

# History of the P.S.A.

## (the first 100 years)

### The PSA, Gentleman's Club, Association, Union?

#### The first 30 years

The first thirty years of the Association's existence saw it develop from a small group of elite members of the Public Service into a representative body with a strong commitment to advancing the welfare of all members. In the course of that time the Association gradually achieved a unity of purpose and developed a policy for the improved organization of the Service. To this end it brought pressure to bear on successive governments of all parties to institute reforms which would establish a stable and just career service for its members. It is these years, leading up to the passing of the Public Service Act of November, 1916, which are the principle focus of this article. However, a brief overview of the Association's affairs in the period from 1916 to 1949, and some indications of later developments are also included.

#### Formation and early objectives

The Civil Service Association of South Australia, as it was originally known, was the first formal body of civil servants in the Australian colonies. The abolition of the retirement allowance scheme in 1881, and proposed reductions in civil service salaries and allowances, led to increasing dissatisfaction with conditions of employment which were based on the Civil Service Act of 1874. Governments were becoming less sympathetic to the needs of civil servants as presented in the traditional fashion, through informal approaches to ministers. Group representation seemed more likely to be successful than individual action in the depressed economic climate of the day. Somewhat unusually, the initiative to form the Association came from the Heads of Departments and senior officers. For example, two of the principal founders were Thomas Gill and Peter Whittington, both of whom were chief clerks and career civil servants, and seven out of the twelve members of the first Council were heads of Departments. A proposal was submitted to the Bray Government for approval in April 1884, and the Association was formally constituted at a meeting on November 6, 1885.

Its aims (as stated in the first issue of the Public Service Journal - 1888) were: "To encourage unity of opinion and action in all matters affecting the welfare and efficiency of the Civil Service."

The lack of unity and decisiveness within the Association in its early years was partly a legacy of its original method of formation by the senior officers. As the Public Service grew, it became clear that the old paternalistic system, with control in the hands of the upper echelons, meant that Council members were out of touch with the concerns of the rank and file. Leadership gradually shifted as this situation came under challenge, and lower grade officers moved into the Council. Nevertheless the influence of the Heads of Departments remained strong until the late 1890s. Many of the matters which concerned the founders have remained issues of importance right up to the present day. They included salaries and working conditions, superannuation, outside appointments, and the defence of individual members, and the Service in general, against criticism.

In the closing years of the century disillusion among the rapidly growing membership with their leaders inaction led to changes in the Council, and a re-orientation toward the lower ranks of the Service.

### **Social activities and cultural attitudes**

During this initial period in the history of the P.S.A. its activities had also included purely social events, such as the 'some socials', which were musical evenings held in the Association's Club Rooms, and the development of sporting teams. The tone of the *Journal* changed from a businesslike collection of news items relevant to the Association's affairs, to a magazine designed to emphasize the fact that civil servants were 'gentlemen' and leading members of society. By the 1890s the headings were in florid gothic lettering and the content included literary items such as poems, stories, articles on science, economics or logic, and travel notes. Some were by known authors, Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Matthew Arnold etc. However, many were the work of members. Leading citizens who were also civil servants were featured prominently.

### **Increasing pressure for reform in the early twentieth century**

The approach of Federation caused the Government to set up a new Commission to enquire into the Public Service. One of its objects was to place South Australian officers who might be transferred to the Commonwealth departments, on an equal footing with those of other States. This Commission sat from 1899-1900 and its recommendations, which were very similar to those of the previous Commission, were again not acted upon. A classification board headed by three civil servants was appointed early in 1901, but its proposed scheme was also ignored.

The members of the P.S.A. were still divided at the beginning of the 20th Century with the senior officers continuing to oppose an independent Civil Service Board, which would control and regulate the Service. The lower grades, on the other hand, were anxious to achieve a secure, career service, through the ranks of which they might advance, and in which there would be no room for political patronage or nepotism. The P.S.A. was attracting more and more members, until, by 1910, almost 80% of those eligible had joined. A larger and more diverse membership was beginning to demand more forceful action. Comparisons with conditions in the Commonwealth and other State Public Services fuelled discontent in South Australia. In particular there were complaints about promotion procedures within the Service, and the practise of bringing in non-South Australians to fill high positions, or indeed any outsider who took a position which might have been filled from within the Service. An instance of this last which provoked not only an outcry by individual members, but an editorial in the *Review*, was the appointment in 1916 of a brother of a Minister to an Education Department caretaker's job.

A suggested classification scheme, with guaranteed promotion prospects, was put forward by the Council of the Association in 1908. However, under this scheme there was still no Board of Control to ensure its continuation. Eventually, in 1911, after more than 10 years of procrastination, the P.S.A. Council bowed to the growing pressure from its members and drafted a Bill to create such a Board. It was to consist of three members, two to be selected by the P.S.A. and one by the government. The proposed bill was published in full in the *Review* in February 1911, following an editorial headed "A Bill of Hope - Equal Opportunities for All". Consideration of this proposal dragged on under various governments until it was overtaken by events. The *Review* expressed its "deep regret", in September 1914, that the Public Service Bill had been shelved by the government, on the grounds that the increased cost could not be justified due to the war.

### **Other achievements 1900-1914**

In the years between 1900 and 1914 the Association had become more efficient and professional in its approach to industrial matters. It had some achievements to its credit too, notably the Superannuation Fund, which was established in 1902, although without government contributions. The Public Service Provident Fund, which had been set up in 1894 was also flourishing. In 1906, following legal representations from the Association, four months long service leave was guaranteed to all civil servants after 10 years continuous service. The question of whether efficiency or seniority should govern promotion was raised in 1909.

## War and reform, 1914 - 1918

The Public Service Association achieved recognition and increased prestige with the general public during World War I by its patriotic and responsible attitude. Members volunteered for war service, and the Association accepted a wage freeze and set up a Distress Fund, with suggested voluntary contributions of 2.5-5% of salaries, which was generously supported. The rising tide of patriotism in society at large was reflected in the *Review* in editorial comment, and the publication of a Roll of Honour giving the names of public servants who had enlisted. In the elections of 1915 the Service vote, by now considerable, was wooed by both parties with promises of a Public Service Act. and this promise was honoured by the incoming Vaughan Labour Government. On November 16, 1916 the long awaited Public Service Act became law.

Following the examples of the Commonwealth, Western Australia and Victoria, the South Australian Act set up a Public Service Commissioner with responsibility for drawing up and implementing a system of classification for permanent officers; ensuring that senior positions were not filled from outside unless there was no-one within the Service as capable; approving that transfer of employees from the temporary to the permanent lists, or from cadet to senior rank; and inspecting all departments and making recommendations to the government for the improvement of efficiency and economy. The Association would have preferred the Public Service Board, for which it had fought so long, to a Commissioner and had reservations about some of the provisions. However, the principal goal of internal regulation of the Public Service was guaranteed for the future, and the Government's choice of Lieut. Col. S. Price Weir as the first Commissioner was a popular one. The *Review* described the Act as:

"... the first milestone on the steep and rocky pathway leading to the goal at which we aim - ideal conditions governing a happy and contented Service ... It is founded upon the principles of equity and justice to all..." and, it continued, "It is the brightest passage in Service history..."

## From peace through depression to another war, 1918 - 1949

During these years the country passed through the Great Depression and had scarcely recovered before the advent of the Second World War. Many of the issues and problems faced by the Association remained the same and required continuing vigilance to protect its members' interests. In addition, some new ones arose as a result of changes in the economy.

Throughout most of the 1920s an atmosphere of optimism and forward thinking permeated the Association's actions. Right of access by salaried officers to the State Industrial Courts was achieved in 1925, and in March 1926 the P.S.A. was registered with the State Arbitration Court. In the same year a Public Service Act Amending Bill was passed, providing for a permanent Classification and Efficiency Board, which was hailed as a major advance.

Mr. L. C. Hunkin's assistance in steering it through Parliament was acknowledged with gratitude in the pages of the *Review*. The question of preference in employment and promotion, first raised in 1916, was brought before the Council again and a resolution taken that non-members should be excluded from benefits gained by the Association. A new Superannuation Act was passed in 1926.

By 1929, however, the situation had changed and the outlook was gloomy. The *Review* warned of cost-cutting measures and retrenchments of public servants, and recutions in wages for those who remained in employment. The appointment of former Labour M.P. and committed unionist, L. C. Hunkin, as Public Service Commissioner in late 1929, gave the Service a much needed sympathetic ear at the top throughout these difficult times. An announcement by Prime Minister Bruce, at that year's Conference of State Premiers, that his government proposed to repeal Federal Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration legislation, united the P.S.A. with the A.C.T.U. in immediate opposition. Under the Premier's Plan, cutbacks were imposed in 1931, with an overall 10% cut in salaries for all government employees applied twice within a matter of months. Moreover, an editorial in the *Review* of August, 1931 protested that these salary reductions were not being applied to all government employees impartially. Hunkin strongly opposed the savage staff reductions also proposed and persuaded South Australia's public servants to forego, voluntarily one day's pay per month to enable the government to retain officers who

would otherwise have been retrenched. The response was so great that the amount was able to be reduced to 3/4 of a day's pay for the second six months. However, by 1932 the *Review's* editorial was calling for more militant opposition to the austerity measure. The dreadful work 'strike' was not actually mentioned, but was certainly inferred in the April editorial statement; "If we want anything, we must do as do other people who want things. There is no other way." At the same time, a referendum of the entire membership voted not to proceed with an application to the State Industrial Court for an award governing Public Service salaries and conditions as the timing was considered 'inopportune'.

The situation improved gradually throughout the 1930s and a review of achievements of the past five years, published in 1938, listed a number of significant advances for members. Salaries had been raised again, long service leave entitlements extended to temporary staff, and a Hospital Fund established. At the A.P.S.F. Conference of 1939 considerable debate on equal pay for the sexes occurred. However, the South Australian delegation dissented from the eventual resolution, that equal pay was the only way to avoid the exploitation of women's labour, on the grounds that both male and female living wages were set by the Board of Industry in S.A. On the social side, a circulating library for members was inaugurated in 1934 as was an annual Public Service Ball, and a Public Service Orchestra was founded in 1935.

During World War II, as in World War I, the Association worked diligently to safeguard the work interests of those members absent on active service. A five day working week was granted in 1940 but deferred to the end of the war, and public servants volunteered to *increase* their working hours (without extra payment) as part of the war effort. The compulsory retirement of women on marriage was questioned in 1941 when it became clear that they were indispensable to the workforce at that time. In the immediate post war years the Association was chiefly concerned with the problems of re-absorbing ex-servicement into the Service. The role of L. C. Hunkin in the affairs of the P.S.A. throughout this period cannot be underestimated. He retired as Public Service Commissioner in 1949, and died at the age of 100 on September 10, 1984.

### **Into the present, 1950 - 1985**

Since the War there have been enormous changes in Australian society, which have naturally been reflected in the activities and concerns of the Public Service Association of S.A. Without going into this period in the detail which it deserves, it is perhaps possible to indicate a few of these.

The basic bread and butter issues which have occupied the P.S.A. since its inception, and which are still current areas of activity, include superannuation, outside appointments, staff ceilings, cutbacks and reorganisations, salary justice and the protection of members' interests in areas such as criticism by politicians or the public, or health and safety concerns, for example the problems raised by RSI. Women's issues have emerged strongly in the past twenty years and include the questions of equal pay, equal opportunities, positive discrimination and child care. The Association has recognised the rights of its female membership, and real progress has been made in most of these areas.

Questions of industrial democracy, joint decision making and worker participation have also developed during this period and remain of current interest.

Finally, there are the 'fostered activities' which have become strong commercial enterprises in their own right, the Health Benefits Fund, PSA-Jetset and the Savings and Loans Society.

The Public Service Association has gradually moved into the mainstream of the union movement. The moves to achieve this end culminated in the affiliation of the P.S.A. with the U.T.L.C. in 1984 and the A.C.T.U. in 1985. It's taken 100 years.

Sources

[Principal sources consulted in the preparation of this article were the Public Service Review and G. N. Hawker, 1967, *The Development of the South Australian Civil Service 1836-1916*, Ph. D. Thesis, ANU, (copy held in the South Australian Archives).]

duplicate article from insert in the Public Service *Review* November, 1985. (Volume 22 No. 11)  
Centenary edition.