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ADELAIDE AND THE COUNTRY, 1870-1914:

A STUDY OF THEIR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RELATIONSHIP

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SUMMARY

Adelaide held one third of South Australia's population in 1870 and one half by 1914. Adelaide's population was consistently growing more rapidly than the country's, and from the 1880s the country was losing population, some of which was absorbed by Adelaide.

The financial and commercial dominance of the capital was unchallenged throughout, the trade of the new wheat ports being conducted by Adelaide merchants. Special circumstances meant that Adelaide was the headquarters of mineowners and pastoralists who were closely connected with the city's commercial and professional groups. Together they provided social and political leadership for the colony. In Adelaide they recreated the life of a country gentry.

In Adelaide country life was commonly regarded as inferior. This view was shared by retired farmers and others attracted to the city's comforts and pleasures and by farmers advocating improvements in country life. Country people visited Adelaide regularly for recreation and on some occasions when they were ill. Anti-urban feeling in the country was comparatively weak.

Adelaide's pre-eminence in the social and economic life of South Australia was matched by the dominance of the central administration in the state. The weakness of local government was due not

to the country's inability to support local institutions, but to a tradition of central control and to the fact that in the formative years central government could raise revenue readily without recourse to direct taxation. It had no need to pass responsibilities to local bodies. Centralisation went unquestioned in a society where men and information moved easily.

In politics Adelaide men were initially predominant since they held numerous country seats as well as those allotted to the city. Their predominance was questioned in the early seventies when farmers demanded reform of the land laws, but was easily maintained in the prosperous years which followed when public works was the chief concern of parliament. Poor seasons and depression in the eighties led to the creation of the first rural political organisation, a rise in the proportion of countrymen elected to the Assembly, and a demand for payment of members, which was conceded in 1887. By the turn of the century Adelaide absentees were a rarity.

In the nineties two new political organisations emerged in Adelaide - the Labour Party and its conservative opponent the National League. While these organisations were operated chiefly to serve metropolitan interests and programmes, they could not establish themselves firmly in the country. In 1904 the Labour Party changed its platform and constitution and successfully attracted wide rural support. In 1910 the National League disbanded and joined two rural organisations

to form the Liberal Union. Adelaide's wealthy provided most of the Union's funds but wielded little influence. The Party's only safe seats were in the country, and the choice of candidates was in local hands.

Overall Adelaide's political influence declined. Its rise in population left it badly under-represented in parliament. Only in the Labour Party did metropolitan groups remain powerful, and South Australia was usually to be governed by the Liberal Union and its successors.