

role in "South Australia". Indeed the particular relationship between local, State and Federal governments is a feature of South Australian history which helps to distinguish it from the history of other States and countries.

The Town Hall and Municipal Offices are the few tangible items associated with local government. But the features of these buildings frequently reveal a great deal about the prosperity of the local government area, the attitudes of the people who sought local government and a great deal about the time when it was granted.

J. B. Hirst has explored the theme of centralist administration in South Australia.

The District Councils Act was passed in 1852. Councils were to be proclaimed by the governor, but only at the request of the potential ratepayers who were to send in a petition defining the boundaries of the council and naming those whom they wanted to be the first councillors. Within a year twenty-four districts had formed councils. In 1870 councils were operating throughout all the settled areas to the north and south of the capital. The larger



towns, and places which thought they would become large, were incorporated separately as municipal corporations. The chief task of the councils was to construct and maintain district roads and bridges. They also established pounds, registered dogs, and issued licences for the cutting of timber, the slaughtering of cattle and the quarrying of stone and sand. They could appoint district constables and before 1876 they could grant money to support education in their district.

In the areas settled after 1870 there was not the same readiness to form councils. Great tracts of the new wheatlands remained without local government. This was chiefly because the settlers had less need for councils. After 1875 the government in Adelaide was borrowing heavily to provide the farmers with railways, and money was also spent on roads to serve them. By contrast, the older districts, which were settled before governments were spending so freely, and were in hilly terrain, had particular need for good district roads which councils alone could supply. In the South-East, too, large areas were not served by local government. Here councils operated in the towns and their immediate environs, but not beyond because the squatters had used their influence to keep their large freeholds out of the rate-books.<sup>15</sup>

The new wheatlands and the pastoral districts in the South-East were less closely settled than the older districts where district councils were ubiquitous. However, the density of population in these areas was not so low as to prohibit the formation of local government bodies. This became evident within a few weeks of the passage of the District Councils Act of 1887.

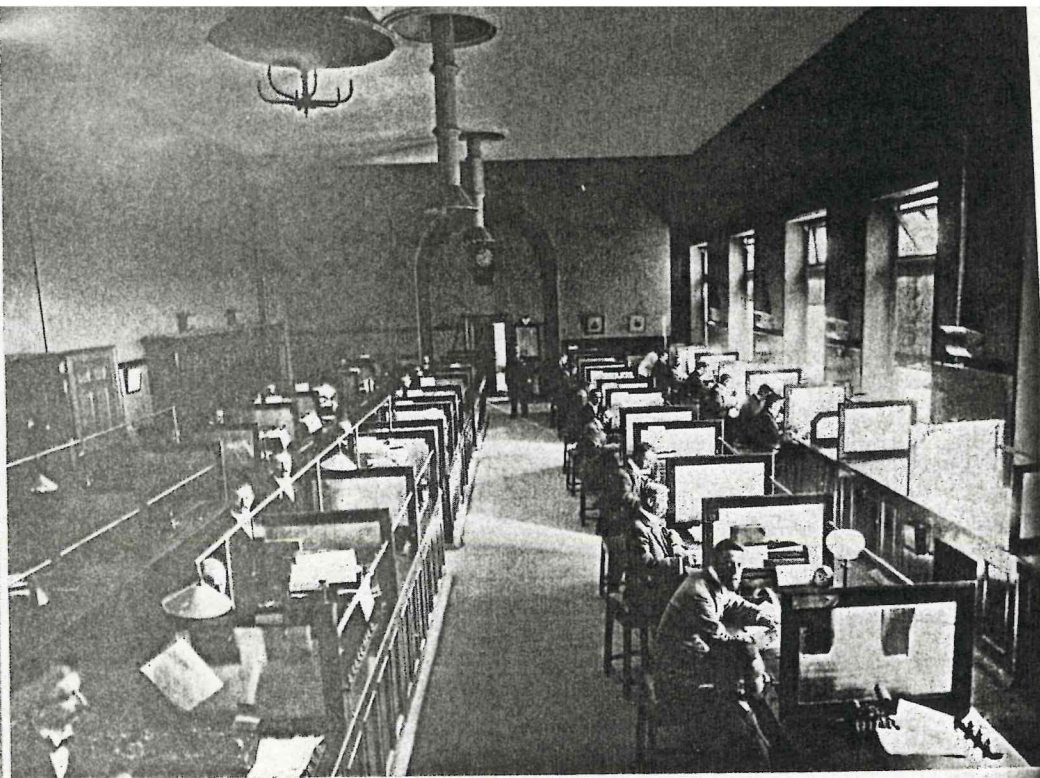
This Act empowered the government to form councils without waiting for the local inhabitants to take the initiative. The schedule of the Act listed councils which the government planned to form immediately in the new wheatlands, and on Eyre Peninsula, where wheat-farming was established but not yet extensive. Some existing councils were to have their territory extended, by which means part of the wheatlands and all the South-East were to be brought under local government. Thomas Playford, who led the government that passed this Act, himself took charge of putting it into effect. He wrote to councils whose territory had been enlarged asking them to nominate extra councillors if they thought they were required. Of course at the next annual elections the new portions of the district would elect councillors: the nomination of the new men was to give them representation until then. In each of the new districts Playford chose a well-known and respected citizen and asked him

to call a public meeting to select the men to be installed as the first council. If for any reason those selected did not seem to represent the district fairly, Playford ignored the wishes of the meeting, sought further information from his local representative, and proclaimed a council which he considered would give general satisfaction. Within less than two months he had all the new councils established. It was a notable administrative achievement.<sup>16</sup>

Playford's task was made easier because he enjoyed the confidence of the farmers on account of his sympathetic administration of the Crown Lands Department in previous governments, and his own experience in rural local government and in the Association of District Council Chairmen gave him an intimate knowledge of how local politics worked. But even with these advantages Playford surely could not have prevailed if the density of settlement exercised the inhibiting influence suggested by Portus, Hancock and others. The ease with which councils were created tells heavily against their argument. On Eyre Peninsula after 1887, councils governed areas with a population density of much less than one person per square mile.

Of course even in the most closely settled rural districts settlement was sparser than it was in rural England. Nor were there, as in England, numbers of leisured country gentlemen with plenty of time to devote to local government. South Australians sometimes commented on the sparsity of their population and the difficulty of finding men willing to serve as J.P.s. Yet in their district councils they maintained the whole machinery of government: elections were held; taxes levied, collected, and spent; men hired and fired. If councils built roads, bridges and council chambers, employed clerks and surveyors, what was it that stopped them building court houses and schools, and employing policemen, teachers and overseers of the poor? Why did the central government discharge these responsibilities?





*Agents of the central administration: telegraph operators, G.P.O. Adelaide, c. 1900; police troopers at Clare, 1883.*



Although whole-hearted support for local government was rare, vague misgivings about central control were more general. Faint echoes of the English debate were sounding in minds that could not



really comprehend what the debate was about. Sometimes politicians and journalists remembered a slogan or principle to support local government, but in the next breath or at the next division they showed that their real sympathies lay elsewhere. Instances of this abound. In the debate on the 1875 Education Bill a member referred to the tyranny of the majority, a notion probably acquired somehow from Mill. Yet he misunderstood Mill to such an extent that he feared this tyranny only in the decisions of *local* government.<sup>92</sup> He—and most of his colleagues with him—could see no danger, where Mill saw it, in the decisions of a democratically elected parliament. Some members who had vague fears about the centralization of education persuaded the government to include provisions for boards of advice in the 1873 bill.<sup>93</sup> These bodies, true to name, had only advisory powers and in no way interfered with central control, yet members were happier with the bill once this concession had been granted. So was the *Register* which had also expressed doubts about centralization, though it warned that local boards must not 'hamper the action of the central authority or interfere with the uniformity of the system'.<sup>94</sup>

The attitude of James Boucaut to central control is a real puzzle. In 1873 he denounced the health bill roundly. In the same year he also criticized the education bill for placing complete control in a central authority. In committee he stated that he would be willing to support an amendment to give boards of advice more powers. He presented the House with a startling vision of the future: 'The power which District Councils and Corporations had and ought to exercise was being thrown upon the Government to an extent which . . . would one day lead to something like a revolution'. But within seconds he was on his feet again to take it all back. He did not wish the boards to have the power to override the minister or the inspector. He had merely spoken 'broadly and abstractedly' upon the principles of local and central control. He would not inconvenience the government.<sup>95</sup> In 1875 Boucaut led the government that passed the education bill—and this bill even denied local people the right to elect their boards of advice.

Most interesting of all is the account of local government given by the ex-premier B. T. Finnis in his *Constitutional History of South Australia*, published in 1886. He praises Governor Young for introducing the district council system in 1852 and makes his bow to local government with the commonplace observation that it is a 'necessary factor in the stability of free states'. On the next page he comments on the provision preventing the creation of councils

without the application of the residents: 'when the power to tax for local improvements is never conferred except on the application of the residents themselves and when moreover a limit to taxation is assigned by the supreme legislature, the liberty of the subject and the rights of property are safely provided for'.<sup>96</sup> According to this argument, the establishment of county government in the American West by order of the United States government was an act of tyranny, inasmuch as the ratepayers had not requested it. Similarly, Playford's Act of 1887, which set up new district councils without requiring the submission of a petition, must be taken as a violation of the liberty of the subject and the rights of property. Finnis uses liberal principles to claim a new inherent right for antipodean man—the right not to have local government.

How can these attitudes to local government be explained? To some extent they reflect the limited nature of the belief in political democracy. In the debates on education a distinctly paternal, even authoritarian, tone is evident. Members were very ready to dismiss the trustees of the vested schools as illiterates and incompetents, though these men had been concerned with education when most politicians were neglecting it. Ross was right to point out that the arguments used against allowing boards of advice any control of education could be used against allowing the people to elect a parliament. The lack of belief in local government also reflects the good performance of the central government. South Australians had never known a government that had not been honest, benevolent and efficient. But what robbed debate about central and local control of its reality was the absence of the feeling that South Australia was a collection of separate regions or localities. Parliament itself was not so much a gathering of representatives from all over the colony as an extension of the life of the metropolis. The colony was represented by Adelaide. To the city members the question of local and central control was merely academic. In the matters of public health and education they were particularly pleased with the prospect of a strong central authority because it could act effectively where they saw the greatest need—in the metropolis. Yet the country members were equally willing to assign responsibilities to the central government. As the debates on education in particular indicate, the almost universal assumption among the parliamentarians was that South Australia could be treated as one community. They had ample justification for this assumption: the country population was highly mobile, the economy was controlled from one point, and the centres of social and economic life



coincided with the political centre of the colony. With Adelaide controlling the colony's business affairs and attracting country people both as visitors and settlers, there seemed nothing incongruous about it playing the predominant and almost exclusive role in the administration of government. The country school-teacher was scarcely more closely connected to Adelaide than the country storekeeper, and the inspectors of the central government departments did not visit the country towns as frequently as their leading inhabitants visited the capital. It was difficult to see South Australia as a collection of separate localities and easy to think of the central government as the 'local' government for the whole colony.

Since the question of central and local control provoked so little genuine debate, the attitudes of the centralizers can frequently only be arrived at by inference. The one reasoned consideration of the virtues of central control is provided by Chief Justice Way, who chaired a royal commission on the Destitute Board in 1884 and wrote its report. Way had before him a recommendation from the chairman of the board in favour of local rating and control. This he rejected. He found the central administration of relief worked cheaply and fairly efficiently. If each district were to look after its own poor the overall cost of administration would rise, and the government would still have to bear the cost of a central organization to control and inspect the work of local bodies. He considered closely the amount various districts would have to pay to support their own poor, and noticed how unequally the burden would fall:

The continuous migration of the youthful and energetic to new fields of enterprise, and the consequent excess in the older settled districts of aged, infirm, and destitute persons, as well as the tendency of the destitute and unemployed to gravitate to the only large centre of population, all add to the difficulty of the problem to be solved in devising a fair scheme of local rating.<sup>97</sup>

In offering this demographic survey, Way gives ample evidence to support a conclusion that was usually felt rather than argued, namely that the colony could and should be treated as a single unit.

Parliament clearly was indifferent to local government, but the willingness of the people, and particularly country people, to accept such a minor role for local government also has to be explained. There were scarcely any complaints from the country about the centralized administration. The question of central versus local control stirred as little interest in the country hotels and meeting rooms as in the Legislative Assembly. Central government control could hardly seem remote when small electorates made it easy for

constituents to influence the member for the district, and since it was no hardship to travel as a deputation to ministers in Adelaide. Show week in Adelaide, with country men, members and ministers meeting in deputation rooms and on social excursions, indicates how close the country was to the process of government.

Country people were also willing to regard the central government as their 'local' government because of its role as the provider of major public works. In matters such as public health and education country people accepted rather than wished the intervention of central authority; the demand for strong government action came chiefly from the metropolis. The central government's provision of public works was viewed very differently. Here there was an almost explicit contract: settlers had paid the government for their land, so they expected railways, bridges and harbours in return. Every settler felt these needs, and the demands for government action were incessant. On the whole these demands were met without provoking conflict between Adelaide and the country. This harmony smoothed the way for the extension of central administration. Had there been prolonged and bitter disagreement over public-works issues, country districts may not have been prepared to trust the central government in other matters. Finally, the country men, like the politicians, had a powerful financial reason for accepting central control. In so doing they obtained schools, teachers, policemen and relief for the destitute without seeming to pay for them.

On occasions, of course, country people were annoyed at particular decisions or policies of the centralized administration. It was sometimes alleged, for example, that the Destitute Board was too harsh in its treatment of the poor. Several cases of 'injustice' were publicized, and accompanied by requests for more local control in the administration of relief.<sup>98</sup> But the complainers were not so concerned with the poor that they offered to impose local rating to provide a more generous system of relief. They wanted a free hand with the central government's funds, a request that could naturally not be granted. Effective local control could only have followed a rearrangement of the public revenue system and the acceptance of some local rating. There was never any movement in the country in this direction. The country press sometimes suggested it,<sup>99</sup> but with no consistency or any noticeable effect.

The newly settled and more distant areas of the colony were as content with central control as those nearer Adelaide. The one change that the development of the northern wheatlands induced in the administrative structure was an expansion of the jurisdiction of local courts and the provision of a northern circuit for the Supreme





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