

Chapter 3

Facts are stern things: The government promises to act ruthlessly

The Labor Government barely had time to settle into office before Japan struck in the Pacific. The new danger aroused fear and panic amongst the Australian people, and the future looked bleak until the United States of America decided to set up a base in Australia from which to launch a counter-offensive. Australia now had a powerful ally, but this assistance brought commitments which, over time, extended Australia's resources to the utmost. The *ad hoc* methods Australia had employed to cope with shortages could no longer continue, and civilian rationing was put on the agenda. But rationing was not something that stood alone. For rationing to be successful all the various departments involved had to co-ordinate activities and, after years of looking to their own particular interests, co-ordination was not easy to achieve. As will be seen, the muddling and bungling about rationing continued as the various departments milled around, making proposals and counter-proposals, until absolute necessity forced the issue.

A major problem was that Labor had been out of office for ten years and was inexperienced in government. Fifteen of the nineteen Cabinet members, including the Prime Minister, had never held office before. In effect, although Prime Minister John Curtin stated belligerently 'Never shall an enemy set foot upon the soil of this country ... the Government will act ruthlessly' when announcing that Australia had declared war on the Japanese Empire,¹ Labor was no more equipped to 'act ruthlessly' than the

¹ John Curtin announcing that Australia was at war with Japan quoted in E. Ronald Walker, *The Australian Economy in War and Reconstruction*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1947, p. 56.

former government. Nevertheless, imported supplies were dwindling, and as civilian consumer production was switched to war production this was also contributing to the rapid run-down of domestic reserves. The growth in war industries was putting more spending power in the hands of the growing workforce, and this was exerting pressure on prices. The Financial and Economic Committee (known as the F. & E.) was concerned that a combination of these two factors could result in raging inflation which would swell the cost of waging the war.²

Clearly, inflation had to be avoided at all costs and the F.& E. set about finding ways to reduce civilian spending. The obvious way was to ration certain consumer goods, which had already been done in Britain.³ Recognition that some form of rationing was needed was widespread. The fact that the Coalition, when in Government, had been recalcitrant about introducing petrol rationing, did not stop Opposition members taunting the government for not introducing restrictions on consumption. Hubert Anthony, Country Party member for the electorate of Richmond on the North Coast of New South Wales, declared:

Our only hope is for every person in the community to make an equitable sacrifice. Are we really fighting an 'all in' war or are we not? ... We have not sufficient resources to engage in a full-blooded war effort and support our armed forces in the fullest possible way and, at the same time, to permit the civil population to enjoy all the amenities to which they have been accustomed.⁴

² F.& E. notes headed 'Restrictions of Expenditure', dated 20 November 1941, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1. The Economic Committee, mentioned in the previous chapter, underwent a name change and became known as The Advisory Committee on Financial and Economic Policy, commonly called the F. & E. The F. & E. was originally established within the Treasury Department but was later transferred to the Department of Supply and Development because of the relationship between the curtailment of production of civilian consumer goods within Australia and falling imports. It was because of this connection that the F. & E. became involved with rationing.

³ For details of rationing in Britain see W.L. Hargreaves and M.M. Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office and Longmans Green and Co, London, 1952.

⁴ H. Anthony, 3 October 1941, C.P.D., Vol. 168, pp. 703-5.

The Labor Party knew that restrictions were needed, but had relied on appeals to the public for restraint in spending on consumer goods.⁵ Then Japan entered the war and the picture changed totally.

From being war at a distance it became war on Australia's doorstep. Curtin declared:

There has been appeal after appeal to the people of Australia to do their utmost, but no longer can the responsible Government of Australia rest the safety of this country on appeals to the multitude. The Government must make the decisions, and when they are made I put it to you ... there must be no argument about the wisdom of those decisions, there must be a ready and immediate acceptance of them.⁶

But Curtin's confidence that Australians would respond to patriotic pleas when under pressure was dashed when, after calling for restraint regarding the giving of presents, retail turnover for the 1941 Christmas trading period proved comparable with other years.⁷ Curtin thereafter featured on a propaganda poster that showed the alarming advance of the Japanese army towards Australian shores. This poster was designed to impress on the people of Australia the gravity of the war situation, and it stressed that government directions had to be obeyed if Australia was to avoid invasion. It also reiterated that despite endless appeals, 'for many, life still moves along pleasant paths', and that so far an all-in war effort had not been achieved. The hard-hitting message promised that things must change if Australia was to survive as a nation.⁸

Despite brave words Australia needed help fighting the Japanese, and there was general relief when the United States set up a base in Australia from which to wage war in the Pacific. When General Douglas MacArthur arrived in Australia on 17 March 1942 as Allied Commander-in-Chief in the Pacific Curtin was so relieved to have a powerful ally that when MacArthur said 'You take care of the rear end and I

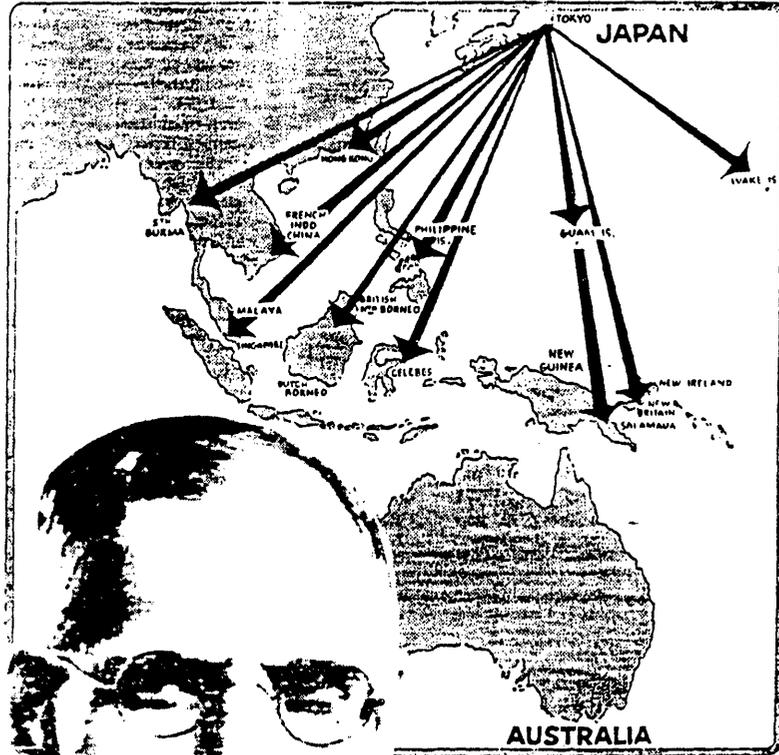
⁵ See Prime Minister John Curtin's speech to the nation after declaring war on Japan, quoted in Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Michael McKernan, *All In!*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1995, pp. 106-7.

⁸ See Illustration 3:1 following.

The Spearhead reaches SOUTH -



IT'S TOTAL WAR

YOU MUST OBEY THESE RULES

- **STOP LOCKOUTS—STOP STRIKES**
Keep war production at full blast.
- **DON'T WASTE MONEY, FOOD AND PRECIOUS PETROL**
Maximum personal economy is essential to safety.
- **HELP YOUR LOCAL A.R.P. WARDENS ALL YOU CAN**
They are doing a vital job for your safety.
- **BLACKOUT REGULATIONS MUST BE OBSERVED**
One lighted house in a street can wreck a city.
- **IN AN EMERGENCY STAY PUT AND SIT TIGHT**
Don't move from your home or office unless ordered by a responsible official. Keep a clear head.
- **KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT**
Rumours are often deliberately spread by the enemy. Don't listen to them; don't repeat them.

Dictators FORCE obedience: Democracy requests it, but in wartime, observance of regulations **MUST** be a rigid rule for all.

THE spearhead of the Japanese hordes reaches south—always south. Australia faces the darkest hour in her history. Lands to the north which believed themselves safe and free already have known the iron heel of the invader; or momentarily await his landing.

The Government has striven ceaselessly on your behalf; has stated your claims overseas; has called for more and still more effort; has exhorted you to realize to the full that what was but a threat yesterday may mean invasion and desolation in the very near future. For many, life still moves along pleasant paths. For many, the working pace of peacetime has not given place to the pressure appealed for in war production. For many, readiness to provoke strikes or lockouts suggests an ignorance of, or disregard for, national security.

Those things cannot continue. We are now a nation compelled to fight, to organise every resource we have as an indispensable contribution to the total war effort.

Those Australians who are fighting, working, adapting themselves grimly to a wartime way of life cannot be let down by a careless, carefree section who may wreck the whole future of our race.

John Curtin

EVERYONE must Fight or Work!

will handle the front'⁹ Curtin acquiesced. Certainly, at that time, Curtin could not have had any conception of the massive demands the Americans would make on Australian resources. But then, also certainly, he was well aware of Australia's dire position. He told the American people on 14 March 1942:

Facts are stern things ... we, the allied nations, were unready and Japan ... had prepared for war on a scale of which neither we nor you had knowledge ... we have all made mistakes. We have all been too slow ... we are, then, committed heart and soul to total warfare ... we are ruthlessly cutting out unessential expenditure, so as to free men and women for war work.¹⁰

War against Japan provided the watershed that set preparation for total war in progress. Everything now had to proceed at full speed and the procrastination that had taken place since the war started made a rapid transformation even more difficult. To get Australia on a total war footing civilian production had to be cut to a minimum. Rationing now became a compelling imperative, but authorities faced an up-hill task. The experiences with petrol rationing had made the government fearful about how the civilian population would react to further rationing, and progress towards general rationing had been desultory.

When the Labor government assumed office Curtin was well aware that the previous government's method of leaving a policy to be formulated between the various departments involved with supply had brought inconclusive results. To improve the process, in early November 1941, he appointed a Production Executive, whose purpose was to co-ordinate the efforts of the various departments. The membership of the Production Executive comprised the Minister for War Organisation of Industry, who was chairman as his department provided the secretariat for the executive, the Minister for Munitions, the Minister for Supply and Development, the Minister for Labour and National Service and the Minister for Aircraft Production. The Statement of Functions of the Productive Executive defined

⁹ David Horner, *Inside the War Cabinet Directing Australia's War Effort 1939-45*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1996, p. 109.

¹⁰ Irene Dowsing, *Curtin of Australia*, Acacia Press, Blackburn, 1968, p. 130.

its role as being responsible for devising a 'settled policy and a workable plan' for manpower, production resources and financial resources. Amongst the tasks included in the statement was that of organising 'any rationing schemes that may be necessary', but it was well down the list in order of priority.¹¹

There was an overlap of interests between the Production Executive and the F. & E., as both were involved with planning for rationing through connections with the Department of Supply and Development. Douglas Copland, the Commonwealth Prices Commissioner, and a member of the F. & E., was an early advocate of consumer rationing. While the government was concerned about how the Australian public would respond to rationing Copland apparently held illusions about patriotic behaviour. Despite the petrol debacle he stated:

Rationing has great social advantages in the contribution it can make to an equitable distribution of the burden of the war effort. The sense of communal behaviour which it induces in the public may be so satisfactory as to allow us to go through the war with a higher subjective standard of enjoyment than we had in peace-time.¹²

In November 1941 the F. & E. was advocating limited rationing, although it was of the opinion that only a few consumer commodities, including clothing, were in sufficiently short supply to justify rationing. To reduce civilian spending, which was a concomitant of rationing, it contemplated imposing a limit on total spending. The proposal suggested that each adult might be allowed to spend a total of 10/- per week on cigarettes, chocolates, entertainments, imported spirits, newspapers, books and magazines. Each household would also be allowed to buy 10/- worth of furniture and domestic needs. It even went so far as to speculate that a limit on holiday expenditure

¹¹ History of the Production Executive, Departmental publication, undated, A.A., Series A2928, Item XM2 Vol. 1. The Treasurer was appointed to the Executive before it held its first meeting in mid-December 1942. The Minister for Trade and Customs was added during January 1942, and the Minister for Commerce and the Minister for Social Services and Health were made members in February 1942.

¹² Notes marked 'Restrictions on Expenditure', prepared by D. Copland, undated, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item 48 Part 1.

could release labour for war purposes. Copland hypothesised that with such a degree of control over expenditure the cost of living could be stabilised and the pressure for higher wages reduced, which in turn would place a brake on war costs.¹³ But these notions were all proposed when things were being done at a leisurely pace, before the situation became critical.

When the Production Executive became operative it acted on the directive to organise rationing, and on 29 January 1942 decided that the Department of Trade and Customs, assisted by an interdepartmental committee, should make plans for the control and rationing of supplies for civil use. Because of the urgency of the situation the Minister for War Organisation of Industry emphasised that some of the investigations that would normally take place before such a procedure was implemented would have to be sacrificed in order to achieve the purpose in the shortest possible time, and because of this mistakes, would inevitably be made.¹⁴ Instructions were one thing, but action was quite different and delays occurred in producing plans. When excuses were made at the meeting held on 26 February 1942 the Production Executive instructed the Minister for Trade and Customs to have plans prepared in time for the next meeting of the executive.¹⁵

Copland became exasperated because action was not forthcoming. As Commonwealth Prices Commissioner he was vitally concerned that shortages would affect prices. He had stated early in February that the time had come when rationing should be introduced without further delay, because while price control was keeping prices down goods were relatively cheap and this was stimulating spending and depleting stocks. In his opinion the only way to conserve stock was to introduce consumer rationing. Hypothesising about various ways that rationing could be

¹³ F. & E. notes 'Restriction of Expenditure', dated 20 November 1941, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Production Executive Minute, Decision No. 17, Agendum 8/1942, 16 February 1942 and explanatory note to Agendum 8/1942, A.A., Series A2866, Item XMI Vol. 1.

¹⁵ S.J. Butlin and C.B. Schedvin, *War Economy 1942-45*, Australian War Memorial Canberra, 1977, p. 287.

organised he conjectured that for any plan of rationing to succeed a distinction would have to be made between goods that were in universal demand, such as clothing, tea and matches, and goods that were demanded in varying quantities, such as liquor, tobacco, confectionery, newspapers and household equipment. Where goods were in universal demand he thought that a points system could be used, with items being given a ration coupon value, and each person given an equal number of coupons to permit the purchase of equal quantities of a particular commodity. Where goods were not in universal demand Copland considered that a system of 'averaging' expenditure by limiting the total amount of money that could be spent would be appropriate. He suggested a 10/- allowance for adults which would permit them to buy up to that value of cigarettes, and/or matches, and/or chocolates, and/or entertainment, and/or newspapers, books and magazines each week. To cover replacements of furniture or domestic equipment Copland suggested that each household could be allowed to spend 10/- for this purpose each week. This split system would involve using two sets of coupon, one for points value, and the other for money value. He admitted though, that such a system 'might make the rationing system more complicated than the public would tolerate'.¹⁶

As it happened, no suitable scheme was ever evolved for tobacco and liquor and these two items continued to cause problems throughout the war.¹⁷ Even though tobacco was perceived as a morale booster it was left to wholesalers and retailers, who were subjected to a quota system, to ration out supplies to civilians as best they could. Restrictions were placed on beer production, and again quotas were imposed on wholesalers and retailers. The purpose of this system may have been because, as Copland noted, rationing by wholesalers and retailers made it 'politically easy' for the government as shopkeepers bore the brunt of public anger.¹⁸ Nevertheless, even

¹⁶ D.B. Copland notes headed 'Rationing', dated 5 March 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

¹⁷ Butlin and Schedvin, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁸ Copland, notes headed 'Rationing' dated 5 February 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

though rationing by way of placing quotas on wholesalers and retailers took the pressure off the government it would not suffice overall. What had to be controlled was excessive spending as people with 'surplus' funds were buying in excess of their needs, which was causing a rapid depletion of available stock. As Copland stated 'consumer rationing is, in fact, the only method by which a reasonably fair distribution of existing stocks and future supplies can be arranged over the whole field of consumers'.¹⁹ Admitting that 'difficulty is always stated as the insuperable objection to the successful introduction of rationing in Australia' Copland emphasised that this was not sufficient excuse for avoiding rationing.²⁰

Having been informed that all would not go well regarding rationing at the Production Executive meeting scheduled for 10 March 1942 Copland sent an urgent and confidential memorandum to the Treasurer saying:

There may be some opposition to the development of consumer rationing [*at the meeting*]. With the intensification of the war effort and the acute difficulties of shipping, the case for consumer rationing is stronger than ever ... the difficulties of administering consumer rationing are well-known, and so are the difficulties of overcoming the enemy. I understood that consumer rationing was to be part of Government policy. This may now be called into question, and even if it is not, there has been another unfortunate delay in getting on with the machinery.²¹

The outcome of the meeting was that a decision was made that consumer rationing would be implemented, even though no actual plan had yet been presented to the Production Executive. In this regard the Department of Trade and Customs and the Department of Supply and Development were instructed to jointly prepare a submission regarding the actual rationing 'machinery' within one week.²²

19 ibid.

20 ibid.

21 Copland to the Treasurer, J.B. Chifley, 9 March 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

22 ibid. A hand-written note added to the memorandum noted 'P.E. decided today to make arrangements for consumer rationing. Customs and Supply to present report in a week as to machinery'. This was initialled JBC and dated 10 March 1942.

Although the decision had finally been taken to implement rationing not all those involved were convinced that rationing was really necessary. Notes prepared by A.C. Moore of the Division of Import Control, which functioned within the Department of Trade and Customs, show that he believed that Australia would reach crisis point within the next few months. The notes emphasise that 'at the present time there does not appear to be any commodity which may be regarded as vital to the people which is sufficiently in short supply as to justify the appointment of a staff of some thousands to control rationing'.²³ Moore admitted that the supply of tea had reached crisis level but in his opinion 'while tea is a very important commodity ... it is not a vital foodstuff ... stocks of tea ... could be controlled in fairly rough and ready manner by the existing trade organisation'.²⁴ Concerning clothing, he commented that 'practically all Australians have a pretty fair wardrobe and particularly is this so in the case of females' and that, on the whole, most Australians could exist for a year or two without 'any replenishment of their wardrobe'.²⁵

Subsequent notes prepared by Copland show that each Minister and his departmental staff were still approaching rationing with their particular responsibilities in mind. S.R. Carver, the Acting Commonwealth Statistician, according to Copland, wanted no hint of rationing voiced until a Manpower Register, which was presently being compiled, was completed.²⁶ The Manpower Register required all Australians over the age of 16 years as at 15 March 1942 to register and to apply for an Identity Card.²⁷ Carver was concerned that if it was known that the issue

²³ A.C. Moore notes headed 'Consumer rationing', dated 9 March 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ D.B. Copland 'Notes on Rationing', undated, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

²⁷ *Control of Manpower in Australia*, Government publication, undated, pp. 125-6. The Manpower Regulations were amended in 1943 to require every person who attained 14 years of age on or before 22 April 1943 to register and apply for an Identity Card.

of ration cards was to be linked to identity cards duplicate registrations would occur.²⁸ L.F. Giblin, another member of the F. & E., was concerned about forgery as well as fraudulent use of ration coupons, and he wanted special precautions taken in the printing of ration cards.²⁹ Copland noted that this had been raised earlier, when the suggestion was made that coupons should be marked with a number that corresponded with Identity Card numbers, so that cross-checks could be made. Alternative suggestions were that purchasers could be required to sign for goods, so that the signature could be compared with the signature on the identity card.³⁰

There was also disagreement on the composition of a rationing authority. Copland commented that H.C. Coombs, another member of the F. & E. and economic adviser to the Prime Minister, was 'justifiably unhappy' about the proposal that all members of the Tariff Board should be members of the Rationing Authority, as Coombs thought the Tariff Board was 'not notorious for their expedition and decision [*making ability*]'.³¹ Copland agreed that if the proposal that all members of the Tariff Board, the Comptroller-General of Customs, the Commonwealth Prices Commissioner, and a Director of Rationing were co-opted as members of the Rationing Authority it would be too unwieldy, and in any case, Copland continued, he was against the Tariff Board being involved with rationing as 'they do not seem to be a particularly suitable body, either through training or from the history of their past work'.³² Copland had stated his ideas regarding a Rationing Authority earlier in the year when he proposed that, because the imposition of rationing would be a major task, and because rationing would 'disturb the normal channels of trade and progressively interfere with the freedom of choice of consumers'³³ the rationing

28 D.B.Copland 'Notes on Rationing', undated, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

29 *ibid.*

30 *ibid.*

31 *ibid.*

32 *ibid.*

33 D.B. Copland notes headed 'Rationing', dated 5 February 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1,

authority should be a semi-independent organisation established under the general control of a Minister. His reasons were that any authority controlling rationing would need to be able to give its undivided attention to problems that would inevitably arise, and it had to be in a position to make 'urgent decisions on important matters' without undue delay.³⁴ The other benefit of setting up rationing as a separate organisation, Copland believed, was that criticisms of rationing would devolve onto the rationing authority rather than onto the government.³⁵

Copland also commented that insofar as the machinery for rationing was concerned Giblin objected to the suggestion that Municipal offices should be used to control rationing as this could involve long distance travel for country people.³⁶ Copland believed that post offices should be used to handle annual issues of coupons, however, if the issue of ration cards was eventually tied to identity cards, then electoral officers should handle the issue. He did concede that, as the National Register was still incomplete, it would take at least two months to complete the issue of identity cards.³⁷ Moore disagreed that post offices could, or should, be utilised to handle the issue of rationing coupons, saying that staff would have to be increased tremendously if they were to cope with issuing consumer ration coupons as well as petrol ration tickets. Moore thought that while it would be possible for the Commonwealth to set up a rationing establishment in every town and staff it with 'local talent' this would prove to be 'an expensive affair' as everyone seeking employment would expect 'substantial Government salaries'. Moore's solution was that local government bodies should be used for the task, as office accommodation would prove a problem if new offices had to be established.³⁸ All these conflicting

34 *ibid.*

35 *ibid.*

36 D.B. Copland 'Notes on Rationing', undated, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

37 *ibid.*

38 A.C. Moore notes headed 'Consumer Rationing', dated 9 March 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

responses boded ill for agreement about the machinery of rationing, and the subsequent introduction of rationing itself.

In the meantime, while the disagreements about rationing were taking place, supplies of tea were becoming critically short. At the end of February 1942 only six to seven weeks' supply was held within Australia.³⁹ Shortages came about because imports of tea were controlled by the British Ministry of Food, which allocated tea under a quota system. Allied countries received 75 per cent of average imports during the period from 1938-1941.⁴⁰ Copland 'suggested with some strength' that action should be taken to implement a temporary 'make-shift' means of controlling tea sales.⁴¹ People felt strongly when their 'cup of tea' was threatened, and when unscrupulous retailers started 'asking them to buy 10/- worth of other commodities before they will sell them 1 lb of tea'.⁴² The problem was raised in Parliament by George Martens, a Labor Party member who represented the electorate of Herbert in Queensland.⁴³ John Beasley, another Labor member, who represented West Sydney, replied on behalf of the Minister for Trade and Customs, saying that the Minister was aware that this was happening, and had issued warnings to retailers about the illegal practice.⁴⁴ Warnings were not sufficient though, and the practice continued and added to civilian angst over perceived government inaction regarding shortages.

Copland suggested that as a temporary measure all consumers should register with a retailer in order to obtain tea. To avoid duplicate registrations consumers could be made to provide Statutory Declarations certifying that they had not registered more than once, with a 'terrifying', but unstated, penalty for people who registered with more than one retailer.⁴⁵ As matches were also becoming scarce Copland thought they

39 Butlin and Schedvin, *op. cit.*, p. 287,

40 *ibid*, pp. 300-1.

41 D.B. Copland 'Notes on Rationing', undated, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

42 G.W. Martens, 26 March 1942, C.P.D., Vol. 170, p. 461.

43 *ibid*.

44 J.A. Beasley, *ibid*.

45 D.B. Copland 'Notes on Rationing', undated, A.A., Series CP6/2/1,

could be rationed as well, and the ration could be tied to the issue of tea, with the proposed ration to be 4 ounces of tea and one box of matches per month.⁴⁶ As a large proportion of matches sold were associated with the sale of tobacco, which Copland proposed should be regarded as a luxury item, any supplies surplus to the monthly ration could be made available to smokers.⁴⁷

Following Copland's recommendation a 'crude and comparatively inefficient' system for rationing tea was hastily introduced early in March 1942.⁴⁸ Under this emergency scheme retailers could only sell consumers half of their normal requirements. Haste in instituting the scheme inevitably led to muddling, and a very inequitable distribution of the short supplies of tea resulted as some grocers got more supplies than they needed, while others got less than required. This came about as some businesses closed and customers had to move to other grocers who were unable to get increased supplies to meet the demand because of the way the restrictions were framed.⁴⁹

The Government then decided to introduce a new scheme and allow each person over the age of nine years a ration of one ounce of tea per fortnight. All consumers had to register with one tea retailer before 6 April 1942, although the system commenced on 30 March 1942. Under the new scheme one person in each family or household was responsible for the registration of the other members. The person registering had to confirm that they had not registered with any other retailer, and state what stock of tea they held. The government optimistically announced that 'hoarders will not be able to receive a ration until the tea held by them has been

Item B48 Part 1.

46 *ibid.*

47 *ibid.*

48 Butlin and Schedvin, *op. cit.* p. 300.

49 Minutes of meeting of Tea Control Board, 24 April 1942, A.A., Series CP117/3/1, Item 75.

consumed at the ration rate'.⁵⁰ It was sheer wishful thinking that hoarders would disclose their squirreled-away stock-pile.

Immediately after the announcement of the start of the new system it was found that the tea position was not quite as bad as anticipated and there was talk of increasing the ration. F. Entwistle, a member of the Tea Control Board, blamed Copland for the proposed change to the ration stating:

To change the ration so quickly after it has been announced would create in the minds of the public the feeling that the government did not know its own mind ... anyhow, what is Copland's [*sic*] interest in the rationing side. I made it clear to him at the first conference ... that rationing was the function of this division ... if it is decided that he is to do the rationing I shall be quite happy, but don't let us have two rationing authorities on one product.⁵¹

Quite obviously tempers were becoming frayed and testiness was being shown. But it must be remembered that by the end of March 1942 the war situation in Australia had become critical, and all the departments were under pressure.

No matter what strain and tension the government was suffering it was still expected to act rationally. An article in *The Retailer of Queensland* titled 'What About Some War Organisation of Commonwealth Government Departments? Their tea tactics present a temptation to put the "sin" in business' clearly exhibits the anger and frustrations of retailers with the tea debacle. The article stated:

We have heard so much about War Organisation in Industry, yet see so much of bungling, overlapping, mind-changing, and general mix-up in Commonwealth Government undertakings ... one has no need to look further than the tea position for evidence of bungling on every hand ... it must have been evident for months that there may be a tea shortage. The Emergency Supplies Committee in each State have been anticipating one for twelve months anyway ... then three sets of declaration forms, one after the other, were issued, and in fourteen days, cancelled, and bang went the time spent in attention to these forms, not forgetting the trouble with customers ... why weren't Statutory Declarations asked for from the public, who are warned

⁵⁰ Teleprinter message Entwistle to Maher, Division of Import Procurement, 28 March 1942, *ibid.*

⁵¹ Teleprinter message Entwistle to Donovan, 29 March 1942, *ibid.*

about trouble under National Security Regulations, but who do not know the National Security Regulations, and who care less for them, so long as they can lie cheerfully and still get tea?⁵²

The article also complained about the bungle caused by retailers being told that they could choose which customers they wished to register, and that they must provide their own registration forms. This procedure was changed shortly afterwards when the Customs Department issued compulsory forms, in many cases after individual retailers had organised and paid for the printing of forms, and had accepted registrations. Worse still, in the *Retailer's* opinion, customers were permitted to register where they chose.⁵³ The system was so loose that there was a general temptation to cheat when people suspected others 'were beating the ration'. It was not long, as historian Michael McKernan commented, before it became quite obvious that registration through retailers 'would not do'.⁵⁴

This type of inefficient rationing, continuing shortages, and the pervading threat of invasion all drained civilian morale, which was further exhausted when economists constructed and published fanciful and frightening rationing schemes such as one devised by Colin Clark, which was published in the *Courier Mail* on 12 March 1942, under the heading 'This would be Paradise to Life Under Jap Rule'.⁵⁵ The article was attention-grabbing and commenced by saying 'If we are lucky we may have two or three months to prepare ourselves against invasion', and went on to forecast that Australia must increase its war production workforce from the present 500,000 to at least 1,000,000, in order to survive. As about 900,000 persons were occupied in the production and distribution of non-essential goods and services Clark believed that such a labour transfer could be achieved. Because workers were unlikely to voluntarily leave well-paid positions producing non-essentials, Clark proposed that

⁵² *The Retailer of Queensland*, Vol. 6, No. 2, issued 11 April 1942, A.A., Series CP117/3/1, Item 75.

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ McKernan, *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 148.

⁵⁵ *Courier Mail*, 12 March 1942. Clark was an economist and statistician working with the Bureau of Industry in Brisbane.

the government should use emergency wartime powers to stop the production of all non-essential goods, and at the same time discontinue the use of money as a means of exchange. All money, Clark hypothesised, would be recalled and a bank credit given in lieu. Money transactions would be prohibited, and without money in circulation the blackmarket, which was already becoming a problem, would wither. To enable civilians to obtain necessities, ration books would be issued which would permit persons over 16 to purchase necessities to the value of fifteen shillings each week. The proposed allowance for children was ten shillings each week. 'Every able bodied man and woman would have to fight, train, or work' before being eligible for a ration book under Clark's scheme. To overcome standing obligations Clark proposed the introduction of a moratorium for rents, repayments, insurance premiums and the like for as long as the emergency existed. According to Clark, a limit on spending would overcome rationing problems, and 'in the case of habitual indulgences such as tea, beer and tobacco, complete deprivation is much easier than attempting to restrict consumption'. He also regarded entertainment as an indulgence and therefore proposed that all entertainments should be banned.⁵⁶

Coombs described Clark as being able to use 'adventurous simplifications and estimations when addressing problems'.⁵⁷ Historian S.J. Butlin called the plan a 'light hearted and sometimes heroic' experiment, adding that there were not enough government-employed trained economists capable of manipulating statistics to produce rational schemes for immediate wartime use.⁵⁸ The Federal Treasurer, J.B. Chifley, observed that Clark's article was of value in 'preparing the people for what may be ahead'.⁵⁹ Even before Clark's hypothesis was published politicians were criticising the endless flow of theoretical concepts regarding rationing. Eric Spooner,

⁵⁶ ibid.

⁵⁷ H.C. Coombs, *Trial Balance*, Macmillan Company, Melbourne, 1981, p. 3.

⁵⁸ S.J. Butlin, *War Economy 1939-1942*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1955, p. 354.

⁵⁹ J.B. Chifley to C. Clark, 16 March 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

the United Australia Party member for Robertson in New South Wales pertinently noted, 'Australia today is an economist's dream, but very much of what is being done is contradictory'.⁶⁰ This criticism could just as easily be interpreted as being made to deflect attention from government inaction.

The endless theorising failed to produce any practical scheme. Attempting to expedite a solution the Minister for Trade and Customs, R.V. Keane, convened an urgent conference in Melbourne on 14 and 15 March, at which members of the Tariff Board, Copland and the Assistant Commonwealth Prices Commissioner were present. Representatives of the Division of Import Procurement were requested to attend but they were all otherwise urgently occupied.⁶¹ A summary of the meeting made by Copland and titled 'Plan for Rationing', shows that agreement was reached that a Rationing Authority should be set up within the Department of Trade and Customs, which would comprise members of the Tariff Board, the Comptroller-General of Customs or his deputy, and the Commonwealth Prices Commissioner or his deputy. It was also agreed that a Director of Rationing would be appointed, who would be chairman of the Rationing Authority. The Minister for Trade and Customs would be given the power to 'declare' goods to be rationed. The Tariff Board would have the responsibility of recommending to the Minister what goods should be declared, the method of rationing, what amount or value of goods should be made available for civilian consumption, and the right to advise the Minister on any matters relating to the supply and rationing of goods. Local government authorities would be used to distribute ration books. Agreement was also reached that consumer rationing would be organised initially under a coupon system and that, as such a system would take some time to develop, planning along those lines should commence immediately.⁶² In a memorandum which Copland sent to the Minister with the summary, Copland

⁶⁰ E. Spooner, 5 March 1942, C.P.D., Vol. 170, p. 136.

⁶¹ Department of Trade and Customs Minute for Production Executive, undated, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

⁶² D.B. Copland, 'Plan for Rationing', dated 16 March 1942, *ibid.*

suggested that the proposed Rationing Authority should be directly associated with the Prices Branch 'in all matters other than those relating to the distribution of coupon tickets'⁶³ which would have put Copland in a position to influence rationing. Keane subsequently prepared a Minute for the Production Executive which mirrored Copland's 'Plan for Rationing' and included Copland's suggestion that the Prices Branch should be associated with rationing.⁶⁴

The recommendations underwent significant changes before appearing in the Production Executive Agendum which dealt with the matter. The Production Executive decided that it would determine what goods were to be rationed and that a committee consisting of representatives from the Department of War Organisation of Industry, the Department of Supply and Development and the Department of Trade and Customs would recommend what goods should be rationed and in what quantity. It also decided that a Director of Rationing would be appointed from the Department of Trade and Customs to establish, control and administer rationing instead of the previously proposed Rationing Authority, and that a Board of Advisers consisting of members of the Tariff Board, the Commonwealth Prices Commissioner or his deputy and the Commonwealth Statistician or his deputy would be set up to assist the Director of Rationing.. The Production Executive decreed that the Director of Rationing would have the powers previously ascribed to the Rationing Authority and that post offices would be used to distribute ration books. In addition to the Minister for Trade and Customs being given the power to go ahead with the preparation of a plan of rationing he was also authorised to arrange to have ration books printed (although how this was to be done with a plan still unprepared was not stated).⁶⁵ According to historian C.B. Schedvin, who prepared the chapter on rationing for *War Economy 1942-1945*, Copland objected to the changes but his objections carried little

⁶³ D.B. Copland to Minister for Trade and Customs, 16 March 1942, *ibid*.

⁶⁴ Department of Trade and Customs Minute for Production Execution, undated, *ibid*.

⁶⁵ Production Executive Minute, Agendum 27/1942, Decision No. 45, dated 1 April 1942, A.A., Series A2866, Item XMI Vol. 1.

weight with the Production Executive, as it was becoming dissatisfied with the stream of rationing proposals being put forward by the Tariff Board and Copland.⁶⁶

The problem was that Copland, with his prime interest being prices, costs and inflation, wanted rationing implemented without delay, while the Tariff Board was still not convinced that rationing was inevitable despite being in a position where it was fully aware of the problems and uncertainties of obtaining imports. H. McConaghy, the Tariff Board Chairman, arranged a further meeting for 23 March, and set down some Tariff Board suggestions for Copland to consider before the meeting. In spite of all the discussions that had taken place over the preceding months, the Board expressed the 'tentative' opinion that the Rationing Board, when established, should merely attempt to:

Minimise hardship to the civil population by equitably distributing essential goods ... that are in short supply. The Rationing Board should not be asked to aim at any other objects in its early stages of development. Attack on such objects as reduction of luxury spending should not be undertaken until the Board is functioning on simpler tasks.⁶⁷

The Tariff Board was adamant that Copland's 'value' rationing method was so complex, and was so far from 'full development, even on paper, that it should not be attempted until the organisation has been developed to handle other items'.⁶⁸

After the meeting held on 23 March 1942 the Tariff Board still had 'objections to immediate and widespread rationing'.⁶⁹ Amongst the reasons stated, surprisingly, was 'Shock to the Public', as if rationing had not obviously been on the agenda for months. To counter 'shock to the public' and because of difficulties it expected to meet with rationing, and on account of the troubles being experienced with tea restrictions, the Tariff Board recommended that tea and matches should be the first

⁶⁶ Records of C. Boris Schedvin, A.W.M., Series 219, Item 111.

⁶⁷ Commonwealth Tariff Board notes headed 'Rationing', dated 20 March 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48/1 Part 1.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Notes headed 'Tariff Board objections to immediate and widespread rationing', dated 25 March 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

items coupon rationed. Then, the board suggested, with the experience gained from rationing these two items to use as a guide, further rationing could be implemented. For some reason matches, which were the responsibility of the Munitions Department, received an inordinate amount of attention, although in the event they were never subject to rationing. The Board went on to note that if rationing of tea and matches was introduced without trauma the ‘housewife sitting trembling in the kitchen with fear of rationing will be enamoured of this mild and friendly scheme, and will gladly embrace later developments’.⁷⁰ The ‘mild and friendly’ comment apparently referred to the proposal that these two items should be the extent of initial commodity rationing, which was so different from the stringent and wide-spread rationing being advanced by Copland and Clark.

Consumer rationing came to a head after a meeting held at the Tariff Board offices on 6 April 1942, a meeting which was later described by Coombs as ‘far from impressive’.⁷¹ This meeting was attended by McConaghy in his capacity as chairman of the Tariff Board, S.J. Butlin from the Department of War Organisation of Industry, F.A. O’Connor from the Department of Supply and Development, and T.V. Maher from the Division of Import Procurement who were members of the committee appointed by the Production Executive, and H.E. Guy, W.J. Rose and H.F. Morris who were members of the Tariff Board.⁷² Copland was present at the request of McConaghy.⁷³ McConaghy started the meeting by announcing that he believed that it ‘was likely’ he would be appointed Director of Rationing. After considerable discussion about procedure the meeting stalled on the difficulties that would be encountered in the rationing of beer, tobacco and clothing. O’Connor expressed his view that the only way clothing could be rationed satisfactorily would be by standardising materials and designs for clothing. As manpower shortages were already

70 *ibid.*

71 Coombs, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

72 Notes of meeting held at Tariff Board Offices 6 April 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

73 D. B. Copland to Treasurer J.B. Chifley, 8 April 1942, *ibid.*

pinching he believed existing organisations should be used to administer rationing, rather than take up extra manpower in setting up a new organisation. He suggested consumers could be required to register with a retailer and thereafter 'some widely spread organisation, such as the State Savings Bank' could be used to supervise the actions of the retailers. McConaghy stated that the Tariff Board was not in favour of consumer registration 'owing to the tremendous task involved in any adequate check of registrations'.⁷⁴ Some of these ideas were so far-fetched and ludicrous that they were obviously desperation-inspired and could never have been implemented.

O'Connor wanted to know why ration coupons had to be marked with the item rationed, which had been discussed when the question of ration books was under consideration, and he suggested that coupons could simply be marked A, B, C, and so on. The various letters could be allocated to certain commodities later. Morris suggested that this system would prevent people knowing what was going to be rationed, which would prevent 'panic buying'. O'Connor submitted that military requirements were going to influence rationing, and while these requirements were as yet unformulated, plus the fact that 'the needs of American troops are throwing an entirely new light on the matter', definitive decisions should not be made regarding rationing until all military demands were finalised.⁷⁵ As was proved throughout the war, military requirements were continually fluid, which was a primary cause of uncertainty in planning. But that was a problem to be overcome, not an excuse for stagnation in the planning departments.

When asked by McConaghy to define their opinions on rationing O'Connor said that he did not know anything about rationing problems, and added that he understood that the involvement of his department 'would be confined to control of production in factories', and he was at this meeting only because his Minister had instructed him to attend. Maher thought a ration book would ultimately prove

⁷⁴ Notes of meeting held at Tariff Board Offices 6 April 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

necessary but the form it should take was debatable. He stated that he 'was not convinced that it should be issued at once and if it would take any considerable length of time to produce, it might be necessary to issue coupons in the daily press'.⁷⁶ This statement verged on the ridiculous, and obviously would never have proved practicable.

The meeting went from bad to worse as Maher also admitted that he had 'come to the meeting without adequate knowledge of the problems involved'. He thought that 'in fairness to himself and to his department he would like to make an intelligent approach to them', and suggested that the meeting be adjourned. O'Connor seconded this, saying he needed to consult with his Minister. Before the meeting adjourned until 9 April O'Connor expressed the opinion that 'someone with a knowledge of U.K. rationing should be brought from that country so as to avoid waste of time in repeating any mistakes made there'. McConaghy said this had been considered, but as the government had not confirmed the decision regarding the structure of a Rationing Commission made at the meeting convened by the Minister for Trade and Customs in Melbourne on 14 and 15 March, or Production Executive Decision No. 45 which varied the decisions, many things that should have been done were not done.⁷⁷ This was precisely the nub of the problem. There was no over-riding authority to define precisely what was to be done about rationing. Fundamentally, the government looked to the various departments to come up with a scheme, and within the departments too many people, who had neither the expertise nor the authority to make overall decisions, were involved. While dissent existed between the various departments the government remained recalcitrant about making a final decision to go ahead with rationing.

Copland left the meeting at an early stage, but he had seen enough to realise no progress had been made over the months that had passed since rationing was put on

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

the agenda. As Chifley had asked Copland to keep him informed regarding rationing developments Copland wrote to Chifley saying that the meeting, which had been expected to present a feasible plan of rationing ready for implementation, had been a shambles. He summarised what had taken place by saying 'it was obvious that the members of the committee had no working knowledge of rationing problems', nor did they have any understanding of how to develop the machinery necessary to cope with rationing.⁷⁸ Copland went on to discuss decisions made at a recent meeting of the Production Executive when rationing was discussed, saying that if their suggestions for inter-departmental committees and for devolution of responsibilities were followed, the Director of Rationing would be left with 'very little function' with regard to policy. Further, if the proposal made that 'the Minister for Trade and Commerce shall be regarded as the final authority for carrying out all rationing of such commodities as are determined by the Production Executive' was implemented this would lead to 'hesitant and timorous' decision-making, as well as making the Minister the target for criticism.⁷⁹

Copland visualised that much of the work of the Director of Rationing would be to keep his Minister informed on all matters relating to rationing, as the workload of any Minister precluded him from being informed on all matters at all times. Copland also visualised that the Director of Rationing would prepare answers to the 'large volume' of criticism which was expected once rationing was implemented.⁸⁰ Copland's main objections to the way various departments and committees were going about the organisation of rationing was that they were approaching rationing as a means merely of dealing with commodities in short supply. Putting his opinion bluntly he stated:

[This approach] is taking an essentially limited view of the function of rationing as an integral part of the financial and

78 Copland to Chifley, 8 April 1942, A.A., Series CP6/2/1, Item B48 Part 1.

79 *ibid.*

80 *ibid.*

economic policy of the Government. The policy of rationing as a means of securing increased savings and increased diversion of resources from civilians to war needs should be established.⁸¹

Copland 'ventured' to suggest to Chifley that a Director of Rationing should be appointed immediately, and that he be given the responsibility for 'pushing on with the job'. Copland also recommended that a Rationing Committee be formed, which for administrative simplicity should not exceed more than four members, who should be drawn from the Department of War Organisation of Industry, the Department of Supply and Shipping, the Department of Trade and Customs, and the Prices Branch. Copland suggested that the Minister for Trade and Customs should be given the power to approve recommendations made to him by the Director of Rationing about the quantities of goods that should be distributed, the way in which rationed goods should be released, and the purposes for which rationed goods could be used. This scheme, Copland thought, would provide a reasonably flexible administration, without imposing the frustrations and delays to which a more involved scheme would inevitably lead.⁸²

After this, as Coombs noted in his autobiography, *Trial Balance*, 'events took over' as civilian fears of rationing grew, and stores were rushed, particularly for clothing, supplies of which were becoming critically short as materials and production were diverted to meet demands from the armed services. One shortage led to another, and the time was ripe for the Prime Minister to 'act ruthlessly'. Unexpectedly, Curtin sent for Coombs, and after telling him that plans for rationing were not progressing satisfactorily, informed Coombs that he intended to appoint him [*Coombs*] Director of Rationing. The Tariff Board had stated that a scheme of rationing could not possibly be organised before 1 July 1942. Curtin believed that rationing should be implemented as a matter of urgency and set Coombs the immediate task of finding out whether rationing could be commenced earlier. As the printing and distribution of ration books headed the list of problems to be overcome Coombs approached the Government

81 *ibid.*

82 *ibid.*

Printer to ascertain whether the ration books could be prepared sooner. Coombs then surveyed the problem of issuing ration books and decided the Electoral Office would be able to do this more expeditiously than any other established authority. With these fundamentals established Coombs told Curtin that providing a suitable scheme could be devised, and the necessary administrative machinery put in place, rationing could commence on 13 June 1942.⁸³

This was sufficient for Curtin to broadcast to the nation on Friday 8 May 1942, when he stated ‘invasion is a menace capable hourly of becoming an actuality ... we are racing against time’.⁸⁴ Outlining the progress of the war he told the people that they had had it easy so far, and that too much money had been spent on civilian production. Curtin continued:

This nation has made no real sacrifices of peace-time things. The Government now tells you that the time has come when we can no longer avoid sacrifices ... the Government has issued regulations restricting the sale of clothing and clothing material to 75 per cent of the value of sales during 1941 ... rationing is the only fair way of ensuring an equitable and adequate distribution of the available supplies of clothing ... [so] that everyone receives a fair deal.⁸⁵

Curtin then announced that restrictions would commence the following Monday morning and would remain in force until replaced in the ‘very near future’ by a system of coupon rationing.⁸⁶ John Dedman, the Minister for War Organisation of Industry, who was appointed the Minister for Rationing, announced the decision in Parliament only one hour before Curtin broadcast to the nation.⁸⁷ The declaration by Curtin committed the Government, and forestalled further discussion by Cabinet, which was not unanimously in favour of rationing.⁸⁸ Curtin had discovered that fighting the

83 Coombs, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

84 Broadcast by the Prime Minister over national and B class stations, Friday 8 May 1942 at 7.35 p.m., A.A., Series A1608/1, Item D23/2/10 Part 1.

85 *ibid.*

86 *ibid.*

87 Butlin and Schedvin, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

88 Wendy Way, ‘“An administrative miracle”: the establishment of the Commonwealth Rationing Commission’, in J.J. Eddy and J.R. Nethercote

Japanese was not the only battle he had to win when colleagues and public servants did not prove co-operative.

When the time came that absolute necessity forced Curtin to act he did so decisively. By acting on the suggestion that Copland 'ventured' to make to the Treasurer concerning the appointment of a Director of Rationing, and by giving the Director the responsibility for getting rationing underway, Curtin cut through the delays which occurred because initiative, co-operation and agreement was conspicuously absent in departmental attempts to establish a scheme of rationing. By simplifying rationing to one item to start with, the task was reduced to a manageable level, which ultimately provided a basis on which other items could be added as needed. Probably part of the problem that had seen such a multiplicity of schemes hatched between the various departments, with such an infinite number of variations, was that the need to ration, and what to ration, had not been defined precisely. This led to such a wide variety of goods being included that the task became overwhelming. That is not to say that Coombs' task was easy or simple, and many problems awaited, not least of which was the reaction of civilians to Curtin's announcement.

(eds), *From Colony to Coloniser*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1987. Way stated that by announcing the decision Curtin side-stepped opposition by H.V. Evatt and E. Ward, p. 271.

Chapter 4

A younger and better steed: The Commonwealth Rationing Commission

The announcement by Prime Minister John Curtin on the evening of Friday 8 May 1942 that restrictions would be introduced on the sale of clothing from the following Monday panicked the civilian population. The frenzied buying spree continued even after restrictions came into force, and supplies diminished alarmingly. This gave increased urgency to the introduction of rationing, and H.C. Coombs, the newly appointed Commissioner of Rationing, had the daunting task of setting up a central organisation, organising and staffing offices in each State, devising a rationing system, having ration books printed and distributed to all Australian civilians, and being ready to start rationing within weeks. A complicating and hindering factor was that rationing was not the only priority. This chapter explores the haste with which rationing was implemented and the problems that Coombs had to overcome in order to meet the deadline imposed by Curtin.

An unrestrained shopping spree commenced as soon as the shops opened the morning following Curtin's announcement that restrictions would be placed on the sale of all clothing from the following Monday, 11 May 1942.¹ Regulations gazetted 12 May 1942 restricted any retailer from selling in any one week more than 75 per cent of the value of all items of clothing sold during an average week between 1 January 1941 and 31 December 1941. The Regulation defined the controlled goods as:

Articles of apparel or attire for human wear or to be worn in

¹ Radio announcement by Prime Minister John Curtin, 8 May 1942, A.A., Series A1608/1, Item D23/2/10 Part 1. Restrictions commenced on Monday 11 May although regulations were not gazetted until Tuesday 12 May.

connexion with the human body, whether wholly or partly made up, [*or*] piece goods including all woven, knitted or lockstitched cotton, linen, silk, artificial silk, woollen or worsted piece goods, whether partly or wholly made up, but not including piece goods for the manufacture of bags or containers for the storage or transport of any goods [*or*] blankets, bed linen, table linen, towels and handkerchiefs.²

The same Regulation also prohibited the publishing of ‘any advertisement of any kind relating to controlled goods’.³

Curtin’s plea for civilians to observe the ‘spirit of the regulation’ went unheeded. Shops were besieged on the Saturday morning following the announcement, the last time clothing could be purchased before the restrictions commenced. Some Melbourne stores had to close their doors to manage the rush, and civilians lined up on the streets waiting their turn to ‘recklessly’ buy whatever was available.⁴ The Melbourne *Herald* noted that ‘men lined up in record numbers ... [*to buy*] underwear, hats, socks, ties, shirts and ready-made suits’.⁵ Shop assistants commented that ‘the buying orgy was almost totally indiscriminate as people grabbed up goods without bothering about price or fit’.⁶ A contemporary cartoon published in the Melbourne *Argus* on 12 May 1942 shows how a cartoonist likened the crush to that of pigs milling around a trough.⁷ According to historian Michael McKernan this ‘display of panic and greed’ was nation-wide.⁸

By the middle of the following week, despite the start of the restrictions, banks were reporting heavy withdrawals of savings as the ‘contagion of the buying panic’ continued.⁹ A pertinent suggestion was made that a value should be placed on the amount of money people could spend, with identity cards being marked with the

2 National Security (General) Regulations Control of Materials (Clothing and Other Goods) Order, *Commonwealth Gazette*, No. 137, 12 May 1942.

3 *ibid.*

4 *Herald*, 9 May 1942 in Andrew Bolt (ed), *Our Home Front 1939-45*, Wilkinson Books, Melbourne, 1995, p. 136.

5 *ibid.*

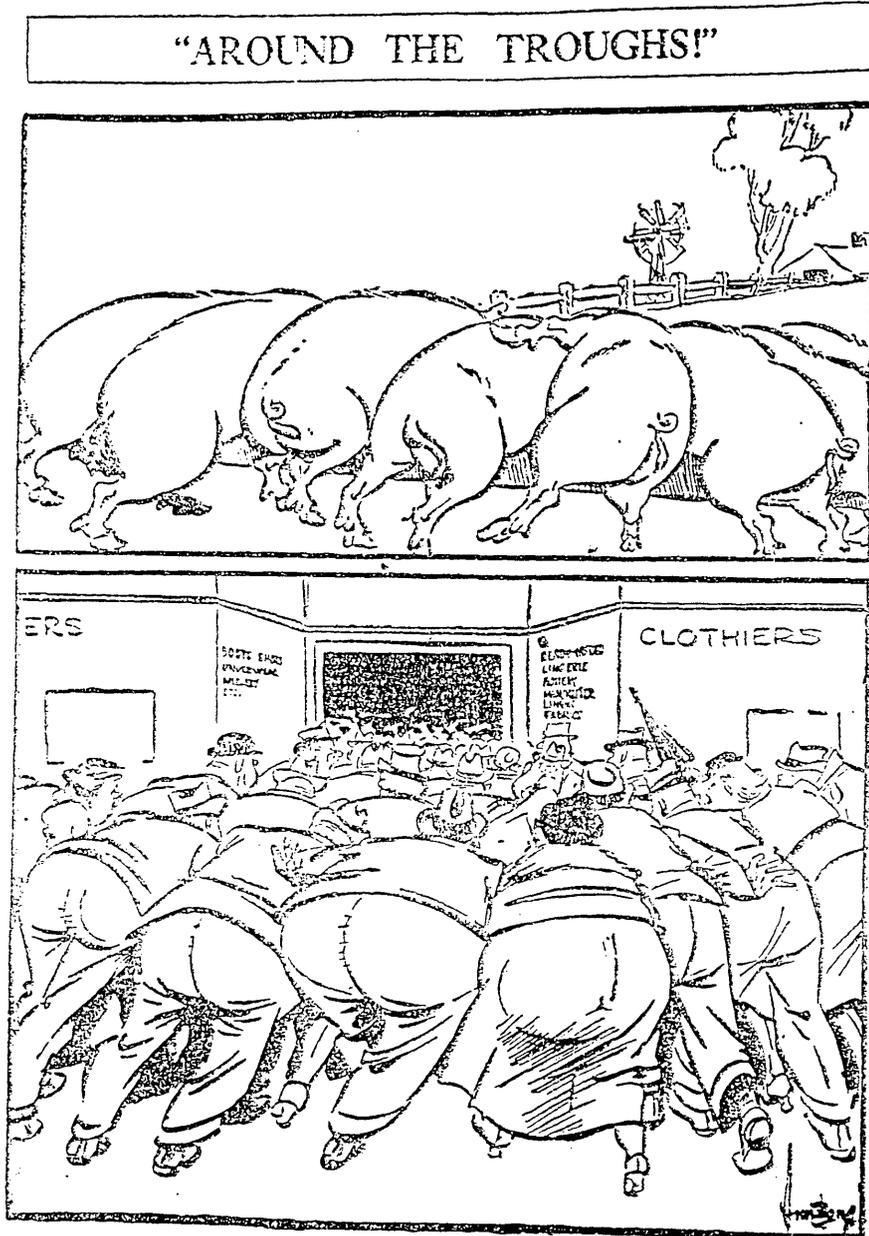
6 Michael McKernan, *All In*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1995, p. 149.

7 See Illustration 4:1 following.

8 McKernan, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

9 *Sun News-Pictorial*, 14 May 1942, in Bolt, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

Illustration 4:1



Armstrong in Argus (Melbourne), 12 May 1942.

Source: S.J. Butlin and C.B. Schedvin, *War Economy 1942-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1977, p. 296.

amount of purchases, and when the permissible total was reached, nothing more could be bought.¹⁰ Most stores used a daily, rather than a weekly quota, as a basis for trading, and when this quota was exhausted, often only an hour after opening, shoppers spent on whatever else was available, including furniture, hardware, radio sets and gramophone records.¹¹ Threats of invasion and fear of the Japanese were secondary to dismay at the thought that shortages of goods loomed, and that purchases would be restricted in the future.

The buying scramble was so widespread and unseemly that Hubert Anthony, the Country Party member for Richmond on the north coast of New South Wales, demanded in Parliament:

Will the Minister allow these conditions to continue until rationing is in operation? Will he be content to allow tens of thousands of working people, who are engaged in all kinds of industries from about 8 a.m. until a late hour in the evening to be deprived of an opportunity to purchase the clothing they require, whilst members of the leisured class have the first choice of the goods available? Is such a policy equitable?¹²

United Australia Party Senator Hattil Foll raised the issue in the Senate by questioning:

Is the leader of the Senate aware that as a result of very bad bungling ... in respect of the rationing of clothing, a wild orgy of buying ... has set in, and, in order to be able to purchase clothes immediately, many people have been selling their war savings certificates at a time when it is most desirable that they should not do so?¹³

In Hobart, the shopping spree caused such disruption in stores that the Secretary of the Hobart Chamber of Commerce telegraphed the Prime Minister

¹⁰ Letter to the editor by D.G. of Killara, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May 1942.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² H. Anthony, 14 May 1942, C.P.D., Vol. 170, p. 1269.

¹³ Cutting taken from C.P.D., dated 21 May 1942, in A.A., Series A1608/1, Item D23/2/10 Part 1. The Leader of the Senate touchily replied 'it is not proper for any honorable senator to ask questions which contain expressions of opinion. The honorable senator has asked me if I am aware of some blunder made by my colleague. I am not aware of anything of the kind. Therefore, the balance of the honorable senator's question is immaterial', *ibid.* *Sun-News Pictorial* also featured the heavy withdrawal of savings, Bolt, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

protesting about the 'premature announcement of rationing [of] clothing' which had resulted in 'an unexampled display of panic purchase by the public'.¹⁴ The telegram concluded:

The Chamber suggests that before the Government embarks on any further adventure of this kind it should take steps to ascertain from those qualified to express an opinion what repercussion [*sic*] may be expected.¹⁵

A group of workers in Launceston echoed these sentiments protesting to the Prime Minister that they were:

Astounded and upset at the shopping arrangements made by the Government. At the present time in Launceston the majority of the shops are only open every few days, and one shop today informed us that they will not open until Monday. Other shops cannot say when they are opening. What is a business girl to do in the circumstances?¹⁶

The workers further stated that if plans for rationing had been prepared in secret, and not announced until all was in place for rationing to commence 'it would have been much more fair to all' and 'some people' would have been prevented from hoarding.¹⁷

Resentment blossomed against hoarders as those who were patriotic and refrained from buying clothing saw others buying unrestrainedly. Gladys Strachan told the Prime Minister that 'there must be very many women like myself. I have tried to be patriotic since the war started, and am right down to rock-bottom in all things to wear'.¹⁸ Isolated country people who ordered goods by mail became frustrated also because when they sent mail orders to city stores, orders and cheques were simply returned with the advice that quotas had been sold. Complaining from outback Gore in Queensland R. Middleton told the Prime Minister of the problems he was experiencing trying to get goods by mail-order, saying that as he was an invalid 'warm

¹⁴ Secretary, Hobart Chamber of Commerce, telegram to Prime Minister, 14 May 1942, A.A., Series A1608/1, Item D23/2/10 Part 1.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ M.G. Forbes and 10 others to Prime Minister 19 May 1942, *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Gladys Strachan to Prime Minister, 13 May 1942, *ibid.*

clothing is essential to defeat early funeral expenses ... the season is not appropriate to turn nudist, yet what is in store for us?'¹⁹ Middleton blamed 'the hint given to the population that clothes would be rationed' for the situation, and suggested that the 'only salve ... would be to close the shops until ration tickets are available.'²⁰ Commenting on the reported remark made by John Dedman, the Minister for Rationing, that 'he considered that complaints about the difficulty of obtaining clothing was exaggerated' Middleton asked 'Does he get the newspapers? Can he read? ... go Mr Dedman into the highways and hedges, into the country towns and the bush, and see if adequate clothing can be purchased'.²¹

The position became worse when some stores withheld part of their quota in order to have a reasonable stock on hand when rationing commenced.²² When Joseph Clark, the Labor member for Darling in New South Wales raised this matter in Parliament,²³ Dedman stated that he was aware that this was happening, and had instructed that 'retailers are not permitted to under-sell their quotas',²⁴ as if a ministerial decree was all that was needed to force stores to fall into line and obey instructions. The only good thing to come out of the chaos and disorder that the panic buying had created was that it was becoming apparent that people would accept rationing when it commenced so long as it led to a fairer and more orderly distribution of clothing.²⁵

To get the organisation for rationing underway National Security (Rationing) Regulations were gazetted on 14 May 1942. These Regulations formally appointed Coombs as Director of Rationing, and established the Rationing Commission which

¹⁹ R. Middleton, from Gore in Queensland to Prime Minister, 24 May 1942, *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Agendum 8, undated, Reports of meetings of the Rationing Commission, A.A., Series M448/1, Item 178.

²³ J. Clark, 27 May 1942, C.P.D., Vol. 171, p. 1567.

²⁴ J. Dedman, 27 May 1942, C.P.D., Vol. 171, p. 1567.

²⁵ Agendum 8, Reports of meetings of the Rationing Commission, A.A., Series M448/1, Item 178.

comprised three members. Arthur Coles, an Independent member who represented the electorate of Henty in Victoria, who was also a director of the chain store G.J. Coles & Co., was appointed chairman. The other two members were J.I. Armstrong, a Labor Senator from New South Wales, and W.V. McCall, a United Australia Party member for Martin in New South Wales. The Minister for Trade and Customs was appointed Minister in Charge of Rationing.²⁶ In his autobiography, *Trial Balance*, Coombs states that by entrusting rationing to a commission comprising parliamentarians of different parties Curtin intended that the political responsibility for rationing would be shared, largely because rationing 'promised to be a difficult and unpopular task'.²⁷

The very fact that the Rationing Commission was made up of politicians from different parties gave the Opposition ammunition with which to attack the government. Anthony wanted to know why there were not more members from the Labor Party to represent working members of the population, as Independents were, in his opinion, unlikely to speak up strongly enough on behalf of the workers. He asked 'is the [*Labor*] Party so lacking in able men ... that the Government was afraid to appoint two of its own followers to the Commission?'²⁸ Various women's organisations sought representation on the commission but the government side-stepped the issue, using the explanation that the commission was a 'purely Parliamentary Commission [*and*] as there was no woman member in Parliament such could not be elected'.²⁹

²⁶ Departmental History of Rationing of Clothing and Food 1942-1950 (as administered by the Commonwealth Rationing Commission), A.A., Series CP590/1/1, Item Bun. 1. A copy embossed with the name H.C. Coombs in gold letters on the cover was found amongst the papers of H.C. Coombs, A.A., Series M448/1, Item 178, and a further copy was located at A.W.M., Series 27, item 532/3. The copy used throughout this thesis was the one located at A.A., Series CP590/1/1, Item Bun. 1.

²⁷ H.C. Coombs, *Trial Balance*, Macmillan Company, South Melbourne, 1981, p. 15.

²⁸ H. Anthony, 14 May 1942, C.P.D., Vol. 170, p. 1269.

²⁹ Victorian Division of The Housewives' Association to Prime Minister, 3

The decision to base the Rationing Commission in Melbourne was also questioned. Frederick Stewart, United Australia Party member for Parramatta in New South Wales, demanded to know:

Why has this arrangement been made, in view of the fact that two out of three members of the Commission are residents of Sydney, and there is no need to correlate the activities of the Commission with those of any department already in Melbourne?³⁰

Curtin explained that accommodation was so short in Canberra that it was not possible to find space for the commission there. Additionally, as the Rationing Commission would have to work closely with the Production Executive, the Department of War Organisation of Industry, and the Department of Trade and Customs, all of which were located in Melbourne, it was logical to base the commission in Melbourne.³¹ Coombs gives a different explanation. He states in *Trial Balance* that because a large section of the clothing industry was located in Melbourne 'it had been decided that in order to establish and maintain contact with the industrial and commercial interests in the clothing industry rationing should be administered from Melbourne.'³²

While the government was criticised regarding many aspects Curtin got it right when he appointed Coombs as the Director of Rationing because Coombs brought an entirely new approach to the whole question of rationing and its implementation. Coombs had been on the fringe of rationing through his membership of the F. & E., however, he states that 'the appointment came as a complete surprise'³³ and he was astonished to be given the position as he had never held any executive position nor did he have any experience in establishing an organisation or of controlling staff.

November 1943 reiterated the initial reason given by the government regarding why no woman was appointed to the Rationing Commission, and complaining that McCall was still a member of the commission even though he was no longer a member of Parliament (McCall was defeated in the August 1943 election), A.A., Series A461/7, Item A325/1/14.

³⁰ F. Stewart, 15 May 1942, C.P.D., Vol. 170, P. 1284.

³¹ J. Curtin, 15 May 1942, C.P.D., Vol. 170, p. 1248.

³² Coombs, op. cit., p. 18.

³³ ibid, pp. 15-16.

Nevertheless, Coombs professed that he regarded the appointment as a ‘tremendous challenge’³⁴ particularly as he had such a short time in which:

To work out how rationing should work, what commodities were to be rationed, what quantities would be available and on what principles they should be distributed. It was not merely a matter of how the consumer should get his share of the rationed goods but of how the retailer, and behind him the wholesaler and manufacturer, were to get their supplies to be able to match the coupons when they were presented.³⁵

Coombs encapsulated the problem as having to plan and set up ‘an organisation which could handle in a decentralised way the varied problems which must arise - an organisation which would be reasonably accessible to consumers in every city, town and village’.³⁶

In achieving its objectives the Rationing Commission was bound by the powers set down in the Regulations which enabled it to:

Direct, restrict, control or regulate in any manner whatsoever [*the*] ... purchase, acquisition, transfer, possession, use, branding, packing, storage, supply, distribution, advertising, sale and disposal of rationed goods, and [*the*] ... supply or carrying on of any rationed service.³⁷

In effect, the Rationing Commission was responsible for ensuring that goods were available, where and when they were required, over the whole of Australia.³⁸ For rationing to succeed goods had to be available when and where required or the whole system would collapse. An example of how powers could be used was that if a ‘desperate local shortage’ existed the Rationing Commission could request a special distribution to the affected area.³⁹ Other branches of the administration were responsible for supply. For example, the Division of Import Procurement, which was a branch of the Department of Trade and Customs, was responsible for obtaining

34 ibid, pp. 15-17.

35 ibid, p. 17.

36 ibid.

37 Departmental History of Rationing, op. cit., p. 3.

38 ibid.

39 Records of Paul Hasluck, A.W.M., Series 68, Item 3 DRL 8051/9.

supplies of textiles from overseas. The Department of Supply and Shipping was responsible for the production within Australia of essential clothing for both military purposes and civilian consumption.⁴⁰ A further Regulation prescribed that before any item came under rationing control it had to be 'declared' by the Minister responsible for the commodity to be rationed.⁴¹

The problems facing the Rationing Commission were 'unique, complex and immense'.⁴² In order to achieve in a short time what the various departments had failed to achieve in months Coombs by-passed all the bureaucratic personnel and processes involved in the unsuccessful planning merry-go-round which had not produced any workable scheme of rationing. From what he had seen of the normal bureaucratic procedure he realised that a 'radically different' methodology was needed, and he set about gathering 'a powerful team, intelligent and flexible, youthful and with abundant energy, and dedicated to the conviction that rationing should be based on equity and concern for individual welfare'.⁴³

Many of Coombs' 'brains trust'⁴⁴ were seconded from various departments for the time it took to set rationing in action. The team comprised economists Jock Phillips, who was loaned by the Commonwealth Bank, Phillips' wife Wilmot, and Jim Nimmo. The legalities of rationing were supervised by lawyers Allen S. Brown and Rae Else Mitchell. Mabel Taylor and Gwen Littleton were recruited from the Philosophy Department of the University of Melbourne, and their work, according to Coombs, clearly demonstrated 'the value of philosophic training in designing a systematic approach to problems of great complexity and potential confusion'.⁴⁵ Mary

⁴⁰ Rationing in Australia, a departmental publication reviewing the work of the Commonwealth Rationing Commission June 1942 to December 1944, undated, A.A., Series A461/7, Item 325/1/14, pp. 16-17.

⁴¹ Departmental History of Rationing, op. cit., p. 3.

⁴² Acting Prime Minister to members of the Rationing Commission thanking them for their services, 28 July 1950, A.A., Series A461/7, Item A325/1/14.

⁴³ Coombs, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

⁴⁴ 'Brains trust' was Coombs' name for his original team, *ibid*, p. 20.

⁴⁵ *ibid*, p. 18.

Houghton, an English graduate of the same University, was employed as an interviewer and consultant with women's organisations. Bill Lockwood, a medical researcher, looked at nutrition. J.T. Pinner came from the Public Service Board, and his experience with State administrative procedures proved invaluable in setting up staffing arrangements. John Cummings was seconded from the Department of Customs, and according to Coombs, while Cummings was a 'seasoned bureaucrat' he was still capable of looking at rationing as an exciting challenge. Bob Freeland, a journalist, and Brian Fitzpatrick, an historian, were included to handle publicity. Mary Grant, an experienced political secretary, became Coombs' personal secretary.⁴⁶

The first formal meeting of the Rationing Commission was held in temporary offices at the Royal Bank Building in Collins Street, Melbourne during the afternoon of Monday 18 May 1942. There was so much to be done that it was difficult to know where to start. The meeting decided that it was 'unnecessary' to take minutes, and that only decisions made during the meetings would be recorded. While this no doubt facilitated the progress of meetings, records do not always show the reasoning behind decisions.⁴⁷ The agenda for the meeting shows that printing, distribution and design of ration books took priority over other matters,⁴⁸ although the organisation of State offices and staffing was discussed, and Coombs was given the task of drawing up a list of 'key men' who could be approached to become deputy directors in each State.⁴⁹ At a subsequent meeting it was noted that panic shopping was creating newspaper headlines, which in turn appeared to be driving shoppers to a greater frenzy. The report notes that this was undesirable as 'distribution is inequitable and the psychological effect is bad. Those holding off or unable to get to the shops feel bitter'.⁵⁰ Drastic action, such as closing stores until coupons were issued, was

⁴⁶ *ibid*, pp. 18-20.

⁴⁷ Report of first meeting of the Rationing Commission, 18 May 1942, Reports of meetings of the Rationing Commission, A.A., Series M448/1, Item 178.

⁴⁸ Agenda for first meeting of the Rationing Commission, *ibid*.

⁴⁹ Report of first meeting of the Rationing Commission, *ibid*.

⁵⁰ Agendum 8(a) headed 'Clothing - interim action', undated, Reports of

considered and plans for coping with emergency purchases if this was done were discussed. In the end, it was decided that any action as extreme as closing stores would lead to intensified panic. There was nothing to do but hope that the spending spree would abate if left alone. Newspapers and radio broadcasters were asked to 'give less emphasis to panic buying', and to assure civilians that once coupons were issued all reasonable needs would be met, and that 'special cases will be dealt with sympathetically'.⁵¹

The only way to stop the spending orgy was to start rationing, and in order to do that the Rationing Commission had to get on with the task. There were too many urgent details to be decided to concentrate solely on any one problem, no matter how worrisome. A scale of rationing headed the urgent list, but the lack of statistics regarding stocks of clothing made this difficult. No-one knew how much the shopping spree had depleted retailers' stocks, and imports could not be relied upon because of both wartime disruption to supplies and shipping losses caused by enemy action. There was no point in creating a scale which stocks could not meet, and the commission was aware that it would cause 'great harm to the public attitude to rationing if extensive shortages occurred' once rationing was introduced.⁵² To enable a build-up of stock Coombs organised for exports to cease briefly, and for factories where production had been transferred to war work to return temporarily to civilian production.⁵³ Curtin recognised the importance of the home front and 'backed firmly' Coombs' assertion that civilian needs had to be given 'as high priority as the needs of the armed services' which, according to Coombs, went a long way towards facilitating the setting up of rationing.⁵⁴

51 meetings of Rationing Commission, *ibid.*

51 *ibid.*

52 Agendum 5(c), undated, Reports of meetings of the Rationing Commission, *ibid.*

53 *ibid.*, and 'Notes for discussion with Mr Beasley', dated 21 May 1942, Reports of Meetings of the Rationing Commission, *ibid.* (John Beasley was the Minister for Supply and Shipping.)

54 Coombs, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

As clothes rationing had been in action in Britain for 12 months by the time Australia decided to implement clothing restrictions, Coombs cabled ‘questions designed to probe the United Kingdom experience’ to the Australian High Commissioner in London.⁵⁵ The basic principles that Britain worked to were that any system had to be easy to implement, it had to be easy for the public to understand, and that adults had to bear the brunt of rationing.⁵⁶ Deciding the principles of a scheme was relatively easy, but arranging such a scheme was a very different matter. British historians E.L. Hargreaves and M.M. Gowing commented that despite the intention of planners to implement a problem-free system, ‘however simple and streamlined any scheme might originally be ... the complexities of life were such that it could not remain so for long’.⁵⁷ By the time Coombs sought advice to help his team avoid the pitfalls Britain had encountered, the British Board of Trade conceded that when dealing with problem areas, such as industrial clothes, it had, over time, ‘created a system of enormous complexity and fundamental inaccuracies’, and that the more it tried to correct problems the more deeply it floundered.⁵⁸ This was not encouraging advice for Coombs, even when it was tempered with advice that experience had shown that it was better to inform the public about reasons behind actions as consumers were much less tolerant of ‘unfairness’ than of severe rationing.⁵⁹ The actual British scale was of no help to Coombs, because of the differences in materials available in each country. Wool was scarce in Britain relative to cotton, while the reverse applied in Australia. Climatic differences also altered the balance of necessities.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ *ibid.* p. 17.

⁵⁶ E.L. Hargreaves and M.M. Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade*, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office and Longman Green & Co, London, 1942, 1952, p. 306-7.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 338.

⁵⁸ High Commissioner’s Office, London, cablegram to Prime Minister’s Department, 8 July 1942, A.A., Series A1608/1, Item D23/2/10 Part 1.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ S.J. Butlin and C.B. Schedvin, *War Economy 1942-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1977, p. 294.

Britain used a 'points' system whereby each article of clothing was allocated a coupon value. Before settling on this method the Rationing Commission revisited other methods that had been considered by the various Australian departments. The limitation by expenditure method, whereby coupons had a monetary value and were surrendered to correspond with the value of the article of clothing purchased was considered and discarded as being impractical because changes in price would upset the overall scale. The mere suggestion that it was being considered brought strenuous objections from the chairman of the Australian Wool Board. He claimed that such a system would be detrimental to the Australian wool industry, as price discrimination would inevitably occur as woollen garments cost more than clothing manufactured from cheaper materials.⁶¹ The proposal that goods be rationed by quality, with high coupon ratings being placed on durable clothing and low coupon ratings on poorer quality was also rejected as unworkable, as before this method could be introduced materials and garments would have to be standardised, and this was regarded as being too difficult and too draconian.⁶²

Working on the fundamental principles of fairness and equitable distribution Coombs' team decided that the rationing scale should be based on a replacement of clothing basis, and a scale was drawn which would allow a reasonable replacement of worn-out clothing. This replacement was also loosely tied to the Australian basic wage clothing regimen as laid down by the Arbitration Court.⁶³ The commission was of the opinion that if the clothing scale was tied to the basic wage this would give a political significance which 'would provide a defence against criticism of coupon ratings'.⁶⁴ The commission had to calculate a scale based on 112 coupons per year because ration books had been prepared with this number of coupons for clothing.

⁶¹ Director of Rationing to Chairman of the Australian Wool Board, A.A., 22 May 1942, Series A1608/1, Item D23/2/10.

⁶² Departmental History of Rationing, op. cit., p. 36.

⁶³ Notes dated 21 May 1942, Reports of meetings of the Rationing Commission, A.A., Series M448/1, Item 178.

⁶⁴ Butlin and Schedvin, op. cit., p. 294.

There was no particular reason for this number of coupons.⁶⁵ It was simply that the printing of ration books had been given priority over planning, and pages had been designed arbitrarily.

In practice, the actual number of coupons issued was not a great problem as ratings were juggled so that only the predetermined quantity of clothing could be purchased.⁶⁶ The scale finally determined allowed adult males to buy slightly more than half their estimated pre-war annual purchases, while adult females were allowed about two-thirds. McKernan comments that the higher allowance for women was because the commission allowed for women's 'greater emphasis on vanity'.⁶⁷ The Departmental History of Rationing merely comments that 'it was thought that adult males could afford to suffer a more substantial reduction of clothing replacements than other sections of the community'.⁶⁸ Working on the principle that children should suffer least, children from 5 to 15 years had their normal annual purchases cut by only about 20 per cent, and because children under 5 outgrew clothing so quickly they were allowed almost full pre-war purchases. Once it had been decided how much new clothing each person would be permitted each year, each item of clothing had to be given a rating value to enable only the permitted quantity of clothing to be purchased. The urgent task was to get the whole scheme underway and worry about fine-tuning as problems surfaced.⁶⁹

The initial rationing scale required the surrender of 40 coupons for a man's overcoat, 42 coupons for a man's double breasted suit, and 38 coupons for a single breasted suit. A woman's overcoat was rated at 27 coupons, a two-piece costume cost 29 coupons, and a woman's frock 13 coupons. Men's shirts required 12 coupons.

⁶⁵ Departmental History of Rationing, *op. cit.*, p.37. McKernan, *op. cit.*, p. 151 incorrectly suggests that the number was chosen because the British system used this number. The British system used 66 coupons per year, see Hargreaves and Gowing, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

⁶⁶ Departmental History of Rationing, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁶⁷ McKernan, *op. cit.*, p.151.

⁶⁸ Departmental History of Rationing, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

Men's shoes were rated at 12 coupons and women's 8. Singlets and underpants for men were both rated at 5 coupons, while women's vests and scanties required 4 coupons each. The general principle used to establish ratings were the durability of a garment, for example, an overcoat would normally wear longer than any other garment; the amount of material in a garment, for example, a lined overcoat which was rated at 40 coupons took much more material than a woman's frock which was rated at 13 coupons; and the necessity of a garment, for example, a beach wrap was given the high rating of 15 coupons while industrial overalls were rated at 6 coupons. Second hand clothing did not attract coupons.⁷⁰

Trying to avoid the industrial problems that Britain had encountered, the Rationing Commission discussed scales for industrial clothing with representatives from the Industrial Division of the Department of Labour and Industry and the main industrial unions when formulating the ration scale. The industrial representatives put forward a proposal that all clothing provided by employers should be coupon free. The commission rejected this suggestion, as adoption of this principle would penalise employees who had not succeeded in obtaining this concession from employers. The commission reasoned that 'the fact that an employee had the advantage of not paying for his clothing did not appear to be a reason for giving him [*sic*] a further advantage in making that clothing coupon-free'.⁷¹

To forestall complaints from employees who were required to wear uniforms the Rationing Commission issued lengthy instructions to employers and institutions stating that no employer should insist on the wearing of any uniform that was not specifically included on an Industrial Scale. Unless an employee was willing to pay the full coupon rate for clothing that was only for use when working, no employer was permitted to insist that the employee should do so. Neither was the employer to insist on the wearing of stockings, gloves, dinner suits or tails, decorative aprons, or indeed,

⁷⁰ *ibid*, pp. 38-9.

⁷¹ *ibid*. Note: Non-sexist language is conspicuously absent in all material available during the era under survey.

any special clothing. The Rationing Commission categorically declared that the wearing of school uniforms must be optional. The edict stated that 'children must be encouraged to use their clothes until they are completely worn out. They should be taught to take a pride in helping the country by conserving clothing'.⁷²

Coombs' planning group showed its depth and diversity by laying down guidelines for a wide variety of special cases, always mindful that the greater the problem areas covered initially, the fewer the complaints that should arise later. Expectant mothers and growing children fell into the special group categories. Expectant mothers were able to obtain a doctor's certificate when they reached a certain stage of pregnancy which entitled them to a special issue of coupons to cover the purchase of a baby's layette.⁷³ Special issues of coupons were made to outsize children. Boys who weighed 8 stone or heavier or were 5 feet 3 inches or taller, and girls who weighed 7 stone 7 pounds or heavier, or were over 5 feet tall, were allocated an extra 30 coupons.⁷⁴ The problem of how to organise clothing for Aborigines who were not issued with Identity Cards and who therefore were not eligible to obtain Ration Books had to be solved. At a meeting between the Rationing Commission and a delegation from the Graziers' Association of Australia to iron out problems concerning supplies for workers and Aborigines on outback stations, Coombs stated that the problem of clothing for Aborigines had been under consideration from 'practically the first day after we began', and that arrangements were in hand for the

⁷² 'Civilian Uniforms - Instructions to Employers and Institutions', undated, Reports of meetings of the Rationing Commission, A.A., Series M448/1, Item 178.

⁷³ W.B. Hudson, Deputy Director of Rationing for New South Wales, in an article written for the *Railway and Tramway Officers' Gazette*, February 1946, Records of S.J. Butlin, A.W.M., Series 70, Item 171. Hudson stated that about 68,000 expectant mothers applied for special coupons in New South Wales during the war.

⁷⁴ Departmental History of Rationing, op. cit., p. 43. For rationing purposes any person under 16 years of age was regarded as a child.

local Protector of Aborigines to be given authority to buy the clothing required for Aborigines.⁷⁵

Preparation of a scale of rationing was obviously of primary importance, but ration books had to be issued before rationing could commence. The Rationing Commission narrowed the method of distribution to either issue by post or issue by electoral officers from polling booths. Considerable costs were involved whichever method was used. Eventually issue by post was discarded when it was realised that even registered post did not guarantee that a ration book would reach the addressee. Issue from polling booths was recognised as the safest option, and this also gave the added benefit of personal contact, which the commission considered desirable to avoid people feeling that rationing was controlled by some remote and unapproachable authority.⁷⁶ While the agendum regarding this decision is undated we know that the first meeting of the Rationing Commission was held 18 May 1942. However, it appears that the discussion was purely academic as a circular letter dated 15 May 1942 found in the Prime Minister's files shows that the decision had already been made. The letter informed all State premiers that ration books would be issued on Saturday 13 June and Sunday 14 June 1942, and requested that all State buildings normally used as a polling booth be made available on those days. The premiers were advised that it was anticipated that at least 6,000,000 ration books would be issued, and that all State officers who normally worked as electoral officers on polling days would be required to work on the issuing days.⁷⁷ The Rationing Commission may have had an inkling about the Prime Minister's communication with State premiers at its first meeting as records show that it decided that electoral officers would remove

⁷⁵ Notes taken at a meeting between a delegation from the Graziers' Association of Australia and members of the Rationing Commission in Melbourne, 26 June 1942, amongst Reports of meetings of the Rationing Commission, A.A., Series M448/1, Item 178.

⁷⁶ Agendum No. 3(b)(i), undated, *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Prime Minister, Circular to all State Premiers, 15 May 1942, A.A., Series A461/9, Item B325/1/14.

tea coupons from ration books issued to children under 9 years.⁷⁸ Then again, with so many people working in such haste on the various strands that had to be organised for rationing it may have been that not all were aware all the time of what the other groups were doing. Insofar as tea rationing was concerned, according to Rationing Commission records, the commission organised to take over the administration of tea rationing early in June 1942,⁷⁹ but as it happened coupon rationing of tea was not instituted until early in July.

While the work of developing ration scales and organising the issue of ration books was going ahead the group responsible for the administrative area considered various alternatives, including utilising existing kindred organisations such as State Governments, the Prices Commissioner, the Manpower Organisation, and the wartime Emergency Supplies Organisation. In the end, according to Rationing Commission Agendum notes, the decision was made to establish the Rationing Commission in Melbourne and set up offices in each State, each under the direction of a deputy director. The main reason for this decision was that if existing organisations were used the Rationing Commission would not have complete control over operations. The commission was of the opinion that while it was 'politically desirable' for State governments to be involved in rationing, the Commonwealth government had to hold complete authority, and this may not have accorded well with some State authorities. Considerable extra staff would be needed for rationing purposes whether the commission set up its own offices or utilised existing organisations, and this was a factor in deciding to run its own establishments. In order to avoid alienating State governments, and to obtain their co-operation and goodwill, State premiers were invited to nominate a deputy director for their respective State, and to assist in obtaining premises for use by the Rationing Commission. To ensure the co-operation of various Commonwealth organisations the Electoral Office was given the

⁷⁸ Report of Rationing Commission meeting held 18 May 1942, Reports of meetings of the Rationing Commission, A.A., Series M448/1, Item 178.

⁷⁹ Agendum No. 18, undated, *ibid*.

responsibility of the annual issue of ration books, and the Prices Commissioner was asked to appoint liaison officers to the Rationing Commission to collaborate in suppressing black marketing.⁸⁰

The various State offices had to be operating by the time rationing commenced. Taking New South Wales as a case study of the work that had to be done the summary written by W.B. Hudson, the Deputy Director of the Rationing Commission in New South Wales, illustrates the daunting extent of the task. Hudson stated that 'there was only about a fortnight to get ready' after he was appointed Deputy Director towards the end of May. Accommodation was hurriedly arranged in Dymock's Building in George Street, Sydney and with the help of the Railway Department and Commonwealth Stores he furnished the two-room office. He arranged for H.A. Tinson, an accountant in the Traffic Branch of the Railways Department, to be appointed Assistant Deputy Director, and F.C. Guthrie was seconded from the Customs Department. Seven female and two male staff were engaged on 13 June to complete the initial staff. Although it was a rush the offices opened on time, on 16 June 1942. There was no time to train the staff. As Hudson stated, commonsense in dealing with all matters had to suffice.⁸¹ The State offices played a very important role, as they carried the burden of administering rationing. The Rationing Commission formulated rationing policy, but deputy directors were given wide discretionary powers.⁸²

As the date for the introduction of rationing drew closer the Rationing Commission became concerned about how civilians were assimilating information

⁸⁰ Agendum No. 6(b), undated, *ibid.*

⁸¹ W.B. Hudson, Article written for the *Railway and Tramway Officers' Gazette*, Records of S.J. Butlin, A.W.M., Series 70, Item 171. Hudson was the Comptroller of Stores for the Department of Railways when the Prime Minister requested that he be released to become Deputy Director of the Rationing Commission in New South Wales. Hudson was released on the basis that he was available to the railways department each morning and to the Rationing Commission for the remainder of the day. Hudson was authorised 'to get what help he needed from the railways', *ibid.*

⁸² Rationing in Australia, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

about the coming restrictions, and arranged for an unofficial poll to be taken at the end of May. This poll revealed that the general public was 'still completely ignorant' about the planned issue of ration books.⁸³ An educational campaign was organised through the press, films and radio to inform civilians about all aspects of rationing. Because of the 'high news value' of anything to do with rationing co-operation was unstinting. From the beginning of June the Australian Broadcasting Commission broadcast a series of discussions between rationing staff and members of the public about how and where to obtain ration books, and the need to plan purchases once rationing began. 'B' class stations presented instructional 'scatters' of about 100 words, as well as a series of two-minute talks on the various aspects of rationing. The Department of War Organisation of Industry and the Department of Information combined to produce two three-minute film trailers, titled respectively 'Fair Go for All', which was released for showing throughout Australia on 12 June, the day before ration books were issued, and 'Questions and Answers', which was released a week after rationing commenced. The campaign was costly and time consuming, but the Rationing Commission believed that it had an obligation to fully inform the public about the purpose of rationing, and the workings of the system, because if the public did not understand rationing it would fail.⁸⁴

After working at a frantic pace, and with a large degree of co-operation from most sources, the Rationing Commission achieved what historian Wendy Way called an 'administrative miracle'.⁸⁵ As Coombs relates:

By 9 June the essential components of the plans to ration clothing and tea were reasonably complete, a nucleus organisation was operating in each State and while we were conscious of innumerable problems which we had yet to solve we were ready to go'.⁸⁶

⁸³ Departmental History of Rationing, op. cit., pp. 217-8.

⁸⁴ Agendum No. 64, undated, Reports of meetings of the Rationing Commission, A.A., Series M448/1, Item 178.

⁸⁵ Wendy Way, "'An administrative miracle": the establishment of the Commonwealth Rationing Commission', in J.J. Eddy and J.R. Nethercote (eds), *From Colony to Coloniser*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1987, p. 189.

On 12 June 1942 Rationing Orders Numbered 1, 2 and 3 were issued. Rationing Order Number 1 prohibited the sale of rationed goods on Saturday 13 and Monday 15 June. Rationing Order Number 2 covered the issue of ration books, and Order Number 3 contained details of the complicated ration scale. Rationing Declarations Numbered 1 and 2 were published the same day. Rationing Declaration Number 1 'declared' yarns, cloths of various types, wearing apparel, blankets, bed and table linen, towels, handkerchiefs and footwear for the purposes of rationing. Rationing Declaration Number 2 covered tailoring of men's and boys' wear.⁸⁷ Rationing Order Number 4 was published on 13 June 1942 and limited advertising regarding rationed goods.⁸⁸

Newspapers published a full version of the rationing scale on 13 June.⁸⁹ This informed the public about the number of coupons required to purchase the various items of clothing. As it was imperative that no errors occur in the scale the Rationing Commission arranged for it to be 'set' by the State Government Printer in Victoria. Seven hundred copies were prepared and distributed to newspapers, under secrecy embargo, in time for publication on 13 June. As the Departmental History of Rationing notes 'practically every responsible newspaper through Australia published the scale in detail, and the majority also published ... additional information for consumers and retailers'.⁹⁰ The additional consumers' information issued by the

⁸⁶ Coombs, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁸⁷ *Commonwealth Gazette*, No. 165, 12 June 1942. Rationing Orders were made by the Director of Rationing. Rationing Order Number 1 prohibited the sale of clothing while the issue of ration books was in progress to prevent those who obtained ration books early from gaining any purchasing advantage. The Monday prohibition gave stores time to mark items with the coupon value. Clothing Declarations were made by the Minister for Trade and Customs. Cloth and clothing came under the jurisdiction of the Minister for Trade and Customs. There is no obvious reason why declarations numbered 1 and 2 were not combined. Declaration Number 2 appears to have been an afterthought to cover an oversight in Declaration Number 1.

⁸⁸ *Commonwealth Gazette*, No. 167, 13 June 1942.

⁸⁹ See Illustration 4:2 following.

⁹⁰ Departmental History of Rationing, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

Tear Out This Page And Keep It For Reference

CLOTHES RATIONING COUPON SCALE

How And What Public Can Buy Under New Scheme

RATIONED clothing is listed in the following scale. If a garment is not listed, but is really a substitute, it counts the same as the listed one and requires the same number of coupons.

Each ration book contains 112 clothing coupons to cover the whole year's purchases. These coupons must provide each person, man, woman and child, with clothing for next summer and the winter of 1943. Clothing purchases should be planned on a family basis to obtain the greatest value from the coupons.

Household linen, furnishing fabrics and drapery are unrationed when bought already made up. Thus, tablecloths, sheets, pillow-slips, cushions can be bought without surrendering coupons, but if material is bought to make such articles coupons must be surrendered for the amount of material.

Among other items exempt from rationing are artificial flowers, aprons for industrial purposes made from unrationed materials, artists' canvases, bedspreads, and quilts, braces, cloth not over 3in. in width or in pieces not over 72 square inches in area, crochet cotton, ecclesiastical and academic robes, embroidery and tapestry canvas.

Ribbons, ties, rug canvas and mending yarn, made up in quantities not exceeding half an ounce in weight, are ration-free.

Coupons can be interchanged between members of one family, but the coupons must not be removed except by a shop assistant. If a family makes purchases for several members all the ration books must be produced.

It is an offence to remove coupons unless for mail order purposes.

Coupons must not be cut into parts. A piece of cloth needing 1 1/2 coupons would require the surrender of only one coupon, but if the purchase involves 1 1/4 or 1 3/4 then two coupons must be given up.

Secondhand goods can be sold without coupons, but coupons are required for new rationed goods sold by auction. Gifts between members of the public are also ration-free, but where charitable organisations give away new rationed clothing, coupons must be collected from the recipients.

If garments are repaired or renovated, coupons must be given for the amount of rationed material involved. The only exception is a small piece of cloth not exceeding 72 square inches.

Repairs to footwear and material for such repairs are coupon-free.

A special allowance of 100 clothing coupons will be issued to cover the needs of each baby from birth until he is six months old. The expectant mother may apply for this special allowance at any time after the fourth month, but a doctor's certificate must be produced.

A further special issue will be made at birth, or earlier if the doctor can give a certificate stating that a multiple birth is expected.

An expectant mother will receive a special allowance of 50 coupons to supplement ordinary ration. These special coupons may be used by the mother to buy additional clothes for the baby, but the infant's allowance must be used for infants' clothing only.

Personnel discharged from the services since May 1, 1942, will receive additional coupons on application to the Rationing Commission.

Persons called up for service in the armed forces must surrender their ration books to their commanding officers.

If clothing is lost by fire, theft, enemy action, or other cause, application should be made to the Deputy Director of Rationing for Victoria. If he is satisfied that the application is genuine, he will issue additional coupons.

Ration books stolen, lost or destroyed may be replaced only after the applicant has made a statutory declaration, and satisfied the Rationing Commission that he is genuine. A charge will be made for a new ration book issued in these circumstances, and the book will not contain the full number of coupons.

The column headed CHILD refers to children from 5 years to 16 years (approximately) and the articles for them are of the types and sizes normally sold in children's departments.

Table with columns: Description of Garment, Coupons Needed, Maximum Measurements. Includes sections for OVERCOAT, RAINCOAT, JACKET, CARDIGAN, WAISTCOAT OR PULLOVER, DRESSING-GOWN, HOUSE-COAT, PYJAMA, NIGHTDRESS, APRON AND OVERALL, DRESSING-GOWN, HOUSE-COAT, PYJAMA, NIGHTDRESS, UNDERWEAR, STOCKINGS, COLLAR, BEACH WEAR, FOOTWEAR, LEGGINGS, HEADGEAR, GLOVES, SCARF OR FUR GARMENTS.

Table with columns: Description of Garment, Coupons Needed, Maximum Measurements. Includes sections for OVERCOAT, RAINCOAT, JACKET, CARDIGAN, WAISTCOAT OR PULLOVER, DRESSING-GOWN, HOUSE-COAT, PYJAMA, NIGHTDRESS, APRON AND OVERALL, DRESSING-GOWN, HOUSE-COAT, PYJAMA, NIGHTDRESS, UNDERWEAR, STOCKINGS, COLLAR, BEACH WEAR, FOOTWEAR, LEGGINGS, HEADGEAR, GLOVES, SCARF OR FUR GARMENTS.

INFANTS' CLOTHING NUMBER OF COUPONS NEEDED FOR ARTICLES OF INFANTS' CLOTHING

Types and sizes normally sold in infants' departments (approximately up to and including 4 years of age). Items not on this list, such as scarves, gloves and shirts, have the same rating as for children.

Table with columns: Description of Garment, Coupons Needed, Maximum Measurements. Includes items like Overall, raincoat, Mackintosh, cape, Infant's shawl, Matinee coat, Cardigan, Jersey, Jumper, blouse, Knickerbockers, Leggings, Dressing Gown, Pyjama suit, Night-dress, Baby-bag, etc.

INDUSTRIAL CLOTHING

A separate coupon scale for industrial clothing will be released shortly. It will include such items as boiler suit, bib and brace overall, coat overall, industrial aprons. These items will have a low coupon rating.

PIECE GOODS (including Sheeting, Towelling, etc.)

Table with columns: Width of Cloth, Coupons, Making-up. Includes categories like Under 22in., 22in. and under 40in., 40in. and under 60in., 60in. and under 80in., 80in. and over.

Provision For Lay-By Goods

Lay-bys made since May 8 will require coupons. Those made before that date will be coupon-free if the goods are paid for and delivered before July 31. The full amount of coupons must be surrendered on all future lay-bys, on or before delivery of the goods and irrespective of the time of final payment.

Official copies of the coupon scale may be obtained by retailers of rationed goods from the Deputy Director of Rationing, Melbourne. Copies will not be issued with coupon books.

Rationing Commission included clear and concise details about how to use a ration book and stated:

Clothing Coupons protect your right to a fair share of the clothes available. There are fewer clothes being produced for the civilian population than in peacetime. Less shipping space is available for importing materials; many workers have been transferred to war production; our own and visiting forces must be provided for. Nevertheless, there is enough to meet real needs if we share alike and coupon rationing will ensure that each gets his fair share.⁹¹

Consumers were told that ration books had to be handed over whenever a purchase was made so that the shop-keeper or assistant could cut the required coupons from the book. All clothing stores were compelled to display a ration scale so that customers could check the number of coupons removed from a ration book when garments were purchased. The information implicitly instructed that the only occasion that coupons could be removed by the owner was when goods were purchased by mail order. If these coupons were returned by the mail order firm such coupons could only be used for a further mail order. In effect, not only were loose coupons valueless, but it was also illegal to give loose coupons to anyone, to accept loose coupons as a gift, or to buy or sell loose coupons. The Rationing Commission stressed that 'the worst mistake you can make is to rush in and buy without careful thought' as once the individual quota of coupons was spent 'you have to do without'.⁹² The release concluded that if any person had any complaints about rationing they should write to the Deputy Director in their State,⁹³ a move that was designed to draw complaints, and subsequently criticism, away from the government.

Almost 10,000 polling booths were open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on both Saturday 13 and Sunday 14 June to issue the ration books. Each book comprised 8

91 'First release for morning papers June 13th', Reports of meetings of the Rationing Commission, A.A., Series M448/1, Item 178.

92 *ibid.*

93 *ibid.*

pages, the first being marked 'Tea'.⁹⁴ The other pages had varying numbers of coupons and were marked with various letters. A total of 7,900,000 books were printed which allowed a 15 per cent margin for each State.⁹⁵ This margin was necessary as the numbers of people who would attend each polling booth were unknown, and it was essential that sufficient books were on hand to meet all demands. Individuals over 16 years were required to present their Identity Card to receive a Ration Book, and the issue of a book was recorded on the Identity Card, which precluded any person obtaining more than one book.⁹⁶ For each child under 16 years of age the parent or guardian with whom the child lived was required to complete an application form, and the applicant's Identity Card was marked to show that a book had been issued.⁹⁷ There were no safeguards to stop both parents applying for a book for a child, nor were there any procedures to thwart the issue of a ration book to any person who presented a stolen Identity Card.⁹⁸ The Rationing Commission was well aware that the system was far from perfect, and indeed, that there were many defects that still had to be 'ironed out' but at least the deadline had been met and rationing was now underway.⁹⁹

Authorities had meandered around as if there was no urgency about rationing until crisis point was reached and Curtin was forced to act. Driven to that position he acted decisively, discarding the committees that had wasted time dithering and achieving nothing worthwhile. Coombs was an unexpected choice for Director of Rationing, as was the appointment of politicians as members of the Rationing Commission. Coombs broke new ground, and by discarding the methods used by the

⁹⁴ See Illustration 4:3 following.

⁹⁵ Agendum No. 3(a), undated, Reports of meetings of the Rationing Commission, A.A., Series M448/1, Item 178. This Agendum shows details of the number of books printed, paper used, and other details relating to the printing of the first issue of ration books.

⁹⁶ Agendum 3(b)(i), undated, *ibid.*

⁹⁷ Agendum 3(b)(ii), undated, *ibid.*

⁹⁸ Departmental History of Rationing, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁹⁹ Coombs, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

Illustration 4:3

General Civilian Clothing and Food Ration Book

Issued 13 and 14 June 1942



V.

Commonwealth of Australia

YOUR RATION BOOK

Issued for Your Protection.

Name _____
(BLOCK Letters)

Address _____
(BLOCK Letters)

If found return to nearest Divisional Returning Officer.

H. E. Daw, Gov. Print., Melb.

Identity Card No.
or
Allen Register No.

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Age (if under 16)
_____ years

Date of Receiving Book _____/_____/194____ Signature _____

HOW TO USE YOUR RATION BOOK.

1. To buy rationed goods you must hand this book to the shopkeeper who will cut out the proper coupon. He will not accept coupons already cut out.
2. To register. For some goods you may be required to register with one shop. Hand your book to the shopkeeper and ask him to register you. He will cut off the registration slip from the appropriate coupon page and enter his name and address in the space provided on the inside back cover.
To save trouble you can hand your shopkeeper the whole page of coupons. If you do, see that your name and address are on it and that the shopkeeper writes "page deposited" and the date above his name and address on the inside back cover.
3. Coupons not used in the period for which they are intended cannot be used later. Cut them off and destroy them.
4. If you are going for a holiday take your book with you. Don't forget to get back from the shopkeeper any pages of coupons you have deposited which you may need.
5. If you join the Army, Navy, or Air Force take this book with you. It will be asked for.

(Continued on page 3 of Cover.)

DO NOT CUT OFF COUPONS YOURSELF.

TEA

Customer's Name _____
(Block letters)

V _____ Address _____

Book Number V _____	Name _____ Address _____	TEA 10	TI		
TEA 26	TEA 22	TEA 18	TEA 14	TEA 9	TI
TEA 25	TEA 21	TEA 17	TEA 13	TEA 8	TI
TEA 24	TEA 20	TEA 16	TEA 12	TEA 7	TI
TEA 23	TEA 19	TEA 15	TEA 11	TEA 6	TI

established bureaucracy he was able to get rationing underway within the time limit set by Curtin. After two and a half years of war the Australian people finally felt the constraints of clothes rationing.