rights to freedom and happiness, though they refer the vast achievements of the human mind, as well as its guidance in the choice of ultimate good and evil, to that Supreme Intelligence to which the human mind itself refers the wonders of creation, they will nevertheless challenge the churches to expound afresh in the light of modern knowledge the mysteries of the Divine Intelligence. They will challenge them to speak to the human intelligence of a world which, cynical at the sight of slaughter, believes less than once it did in the power of God to interrupt, or disrupt, the course of the physical laws of nature. They have seen no bombs or bullets deflected, no laws of gravity suspended, no shattered aeroplane wing miraculously restored to place as the fuselage carried its human load to their deaths. “What!”, they say, “Do statues weep, but children in hundreds drown or burn to death? Can God prevent that? If not, explain to us in what sense we are to understand His omnipotence? In what sense is the individual life a part of His great plan?” The intellectual classes of the modern world have a considerable understanding of abstract scientific truths, and in all the countries which have progressed beyond peasant illiteracy, the artisans on the land or in the cities are accustomed to every form of mechanical contrivance working on the basis of known natural laws. No modern Inquisition can, under whatever guise, oppose by its obscurantist frown the venturesome inquiries of the 20th century human mind, in the face of such myriad proofs of its capacity to reason, and to discover the truths of the physical universe. Perhaps every teacher of religion or of morality should qualify in the physical sciences. For instinctively, man

“thinks he was not made to die”:

and the duty to make moral judgments on a spiritual basis must, for their own salvation, be made to appeal to the millions who today have more education, a much greater capacity to reason, an enormously greater control, for good or evil, of the forces of nature, and, in consequence, an immeasurably greater need of true help to choose the right and hate the wrong. The creed that cannot in the next fifty years be shown to carry such a message is indeed dead.

Can democracy itself survive the next fifty years? Some there are who say that a benevolent dictatorship is the best form of human government. By some standards of days long dead, it may once have been so, though the dictator who could remain benevolent, and uncorrupted by power, must have been rare indeed. But once human society has tasted the fruits of a form of life in which individual liberty has so far progressed as to include a power to deny the tyrant authority of a dictator, it never willingly yields up that freedom again. Democratic institutions as we know them represent the best man has so far been able to manage in practice, in the way of an ordered right to change its rulers. Perhaps the cynic may sometimes say that all democracy has done for the world has been to induce mankind to dissipate the greater part of his most vicious impulses, with comparative harmlessness, in wars of words instead of weapons, within those countries where such a system of government prevails. But even so, increased respect for human life, human safety, and human happiness over so large an area of the globe is an enormous advance on the way of life of even a century or two ago. A similar general approach to international problems would represent an even more amazing advance. No one can doubt that, if the free world can gain time to develop freer institutions, that day will one day come to pass. There is no more magic in the national unit of humanity than there was in the tribal unit, and improved knowledge and methods of communication are at this very moment breaking down the one as they broke down the other. The next fifty years must see an extraordinary acceleration of that process. What threatens the whole progress of mankind towards a general reign of ordered government and individual happiness is the rise of men who seek absolute power, claiming the right to crush those who deny their ambition. Such men must be fought.

Even from within the free democracies, including Australia, the next fifty years will see threats to freedom, and must also find ways



to improve the working of political institutions. As I see it, there will be two great problems.

The first will come from attempts to use power in order to perpetuate power, and will be partly due to the rise of the welfare state. The creation of an official class, having power by law over the distribution to individuals of the very necessities of life and happiness—such as housing, medicines, hospital accommodation, professional services, schooling, and transport—will not perhaps destroy individual freedom to any grave degree, so long as that class is controlled by Parliamentary ministers subject to free and frequent election. But if that safeguard is weakened, bureaucracy will soon tend to oppress the ordinary citizen. And even under the present system, attempts to arrange electorates to secure a continuity of power for a minority, or an alliance between the elected Executive and the civil service to override the rights of individuals, are much to be feared. To the rigging of electorates to secure power for a numerical minority there is no constitutional answer if it is done, as it can often be done, within the limits of constitutional power. It represents the greatest of all dangers to the future of democratic institutions, since it may ultimately drive a majority to violent and unconstitutional methods to force an amendment of the constitutional instrument in order to prevent its continuance.

On the other hand, the citizen's remedy against an unlawful alliance between the Executive and the civil service is furnished by the courts, which from time to time have to interfere to restrain the Executive; and some of the hostility to the Courts which is observable on occasions in political quarters is due, I believe, to an impatience of their authority to pronounce, in the interests of the ordinary citizen, upon the legality of governmental and official actions. The tendency is not confined to Australia, but the next half century may well see in this country, and perhaps elsewhere, attempts, in the interests of power politics, to place the legality or otherwise of Parliamentary, Executive, or official action beyond the competency of the Courts to determine. Apathetic as he is, and little though he understands the enormous importance to himself of the dearly-won principle that no official is above the ordinary law, I believe the citizen of the free communities founded on the British model will in the end successfully defend that principle.

It may, of course, be attacked by a different route—the attempted creation of a subservient judiciary. There has been in Australia,



for fifty years, and in Great Britain and the U.S.A. more recently, a tradition of parsimony in the administration of the law, due perhaps to the fact that it has no dramatic effect on popular votes; in that respect it may be thought by some to have resembled mental and child welfare. In time, such administration might discourage men of independent mind from accepting judicial office. But I believe that so firmly does each generation of lawyers, at all events in the countries of the British Commonwealth of Nations, inculcate in the next generation the tradition of the independence of the bench, that it would take far more than 50 years to undermine it; and so there will be no problem on that score in the next half-century.

Let me now refer to the second great problem—that tendency of modern democracy, well-exemplified in Australia, towards the apotheosis of crude mediocrity, and the disapproval and discouragement of outstanding merit. Australia, in common, I am sorry to say, with much of the rest of the free world, and by reason partly of the course of industrial history, has been engaged for many years in depreciating or destroying all margins for skill—intellectual as well as technical—under the mistaken impression that it was thereby helping to abolish class distinctions in society. To make it no longer worth a man's while to stand out from the ranks of the unskilled, is the mark of a society which is stupid enough to believe in equality of human capacity, which experience denies, instead of equality of initial opportunity, which experience justifies. I believe the next fifty years—indeed, I believe the next 10 or 20 years—will see a more general realisation that abolition of class distinctions based on hereditary wealth or birth cannot abrogate nature's classifications based on intelligence, aptitude, and physique. We should see here, too, in the next half-century, more admiration for and less of the present curious envy of outstanding men, and a cessation of the quaint and self-conscious refusal—indeed, some would say the surly refusal—to recommend honors for civic service. If some men, who would serve their fellows for the honors it might bring them, are discouraged from any such expectation, others, interested in serving with a view to the more corrupting prizes of power or wealth, or both, will take their place—a phenomenon of which examples are not lacking even today in this country or the U.S.A.

By the end of the century, universal education will probably have led, in the more advanced democracies, to the weighting of

universal suffrage in favor of citizens with intellectual attainments, or the distinction of civic service, according to some such systems as the novelists have already been discussing.

In the field of Australian law, the holding of a Constitutional convention cannot long be delayed. I believe the stress of another war, or the imminence for any substantial period of a threat from the north, will tend strongly towards unification, with vast national savings in the expense of government, and vast improvements in its efficiency. But otherwise, in the absence of some such urgent cause, the Federal system—very much modernised and improved by a Convention—will be retained because of the limitations it imposes on the powers of administrators in whose hands the people fear that plenary authority might at times be abused. Even this generation should see a uniform Australian divorce law, women sitting on juries, and absolute liability for damage caused by motor vehicles.

What, finally, will ordinary people be doing in Australia by the New Year of 2000 A.D.? Living, I hope and expect, in many ways the same kind of lives, at home with their families, as they do today. For spiritual strength is deeply implanted in our people, and the great majority will be then, as now, kind, good, and generous. We see and hear much today of the gross worship of worldly and material things, and in Australia particularly, of a pathological over-indulgence in alcohol, which is at the root of most crime and divorce, and is responsible for most of the crudity of manners and barrenness of leisure of which one sees so much in people of all ages, but especially in the young. But few people are wholly bad, and the new science of psychiatry is as yet but in an infancy of experiment and error. Its relationship with religious belief on the one hand, and with the administration of the law on the other hand, remains to be worked out, and in the process it is inevitable that it will have important effects on some aspects of both. The next generation should see its brilliant and startling development, marching hand-in-hand with a revival of spiritual forces and moral values (whatever be their precise intellectual basis) in a land filled with new industries, a much greater population, and a new prosperity.

In Melbourne at the New Year of 2000 A.D., women will doubtless be just reverting to today's fashions; men will be debating the possible reform of their dress; and the newspapers will be full of the January sales and the helicopter-parking problem.