

The ‘Playmander’: Its origins, operation and effect on South Australia

Jenny Tilby Stock

When Tom Playford came unexpectedly to the premiership of South Australia on 5 November 1938, he could not have predicted that he would occupy the office for so long. What he did know was that the Australian Labor Party (ALP) would have great difficulty in unseating the Liberal and Country League (LCL). During the five-year parliament (1933-38) of his predecessor, Richard Butler, significant changes had been made to the state's electoral law, changes which were to severely disadvantage the Labor opposition. Playford's name attaches to the resulting system, not because he originated it or had a part in its refinement, but because he was its main beneficiary and did nothing to change it.

What was the ‘Playmander’?

At its simplest, the Playmander was the 1936 division of South Australia into two electoral zones, rural and metropolitan, the former containing twice as many single-member House of Assembly seats as the latter. This ratio, although not new, was anomalous. It had originated with the advent of responsible government 80 years earlier, when the majority of South Australians lived outside Adelaide. Although the balance of population swung in the new century towards the capital, it was not until the rise and consolidation of the party system in the first decade after Australia's federation that the disposition of seats and members came to have much significance. The ALP felt disadvantaged by the redistribution of 1913, but was mollified when it tipped the Liberals out in 1915, after a campaign in which the evils of the ‘gerrymander’ was a key issue. Not yet apparent, even to the party of the workers, were the full implications of the increasing disparity between Adelaide's size and importance and its level of representation in parliament. Electorates were still multi-membered (up to five members per seat in the period 1901 to 1913 and two or three per seat in the years 1913 to 1938), and both parties could pick up enough members in areas dominated by their opponents to win office. Hence, of the nine elections held between 1910 and 1933, the Liberals won five and the ALP, four with the baton changing with almost clockwork precision, and neither party felt itself at any particular disadvantage.

All this was to change with the formation in 1932 of the LCL. The small Country Party had been a thorn in the Liberal Federation's side since its origins as a farmers and settlers association in the First World War; it always threatened to split the anti-Labor vote in three-way contests in key rural seats, and was able to force on the Federation disagreeable terms as the price of its cooperation on occasions when electoral pacts were negotiated. The failure to reach such an arrangement in 1930 had contributed to the Liberal loss at that election, and senior Liberals then made concerted efforts to bring about a permanent solution. The merger agreement that resulted was

framed to offer some protection to the Country Party constituency, the small 'cocky' farmers of the marginal mallee lands. A key inclusion was the preservation of the existing ratio of rural to metropolitan representation (then standing at 31 seats to 15 in the House of Assembly).

Having won the 1933 election as a united force against a divided and demoralised opposition, the LCL put in place the legislation necessary to implement the merger undertaking. A three-man independent commission, whose terms of reference included also the belated introduction of single-member seats, and a reduction in members from 46 to 39 'in a fair and equitable manner', duly presented its report.¹ The resulting maps established the two zones, a rural one of 26 seats, and a metropolitan one of 13. The entrenchment of rural representation at twice that of metropolitan Adelaide, combined with the two novel features of the *Constitution Act Amendment Act 1936* – single-member seats and the transferable vote – was to deny the ALP, for three decades eventually, the opportunity to form government, and there was nothing they could do about it.

How did the LCL justify the undemocratic dominance of country over metropolitan representation? In debates on the Bill, the Liberals claimed merely to be ensuring 'adequate' representation for South Australia's all-important country districts. To this priority, demographic trends and notions of electoral equity were simply irrelevant. In the words of Attorney-General Shirley Jeffries, 'The Government's policy has always been to preserve this ratio, and we have at no times bound ourselves to alter it. We are totally opposed to a system which gives more than half the representation to the metropolitan area'.² Other Liberals saw the ratio as entirely reasonable in a primary producing state like South Australia where, it was claimed, 'every wage-earner depends upon the success of the farmer and pastoralist to keep him living in the city upon the basic wage'.³ Labor's principle of 'one vote, one value' was summarily dismissed on the grounds that it 'would destroy entirely the present ratio'.⁴

Such reasoning cut little ice with the ALP, which considered itself well able to go on looking after the interests of the variety of producers, tradesmen and workers who made up the rural population. The Butler government was accused of deliberately setting out to restrict the people's franchise. Electoral maps, it was pointed out, were 'based on lines that will give their party a majority ... even to the extent of giving 4,000 voters in a country block equal voting strength to metropolitan blocks of 14,000, 16,000 and 18,000 voters'.⁵ The perpetuation of the favouring of rural areas was clearly seen by the ALP to confer an electoral advantage on the LCL. To these and other suggestions that the Bill was 'designed to enable the present Government to be returned to power',⁶ Jeffries replied disingenuously that 'there was nothing further from [his] mind in introducing this Bill than to keep the Labor Party out of office'.⁷ Yet this was to be the result.

What made the new system so damaging to Labor's prospects? Quite apart from the ratio, the introduction of single-member seats and preferential voting affected Labor's ability to win seats in the vital country zone. Its strongest support outside the metropolitan area lay in the larger industrial country centres, henceforth to be confined to a handful of extra-safe Labor seats. Almost all other country seats, where their supporters were less concentrated, were now closed to them because the ending of the 'first past the post system' denied them the chance to top the poll in contests

where the non-Labor vote was spread among several candidates. It is also the nature of 'winner take all' single-member seat systems to exaggerate the winning party's margin of seats, especially when a high proportion of its seats is won by narrow margins. With the added handicap that its heartland voters were locked up in vast city seats, the ALP had every reason to view the 1936 legislation with foreboding.

To what degree was the LCL the preferred party of the rural zone and hence electorally advantaged by the ratio? Its estimated share of the country vote in the four Playford era elections for which such estimates can accurately be made was between 51 and 58 per cent of that vote,⁸ compared with only 41 to 50 per cent of the metropolitan vote for the same period.⁹ This vote was well dispersed, in contrast to Labor's. Rural areas with the highest LCL support were in the most prosperous parts of the state, well-watered and earning good returns from wheat, barley, sheep and dairy cattle. A high level of employers and self-employed males also characterised LCL strongholds. The LCL also did well in the old Country Party heartlands, the marginal mallee lands of the upper Eyre Peninsula and upper South East. Non-Labor Independents retained seats based on the upper Murray (Chaffey), the Murray Mallee (Ridley) and Mount Gambier, where distrust of the Liberals lingered longer. While every country town had its complement of ALP voters, especially the old mining settlements, railway towns and ports, away from these centres 'the man on the land' was unswervingly loyal to the LCL. Closer in, and more accessible to the Labor movement and alternative points of view, the smallholders along the lower Murray were less hostile to the ALP. The most consistently Liberal sub-division in the state was Bute, a cluster of prosperous mixed farming hamlets on upper Yorke Peninsula.¹⁰ In Adelaide itself, Liberal strength was greatest in the affluent enclaves of Walkerville and North Adelaide, some older beachside suburbs and the leafy eastern and southeastern foothills areas. The apogee of Liberal loyalty was reached in the subdivision of Burnside, with its unbeatable combination of elector characteristics: affluence, Anglicanism, female and older voters.

The operation of the Playmander

With ALP voters now able to form majorities in only a handful of small rural industrial or old mining and railway seats and around half of the large city ones, it proved relatively simple for the LCL to amass the minimum 20 seats required to retain office. Most of the large contingent of 1938 Independents lost their seats in 1941, and in the period from 1941 to 1956, the LCL never won fewer than 14 rural seats, maintaining a steady 16 from 1944 to 1956. Its two best elections were 1947 and 1950 when it gained a total of 23 of the 39 Assembly seats. Labor was even further behind in the race than these figures might suggest, due to its sharing the balance of seats with three or four (non-Labor) Independents. Until as late as 1959, Labor's best total was 16 seats in 1944, and its lowest a mere 12 in 1950. Not until 1962 did the ALP win more seats than the LCL, but even then it was denied office when the two remaining Independents acted to keep Playford in office for a further three years.

While the privileging of the country vote obviously disadvantaged the party whose mainstay was the industrial and unionised workforce, how crucial was this disadvantage? Was the ALP ever the choice of a majority of voters in the Playford era, a choice denied fulfilment by the electoral system? Could Labor legitimately claim to be a party not just under-represented by the operations of

the Playmander but cheated of office on one or more occasions?

A major stumbling-block for analysts examining this aspect of the Playmander has been the difficulty of estimating a notional two-party preferred vote for the elections of the era.¹¹ Not only did Independents with strong personal followings hold sway in a number of seats, but many safe seats were left uncontested by one or other of the two major parties for many years. The substitution of federal voting figures in these electorates is a dubious technique, due to the high degree of 'cross-voting' between state and federal elections. (That is, a sizeable proportion of citizens varied their vote according to the differing party records, programs, leaders, issues and candidates relevant to state and federal elections.) Nevertheless, one recent study has developed techniques to take account of all hitherto incalculable factors for the four central elections of 1944, 1947, 1950 and 1953. It concludes that, while Playford had a majority of popular support in 1947 and 1950, he clearly did not in 1944 and 1953.¹²

Table 1

Year	Country Zone	Metro Zone	All
1944	50.9	44.0	46.7
1947	54.9	50.2	52.0
1950	58.3	49.1	52.6
1953	53.5	41.5	46.1

The LCL's percentage share of the two-party preferred vote in elections from 1944 to 1953.

But for Labor to have won those and other elections in which it was the preferred party might have required more than just the ending of the zonal system. As has become apparent more recently, competing for more or less equal-sized electorates does not necessarily guarantee victory to the more popular party. (It is ironic, but hardly surprising, that it was not until the Liberal Party was similarly cheated of office in 1989 by the inability of the single-member system to deliver the 'right' result, that they, too, began to clamour for drawing the boundaries in such a way as to ensure that the more popular party actually won a majority of seats. Such concerns never surfaced while it was Labor losing out in the Playford era.) Although the allowable variation from quota, 20 per cent in Playford's time, 10 or 15 per cent since 1970, favoured small and declining electorates, these were not always Liberal seats. More seriously, the ALP was the victim of the phenomenon of 'differential concentration of majorities' alluded to earlier; to a far greater degree than its more dispersed opponents, Labor's votes were 'wasted' in very safe seats, due to their aggregation in working-class suburbs and certain country towns, a concentration aided by the large-scale construction of low-cost housing by the Housing Trust. Yet, such intrinsic handicaps for Labor were less critical than the extrinsic handicaps imposed by the Playmander itself. Designed to deliver not electoral justice but the dominance of rural representation, its severe downgrading of the metropolitan vote meant that Labor could never come within striking distance of the 20 seats required to win office.

The effects of the Playmander

The electorate

However sincere and avowedly non-partisan the intentions of the framers of the Playmander were, the *effect* of their giving country South Australia twice the representation of the burgeoning metropolitan area was the entrenchment also of the LCL in government. Since Labor could not possibly win, the triennial elections became something of a formality. An obvious casualty of this predictability was the electorate itself, large numbers of whom came to have little say in the electoral process. So secure for one party or the other were the majority of seats that vast sections of the state were virtually out of bounds to the other party; it was just not worth the effort to maintain branches and run campaigns in unwinnable seats. While this made good sense to party officials, it meant that many voters never got the chance to either endorse or reject Playford's government.

Least able to influence the outcome were electors in the raft of seats left entirely uncontested, some for many years at a time. Not a single candidate stood against Cecil Hincks, the member for Yorke Peninsula, from the time he entered parliament in 1941 until he died in office in 1963; similarly disenfranchised were the constituents of the mid-northern electorate Rocky River from 1944 to 1965. Scarcely better off were voters in seats where the only challenge came from the occasional Independent, since they were still denied a choice between government and opposition. For the entire Playford period, not a single LCL candidate stood in the metropolitan seats of Adelaide, Port Adelaide, Semaphore and Hindmarsh. Thebarton was also ignored until the redistribution of 1955 made the new seat of West Torrens less safe for Labor. The 'Iron Triangle' seats of Port Pirie, Stuart and, later, Whyalla, were likewise left uncontested by the LCL.

Table 2

	1944	1947	1950	1953	1956	1959	1962
Seats uncontested	9	13	14	9	16	8	8
Per cent of voters	28.1	26.8	28.8	21.2	36.1	14.3	16.4
Seats with limited choice	5	8	8	15	10	10	11
Per cent of voters	10.1	23.4	26.3	33.5	24.7	31.3	29.9
Seats with real choice	25	18	17	15	13	21	20
Per cent of voters	61.8	49.8	44.9	45.3	39.2	54.4	53.7

The nature of the electoral contests in the 39 House of Assembly seats from 1944 to 1962.

The voters' real choice between the ALP and the LCL was substantially limited in the seven Playford elections following the introduction of compulsory voting in 1942. In the four polls from 1947 to 1956, less than half the electorate had a real

choice. The 1956 poll was the most restricted, with over a third of the voters having no vote, and another quarter were in seats not contested by one or both major parties; only 39.2 per cent had the chance to register their approval or otherwise of Playford's government. Under these circumstances, the legitimacy of Playford's electoral mandate is certainly questionable.

But since the ultimate outcome was not in doubt, such interest as could be mustered at election time focused primarily on the handful of seats that *might* change hands. These were remarkably few. Between 1944 and 1953 only three rural and three city seats changed hands, two of them twice. Out of a notional 156 'contests' (39 x 4) only eight actually resulted in a change. The LCL won and then lost Norwood and Prospect, Labor lost Torrens and later Murray but won Victoria, and the member for Stanley became an Independent. In the 1956 to 1962 period the LCL regained Victoria but Labor collected Chaffey and Unley. Only in the final 1965 election did the fall of Glenelg and Barossa spell defeat for Playford. Until that time, although the two parties were quite evenly balanced in terms of popular support, the fate of the marginal seats could affect only the *size*, but not the *fact*, of the LCL's majority.

Country voters

Labor voters knew they were not well served by the Playmander, returning fewer parliamentarians than was their due, and frustrated by the impotence of their party. But how well served were Liberal voters, so relatively over-represented in the rural zone? Did, for example, living in a safe LCL electorate ensure the benefits of an attentive and influential local member? Not so, it would seem. As is often the case, safe seats could be taken for granted, more so when the overall electoral outcome was not in doubt and the member concerned was a busy cabinet minister. Cecil Hincks's constituents were proud of their local man and his record 16-year term as Minister for Lands, but satisfaction was neither universal nor unqualified. Early on, the Mayor of Maitland expressed the hope that the town and district would not 'sink back into its customary apathy and permit the government to continue its criminal neglect of this important district'.¹³ Nineteen years later, when the seat fell vacant, the Labor candidate attributed the electorate's oft-voiced but still unmet needs for a reliable water supply and decent roads to its being 'in so many ways badly neglected ... taken as a Government stronghold'.¹⁴

In a more general sense, how well served was country South Australia by the system whose very rationale was the due recognition of its economic value and 'development' needs? Certainly, parliament was full of country politicians, and they monopolised cabinet. Although Playford himself was the dominant force, few rural producers found fault with what he did. For all sorts of reasons, including good seasons and commodity prices, farmers and graziers prospered through most of the period. Specific groups with occasional grievances, like the dairy farmers who objected to Playford's price controls on metropolitan milk, still rarely doubted that the LCL was their party. Even blame for the painfully slow progress of soldier settlement was not sheeted home directly to Playford's government, except by a couple of Independents in the most affected areas.¹⁵ In the sense that the state was being run by an orchardist, backed by a party of landed and commercial capital, the agricultural sector had no reason to feel its faith in Playford anything but well placed.

But rural well-being has other dimensions. A perennial concern of country

people was (and is) the 'drift to the city', a constant draining away from small communities of youth and energy in search of employment and educational and other opportunities. And it is not just within farming families that such concerns are felt. One of the ALP's most consistent election themes in the Playford era was 'decentralisation'. Although the LCL also voiced the rhetoric of decentralisation, the viability of country towns, as such, was not a top priority. Rather than capitalise on the wartime dispersal of economic activity (the small-scale local growing and processing of flax at Auburn, Laura and Willunga, for example), Playford's post-war efforts were directed primarily at bringing industry to Adelaide and to the existing Iron Triangle towns. Apart from soldier settlement and the AMP's scheme in the Ninety Mile Desert, the major country projects were those based squarely on the location of certain raw materials, and significant proportions of their workforce came from Adelaide, or from overseas. Whyalla, with its steelmaking and shipbuilding, and the Leigh Creek coalfields were islands of workers and managers, having little in common with the scatter of farms and railway settlements in their hinterland. Better integrated with the local communities was development associated with the growing and processing of *pinus radiata* in the lower South-East, although towns like Mount Burr and Nangwarry were virtually company towns built around their sawmills.

While Playford's push for 'development' led to the burgeoning of an industrial workforce in certain locations beyond the capital, it did not extend to giving those workers their share of political representation. For the LCL, country South Australia' meant essentially the farming community, not those engaged in secondary industry who happened to be living outside the metropolitan area. And it proved relatively simple to 'contain' the unionised industrial workers, Labor voters to a man, in their existing enclaves. Due to the 20 per cent variation in the original quota and the failure to readjust the boundaries for two decades, Labor voters even within the privileged country zone got considerably less than their one vote, one value. By 1953 the Labor members for Port Pirie, Stuart and Victoria represented a total of nearly 30,000 voters, a greater number than the six smallest non-Labor seats. The mean size of the six Labor country seats was 7,473 enrolments, compared to 6,105 in the 16 LCL seats and 6,847 in the four held by Independents.¹⁶ Another, truer, measure of Labor's rural under-representation was that, with between 41.7 and 49.1 per cent of country people voting for the ALP from 1944 to 1953, the party won only six or seven of the 26 country seats, or around 23 to 27 per cent of them (see Table 1). Even after the 1955 redistribution, the new seats of Whyalla and Millicent lifted the threat from adjacent non-Labor seats, and preserved the LCL status quo at the expense of an Independent.

Metropolitan voters

Metropolitan Adelaide's serious under-representation meant that *all* its residents were electorally disadvantaged although, once again, ALP seats tended to be larger than the LCLs. In 1953, for example, the mean size of Labor's eight Adelaide seats was 22,011, compared to 20,732 in the LCL's five. More serious was the differential impact on party representation due to a higher proportion of Labor than Liberal supporters living in Adelaide. From 1944 to 1953 Adelaide was home to between 63.0 and 67.0 per cent of the ALP's voters, compared to between 55.7 and 58.5 per cent of the LCL's.¹⁷ In terms of the ratio of votes cast to seats won, around a third of South Australia's voters (Labor's

metropolitan supporters) could return only six to eight members of the House of Assembly, while less than a quarter of the electorate (the LCL's rural constituency) returned 16. Because the majority of LCL members were from small country districts, the average size of all LCL electorates in that period varied from 8,034 to 9,820, whereas the ALP's ranged from 11,447 to 15,975.

Far from according the citizens of the state's capital their political voice, Playford evinced a curiously ambivalent attitude to the city. While actively pursuing immigration and industrial development, policies which would cause Adelaide's population to grow at almost twice the rate of the non-metropolitan area, Playford could say in parliament, just as the post-war expansion of Adelaide was about to start, 'I believe one of the biggest problems today in South Australia ... is the tendency for people to accumulate around the capital cities'.¹⁸ Seldom engaging in debate on the perennial Independent and Labor attempts to reform the electoral system, Playford did make clear his 'fundamental objection' to any system under which an 'area within a radius of nine miles from the General Post Office would return more members than all the rest of the state'.¹⁹ 'If we are to achieve development in South Australia it will not be by centralising a majority of the representation *as well as industries* in the metropolitan area', he stated.²⁰ It was as if the monster that was the city could and should be controlled only by the pure and upright men of the countryside.

It was not just the fact that city dwellers were patently not the rural backbone of the state that Playford objected to. A good proportion of them were ALP voters, whose equitable representation would have threatened his party's hold on power. Not that he would express this so bluntly. For example, the ALP leader's 1950 bill for a 45-member house of nine five-member seats was dismissed on the grounds that such proportional representation would result in 'too finely balanced a house' and, hence, 'instability'. The Premier's assertion that 'no Government would [then] have a clear majority' was a tacit admission that under the Playmander, stability was being achieved at the price of the ALP's under-representation.²¹ (Not that proportional representation, with its potential for hung parliaments, was necessary. An end to the zoning, even with a 20 per cent variation for thinly populated rural seats, would have given Labor a working majority on more than one occasion during the Playford era.) Three years later, after yet another election in which the ALP felt cheated of victory, Playford could reiterate unblushingly that it was 'self-evident' that 'an electoral system based on one vote one value is unsound'.²²

But the result of such mistrust was also to disregard and undervalue the vast numbers of his own supporters who lived in greater Adelaide. After all, more than half of all LCL voters lived in the metropolitan zone, and yet their representativeness comprised only four to seven of the 20 to 23 LCL members of the House of Assembly, and four of the 16 Legislative Councillors. With so few to choose from, it is not surprising that over Playford's entire premiership, 90 per cent of 'cabinet man years' were served by ministers representing country South Australia. Between Charles Abbot's retirement in mid 1946 and Baden Pattinson's appointment in late 1953, Playford's cabinet contained not a single city member. Not that ministers did not spend a lot of time in Adelaide, or fail to engage in its commercial and social life. But their constituents, when the ministers thought about them, were not city people, and re-endorsement, never entirely a formality, depended to some degree on keeping them happy.

The political parties

The Australian Labor Party

How prescient were Labor's 1936 fears that the Playmander would reduce its members to 'seat-warmers', their usefulness as an opposition, along with the power of parliament itself, 'reduced to a farce'?²³ Undoubtedly, indefinite exclusion from office did little for party morale or public profile. Realising the hopelessness of their position, the Labor leadership seems to have decided that the best strategy was to work with, rather than against Playford. He, at least, represented the more progressive of the forces which made up the LCL, and could not be cast, in any rabble-rousing sense, as Labor's traditional class enemy. Of course Playford always claimed to be working for the benefit of *all* South Australians, and as a pragmatic and parochial premier, relatively unencumbered with ideological baggage, there was little in his schemes of industrial expansion and diversification that Labor could object to. Both opposition leaders, the dour Methodist Robert Richards (1935-49) and the avuncular Catholic Mick O'Halloran (1949-60) were able to take comfort from the fact that the state was patently being well run and the workforce was growing rapidly and getting as good a deal as could be expected out of all the economic activity. Had they been in power themselves, one suspects there was little they would have done differently, apart from a greater emphasis on things like workers' compensation and some social welfare issues.

Labor would also have attempted, had they won a majority of seats in the lower house, to end the Playmander itself. In this they would have failed. Winning office in the Assembly would have been insufficient, of itself, to achieve electoral reform or to enact social democratic legislation. One of the Playmander's characteristics was the reflection, in the upper house, of an even more exaggerated rural and LCL bias, delivered as a result of a property franchise and voluntary voting for that chamber. Ironically, the Legislative Council's virtual exclusion of Labor and its traditional independence from the Assembly, meant that it was by no means always amenable to the premier's wishes; so great was the LCL majority there that, on occasions, the four ALP members were able to play a 'balance of power' role between two loose factions of the LCL. With their help Playford was able to push through measures branded 'socialist' by the die-hard conservative element, like the annual extensions of rent and price controls after the war and, most notoriously, the nationalisation of the Adelaide Electric Supply Company. Playford still retained the advantage, however. With such measures he both implemented certain Labor policies, thus undercutting the opposition's appeal *and* he kept workforce and industry costs low enough to attract investment from interstate and overseas.

Looking like perpetual losers, or collaborators, Labor could not present itself as an aggressive, go-getting opposition poised for victory at the next election. Considering these handicaps, its electoral appeal held up surprisingly well; but Labor found it hard to attract able young men from outside the union movement who could make a career in politics. The spoils of office were non-existent and the opportunity to put ideals into practice seemed a long way off. By the time Don Dunstan entered parliament in 1953, the last ALP government anyone under middle age could remember was the ill-fated depression administration of Lionel Hill. Even a man as talented and hardworking as Dunstan had to wait another 12 years before his chances materialised.

And it was not until Dunstan, with his debating, dramatic and media skills, took up the issue of Labor's electoral handicap that it got any sort of hearing outside ALP circles. One reason for the longevity of the Playmander was that it was never subject to serious scrutiny by anyone with the power to have it changed. Although the labour movement never ceased to discuss and feel aggrieved about its injustices, the general public was not galvanised into awareness. Even as the bill was being debated in 1936, Jeffries professed himself 'amazed' that there was 'so little interest displayed in the press' in the far-reaching legislation, a clue to later media attitudes.²⁴ Far from analysing the contribution of the Playmander to the premier's on-going electoral triumphs, Adelaide's influential morning broadsheet, under the control of such staunch LCL allies and party office-holders as Sir Lloyd Dumas and Arthur Rymill, chose to ignore it. While campaign activity during every election was duly and fairly reported, it was inevitably Playford, busy about his duties as a 'good news' premier, rather than the leader of the opposition, who featured in the paper. In its editorials, the *Advertiser* was unashamedly partisan, extolling Playford's virtues and achievements, and warning the public against flirtation with Labor's 'socialism'. Each successive victory was ascribed purely to the South Australian electorate's 'sanity' and good sense at sticking with progress and prosperity, with no allusion to its underpinning by the Playmander.²⁵ The evening tabloid, the *News*, was more even-handed, especially during the editorship of the idealistic Rohan Rivett from 1951 to 1959. The *News* gave its cartoonist a freer hand than did the *Advertiser*, and treated Labor with a little more respect, and Playford with somewhat less, than did its rival. Neither, however, subjected Playford, his policies or the Playmander to serious critique.²⁶

The Liberal and Country League

Shielded by an electoral system under which Labor could not win, the LCL remained in government for 32 years. After a wobbly start, and having survived the first decade or so, an air of invincibility built up, less around the party than around its leader. Guaranteed office and secure in his party's esteem and his prowess as an election-winner, Tom Playford was free to pursue *his* vision of what was best for the state; from the mid 1940s on, he was the unchallenged leader of a party that, whatever its shortcomings, would not and could not be turfed out. (At least until demographic changes meant the breaching of the *cordon sanitaire* of its zonal protection by the dreaded urban overflow.) Long terms in office, uninterrupted by any real threat of replacement, had predictable effects: a certain complacency, a low turn-over of parliamentarians, a lack of challenge, an atrophying of such youthful idealism that might once have inspired some of its members. Behind the scenes the LCL was not a dynamic organisation brimming with ideas and dedicated to the promotion of young men of promise. Its main purpose was the pre-selection and re-endorsement of safe candidates and the mobilising of the faithful at election times. Politics, never a highly regarded occupation in Australia, rarely attracted candidates of vision and commitment in this period, and there were few berths for those without strong rural credentials.

The dearth of real talent in parliament and cabinet was less of a handicap to Playford than it might have been, due to his own capabilities, drive and mastery of the political and administrative processes. Equally significant was his willingness to enlist the expertise of, and work closely with, a small band of loyal and gifted senior public servants and co-operative businessmen.²⁷ And, far from

having to act at the behest of a critical caucus, cabinet, LCL executive or party, Playford was one of the 'freest' premiers South Australia has ever had. This autonomy had its advantages, but also a cost. While 'development' in all its guises was given top priority, areas of lesser concern to the premier, such as education, health, social welfare, the arts and the environment, atrophied or got by with less than optimal resourcing. Some of these issues were of growing interest to Adelaide's under-represented and increasingly well-educated middle-classes, whose chief spokesman from 1955 on was the young lawyer, Robin Millhouse. He was one of the very few Liberals prepared to challenge Playford in party forums and in parliament, even voicing reservations about the wisdom of the LCL's continued reliance on the Playmander. But for the first two decades of Playford's premiership, one man dominated, inside and outside of parliament. The LCL was Playford's party, and the public was left in no doubt who was in charge.

What they might have forgotten, as the years rolled by, was the role of the Playmander in this seemingly effortless hegemony of the LCL and its leader. For without it, especially early on, Playford would not have been afforded the time in which to outgrow his early brashness and irresponsibility, to mature into the purposeful, seasoned and consummate political operator he became.²⁸ A non-biased electoral system would have delivered government to Labor in 1944, and, possibly, again in 1953. Had Playford's term been thus cut short or intermitted, many things would have been different and his talents might not have developed in the way they did. Without in any way denying Playford's enormous energy, dedication and adroitness, it took the Playmander to allow these qualities full expression. Surviving several periods of low public esteem, he was able to build up unparalleled experience in office and an impressive record of achievement which the opposition could not hope to match. This was, perhaps, the Playmander's greatest role.

¹ South Australian Parliamentary Debates: House of Assembly [SAPD:HA] 13.8.1936, p.1096.

² SAPD:HA 13.8.1936, p.1098.

³ SAPD:HA 22.9.1936, p.1497.

⁴ SAPD:HA 22.9.1936, p.1500.

⁵ SAPD:HA 17.9.1936, p.1469.

⁶ SAPD:HA 22.9.1936, p.1510.

⁷ SAPD:HA 22.9.1936, p.1521.

⁸ See note 12.

⁹ See also table 1.

¹⁰ It was also the most Methodist, and the contrast with the Labor Methodists of the nearby Copper Triangle is striking.

¹¹ D.H. Jaensch in 'Under-representation and the "Gerrymander" in 'The Playford era', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol.17, no. 1, 1971, pp.82-95, and Ren De Garis in *Redressing the Imbalance* have attempted to, while A.J. Forbes in 'The South Australian electoral system' *Australian Quarterly*, vol.28, no.2, 1956, pp.47-51, and John Playford in 'The "Playmander" reassessed', *Quadrant*, vol.26, May 1982, pp.64-7, are sceptical about claims made by political scientists.

¹² J.T. Stock, 'The "Playmander" revisited: the significance of cross-voting in estimating the two-party vote in South Australia, 1943-1953', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol.26, no.2, 1991, pp.331-41. The tables in this essay are derived from material presented in that paper.

¹³ *Maitland Watch* 14.7.1944.

¹⁴ *Maitland Watch* 31.1.1963.

¹⁵ For the role of the Independents as the unofficial opposition, see Reece Jennings, *Barnacles and Parasites: independent members of the South Australian Parliament 1927-1970*, Nesfield Press, Plympton, SA, 1992.

¹⁶ Labor criticism of the unequal size of rural electorates was always blunted by reminders that the Labor seat of Frome, based on Peterborough and the electorate of their leader, 1949 to 1961, was the smallest in the state.

¹⁷ See Stock pp.336-39.

¹⁸ SAPD:HA 13.11.1946, p.934.

-
- ¹⁹ SAPD:HA 29.10.1947, p.1113.
- ²⁰ SAPD:HA 13.11.1946, p.934, emphasis added.
- ²¹ SAPD:HA 20.9.1950, p.670-71.
- ²² SAPD:HA 26.8.1953, p.518.
- ²³ SAPD:HA 17.9.1936, p.1466.
- ²⁴ SAPD:HA 22.9.1936, p.1519.
- ²⁵ See, for example, editorials on two of the occasions when it was only the 'Playmander' that saved the LCL from defeat, 27.4.1944, 1.5.1944, 3.3.1953 and 9.3.1953.
- ²⁶ K.S. Inglis, *The Stuart Case*, pp.65-9, 73; R. Hetherington and R.L. Reid, *The South Australian Elections 1959*, pp.85-8.
- ²⁷ See Katharine West, *Power in the Liberal Party*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1965, and Katharine West, 'Playford and the Liberal and Country League of South Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol.9, no.2, 1963, pp 167-75.
- ²⁸ See P.A. Howell 'Attracting heavy industry to South Australia, 1935-1941', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, no. 16, 1988, pp.6-21 and his chapter in *Playford's South Australia* for examples of Playford's less attractive parliamentary performances in his backbench years.