



# A CURRENT AFFAIR

from some 60 years ago

‘What effect would the import of low-priced Japanese goods have upon Australian industry?’ ‘Does your daily diet measure up to the standards necessary for health?’ ‘How can the world be fed if soil erosion continues to eat deep into the flesh of the good earth?’

Feel as though you’re reading today’s current affairs? You’re correct – except that they are also current affairs from some 60 years ago. Instead of the eye-popping pixels of today’s ACA, these hot topics from the late 1940s were printed on flimsy paper destined for the classroom pinboard. With their bold colours, snappy graphics and headlines that demanded debate, the posters were part of an education revolution that has since come full circle. The teaching tools of a previous generation, now ephemera, provide some familiar insights into modern complexities.

The National Museum of Australia holds 46 of these Discussion Posters, ‘an experiment in a new educational medium in Australia’. Designed ‘to stimulate discussion and thought in the adult community’<sup>1</sup> they were issued fortnightly between 1947 and 1950 by the Commonwealth Office of Education (COE), an agency created in 1945 under the Chifley government as part of the Department of Post-War Reconstruction. Ex-service personnel who attended classes as part of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training

Scheme (1944–1950) may recall these posters. They were also used in schools, community organisations, migrant centres and private enterprise.

The Museum’s collection of posters was donated by Tom Woolman of Bendigo, who saved them from destruction while he was teaching at the Maryborough Technical School (now Maryborough Regional College), Victoria, in 1973. They were obviously well-used, with pinholes, flattened creases and repaired tears a legacy of their handling and display. Some of the most popular posters have actually fallen to pieces along their folds, but their colours remain as intense as some of the debates they were intended to provoke.

And what provocation! Australia’s international obligations (‘New Homes for 815,000 Displaced Persons’), trade relations (‘Britain Must Have Meat’), industrial expansion (‘Oil in Australia?’), technical innovations (‘A Few Facts About Atoms’), changing demographics (‘WANTED: 15,000 More Teachers’) and agriculture (‘Save the Soil – or Starve!’) are recurring themes. Posters detailing ‘Where Your Taxes Go’ and ‘The Menace of INFLATION’ still raise a wry smile, while the stark statistic of ‘One Road Death Every 6 ½ Hours’ reveals a different impact of the motor car on the Australian way of life. A poster explaining the Schuman Declaration documents the roots of today’s European Union; while the work of the United Nations also comes in for repeated





These posters document the Chifley government's efforts to explain Australia's changing economic position in a world under reconstruction.

treatment, including at least two posters explaining the brand new Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A wide range of other subjects is also covered – from radio to religion – including some, such as personal appearance ('Good Taste') and interior design ('What's Wrong with this Room?'), with seemingly tenuous links to the national interest.

These official efforts to explain Australia's socio-economic and political position were researched and written by COE staff or specialist academics under the directorship of economist Professor Richard C. Mills, who was also, ex-officio, the Chairman of the Universities Commission. Liaison was extensive: agencies including the Department of Information, the United States Information Services, the Commonwealth Statistician and the Deputy Commissioner of Taxation were all involved, while COE's work in connection with UNESCO and with migrant education required consultation with the Departments of External Affairs and Immigration. The Commonwealth Department of Transport suggested a poster on the unification of the rail gauge (which, in common with its subject matter, did not eventuate); the Child Welfare Advisory Council suggested a poster on juvenile delinquency (which, in common with its subject matter, did).<sup>2</sup> Newspaper cuttings were also used to spark ideas or supplement current research.<sup>3</sup>

This collection provides an insight into a society undergoing profound change. Imaging an increasingly independent Australia forging a new role in the global and regional community, the posters document the nation's industrial expansion, the growing power and influence of the manufacturing sector, and the promises of science, engineering and technology.

They also interpret the social restructuring of Australia at a time of full employment, a booming population, and an increasingly prosperous and sophisticated urban society.

In addition, the posters represent the Chifley government's drive to stimulate post-war intellectual life and to reassert the concepts of democracy, egalitarianism and social justice. Talks, displays and courses in discussion leadership were given to adult and workers' educational organisations and others, such as the National Union of Australian University Students, the NSW Department of Prisons, the Bank Employees' Committee of NSW, and the Institute of Management, to ensure the posters were used 'in ways likely to bring the highest degree of educational advantage to group members'.<sup>4</sup> It seems the posters were tools used not only to encourage informed discussion, but perhaps also to reassure and stabilise a society in flux. By attempting to reduce social disadvantage and emphasise civic participation in the democratic process, they aimed to achieve greater social cohesion – perhaps even a conformity of opinion – amongst 'New' and more established Australians. As donor Tom Woolman wrote, 'They are a fascinating reminder of a world my parents had to make sense of'. Explaining issues that are now history, and problems as yet unresolved, these Discussion Posters are still helping us make sense of their world, and ours, today.

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*References*  
 1. Commonwealth Office of Education, Annual Report, Sydney, 1948, pp. 13-15.  
 2. National Archives of Australia (NAA) Series A1361; 23/9/1 Part 2; f. 61A, 65A.  
 3. See for example NAA Series A1361; 23/9/1 Part 2; f. 69A.  
 4. Commonwealth Office of Education, Annual Report, Sydney, 1949, p. 16.

The heart-stopping diet advocated in 1950 could provide insight into current health concerns!



# WHERE WE LIVE



KEY	
	COAL DEPOSITS
	RAILWAYS
	TOWNS OVER 1,000,000
	TOWNS 100,000 TO 1,000,000
	TOWNS 50,000 TO 100,000
	TOWNS 10,000 TO 50,000
	TOWNS 5,000 TO 10,000

Australia is one of the most highly centralised countries in the world. Half of our 8 million people live in the six capital cities, 2½ million in Sydney and Melbourne alone.

This map shows our rail transport network, major coal deposits and the existing "town pattern". Does it help to explain why we are so centralised? (Note the small number of medium-sized country towns [▲]).

*With their habitual inclusion of charts, maps and statistics, the posters additionally demonstrate contemporary concepts in pedagogy and graphic design.*

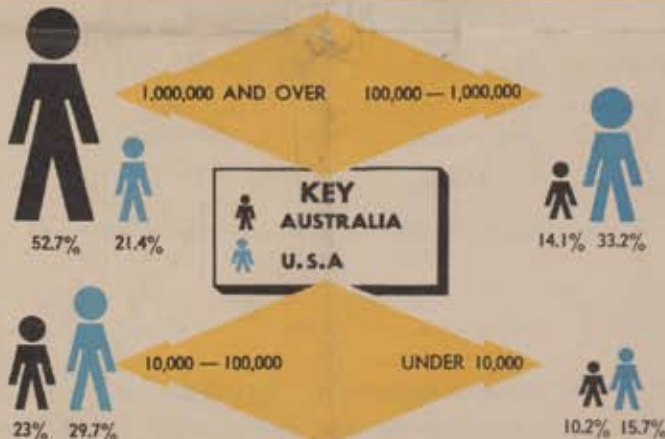
## SHOULD WE DECENTRALISE?

### ADVANTAGES

- Industry — now concentrated mainly in Newcastle, Sydney, Port Kembla and Melbourne— would be less vulnerable in the event of an atomic war.
- Traffic congestion in the capital cities would be relieved.
- Living conditions would be more attractive and workers would have more time for leisure.



*These diagrams show how the urban populations of Australia and U.S.A. are distributed among towns of various sizes. While a third of America's urban population live in towns of 10,000 — 100,000 people, the corresponding proportion in Australia is less than one-seventh.*



### DISADVANTAGES

- Only the big capital cities can offer a full range of amusements, cultural and educational facilities, and specialised medical care.
- Skilled workers would not have the same opportunities of employment in the country.
- Primary industry might suffer if labour for decentralised secondary industries was recruited in country towns.



What are the obstacles to successful decentralisation of Australian industry? How could they be overcome?