Rationing & Coupons During World War II

World War II began in September 1939 but until mid-1942, goods including clothes, butter, sugar and tea were in plentiful supply in Australia. The advance of the Japanese toward Australia and the arrival of large numbers of American troops placed the country’s resources under great strain. Australia was already sending large quantities of goods to Britain to help with its war effort.

Rationing is the process of sharing goods amongst the whole population. Australians were given a certain number of coupons per year to buy rationed goods. Everyone had a ration book, even children from 5 years and upward. A clothing coupon book included 112 coupons for 12 months. Boys’ shirts required 5 coupons, ladies’ dresses usually required 13 coupons and men’s suits about 38 coupons. Once the coupons were used up, people were not allowed to buy any more goods even if they had enough money to pay for them. For example, a floral housecoat might cost 95/- (95 shillings) and require 15 coupons, but if a woman had sufficient money yet only 10 coupons, she would not be able to purchase it.

Not only were coupons required to buy goods but there were also quotas on goods. For example, individuals were only allowed 0.5kg (1lb) of sugar per week, no matter how much money they had.

Some goods became very difficult to find, including margarine, coffee crystals, rice, prunes and potatoes. Fresh vegetables were always in short supply once the American troops arrived in Australia, so many people began to grow their own vegetables in the backyard.

Although rationing caused inconvenience, most Australians suffered far less than their counterparts in Europe. Rationing prevented hoarding of goods and also allowed the government to divert resources to making weapons, ammunition and other materials essential to waging war. John Curtin favoured rationing because he thought that it was the most effective way to provide equality for all Australians.

Timechart of Rationing

- March 1942: Tea (Japan had occupied the countries in southeast Asia from which Australia bought most of its tea)
- May 1942: Clothes
- August 1942: Sugar
- June 1943: All manchester and household drapery
  - Butter (most of Australia’s butter was sent to Britain)
- January 1944: Meat

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