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Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies.

Mr. Chairman :

I've been misled and I've been misled by that deplorable character, Maley (Laughter). I understood from him that today was my 30th anniversary. I am no doubt quite wrong, but there you are. But I thought it was - I didn't look it up, and when I had people coming to me earlier and saying "Many happy returns of the day", a somewhat fantastic wish, you will agree, I was still under the illusion that it was today, but now it's tomorrow. So I suppose I'll have to make a little speech and then make it retrospective to tomorrow, hoping that I survive so long.

Now I was told that what you would like to hear, as briefly as possible would be some retrospective views of affairs, people, since I came here first in 1934. Or as Ray Maley, with that exquisite capacity for an original phrase that characterises the Press, said to me - "Wandering Down Memcry Lane" (Laughter).

Well, I will first of all wander down it about Canberra itself because at that time, in 1934, Canberra had 6,000 people, and you could positively stroll around the whole, beat the bounds, in two hours with no difficulty. Now it's a large place and getting larger. In 1934, it did not have municipal self-government, a state of affairs that still continues. (Laughter)

Back in 1934, in the Lyons Government, we had a Budget - I haven't had a chance of looking up the precise figures - but I would say something of the order of £75M. for the year, the Commonwealth Budget. I, myself, in 1939, by a temporary but speedily corrected error, became Prime Minister and introduced the first £100M. Budget. Happy days! (Laughter) Even then, I have no doubt that some of the newspapers here represented complained of the gross extravagance of public expenditure and said that it ought to be cut down. We spent in a delirium of excitement in 1935-6-7, around that time, £15M. a year on social services and it's now somewhere between £400M. and £500M. and is conceded by everybody to be grossly inadequate (Laughter) but that was the position at that time.

We had, in theory, an External Affairs Department. We didn't really have a Department, we had a Minister for External Affairs, because George Pearce about whom I will say something later on, was Minister for Defence and Minister for External Affairs. Instead of masses of young men and women who now have their being in the External Affairs Department and who are the masters of all the most subtle intricacies of the United Nations' procedure, so important for somebody, in those days, George Pearce, the Minister, "Hoddy" - Hodgson - he was the Department, and there was the stenographer and she was the other part of the Department. (Laughter) We had a High Commissioner in London. We had no other diplomatic representative anywhere in the world. Those were days of noble simplicity. Today, of course, as you know, we have High Commissioners and Ambassadors around the world and we have an External Affairs Department of a fully sophisticated kind, with all sorts of aspects of international affairs being dealt with. Very hard to believe that when I was

first here in this very place, in this hotel, we had none of these things.

I don't think we had any Trade Commissioners at that time. We may have had. If we had, they existed in perhaps New Zealand and Canada, but we had no organised Trade Commissioner service of the kind that we now have. In other words, these were days of almost Spartan simplicity in administration. The complexities of international trade, the complexities of international affairs had not yet fully developed, they had not yet been complicated by all the explosive effects of the Second World War and those events that happened after the Second World War, and I think the result was, in those days, with fewer Ministers than we now have, it was found possible to have a certain amount of civilised leisure - Ministers were well known to be seen on the late lamented golf course, playing golf. Indeed their fraternity with the Heads of Departments on the old Canberra golf course postponed the introduction of the Lake for a long, long time. (Laughter) Which reminds me that of course we had no lake. We had none of these things that we are now beginning to take for granted.

Now I just said to you that there was a certain simplicity about life. That's quite true. If there was a conference in London, it was a conference between a limited number of people, all of whom understood each other. It had none of the complexities that have come with the new Commonwealth. Indeed, nobody in those days could have envisaged what was going to happen as colony after colony came to self-Government and to independent statehood.

Well, of course inevitably, moving over thirty years, the complexity of matters to be dealt with by governments has expanded almost by geometrical progression. I can give evidence about this because I am the only extant creature who was a Prime Minister in 1939 and 1940 and 1941 and who is still a Prime Minister in this year of grace. "Grace", I think, is the right word. (Laughter) But, anyhow, I thought that I had plenty to do at that time and indeed I did. I worked seven days a week and there are only seven days in the week. I would say that the complexity and mass of matters coming across my table today is double or treble what it was at that time, twenty-five years ago. This goes for everything.

The sturdy individualists in the country who resent any political interference apply for it every week. The manufacturers who - oh, I must be careful because I have to speak to them this week sometime (Laughter) ..... what I will call the sturdy believers in private enterprise who think the Government ought to keep out of it are with us every week or with the Tariff Board every week or with something or other every week. There is hardly a section in the community today that doesn't in one breath protest its undying hostility to government activity and in the next breath, pray for it.

It isn't a wonderful or a remarkable or a regrettable thing that the number of Ministers has perhaps almost doubled since I first came to Canberra, it has been necessary - and I venture to say that if the complexity of modern affairs and the demands made on governments both continue their pressure, there will be more Ministers and more Ministers in time to come, and a bigger and bigger Parliament in time to come.

I mention it to you because I know it is not of your own malice but under the instructions that you will be given, or

your successors will be given, that you must criticise every increase of any kind, and say that it is nonsense; that what the Government needs is fewer Ministers and not more. Well, all I can tell you is that if we had fewer there would be one interesting consequence, because if you reduced the number of Ministers and you thereby increased the responsibilities coming to each Minister, you would make him more and more dependent on his Departmental officers. You have only to reduce the number of Ministers far enough to create ultimately a complete bureaucracy. It's worth thinking about.

A Minister must have sufficient opportunity and time, if he is a seriously-minded person to master the problems of his Department, and if he does, he will be able to place the proper value on the highly competent professional advice that he will get from his Department. But if he is so pressed, always against the clock, that he just has to say, "Well, look, I haven't time to answer this problem, So-and-so, my Departmental Head is a very wise and experienced fellow and he recommends so-and-so, I'll say 'yes'". Now this is worth thinking about. It is worth thinking about.

Cabinets don't cost much. Really they don't if you look at the broad sweep of national affairs. I would sooner have too many than too few, because I believe that the best kind of government arises when Ministers have enough energy and time to think about their own problems and to form views, and enough time to put the proper value on the advice they will get, as they will get it, from what in my opinion is one of the greatest civil services in the world. But we must have balance, and that's why, looking back over this time, I see an enormous increase in numbers and I believe that it's been justified.

Well now, I must push on. I've said to myself for the last two or three days, "How does the standard of debate in the House compare now with what it was thirty years ago?" Well, I think on the whole it's better. There are two reasons which make me interested to find myself admitting to myself that it is better. One is that there are two very good reasons why it should be worse.

One reason is that people, constituents (I have no complaint about my own; they have remarkable patience and endurance) but people, constituents, will write an enormous amount of correspondence to a member, a private Member of Parliament, and if he is going to answer them and deal with all the details that they want him to deal with and go to the various Departments and get the necessary answers, then he's going to have a pretty small amount of time to sit down and do that good hard sweat and study that is necessary if anybody is going to make a considerable speech.

The volume of constituency work, of course, grows and grows and grows every year because we are always having some new proposal, there is some new social service, there are some new changes in the rules of social services, there are changes in trade treaties, changes in the tariff schedules. There are masses of things of this kind, and on all of them, the Member is going to be at the receiving end. Therefore, when I consider their constituency and correspondence and interviewing work, I would have expected, as a more or less detached observer, to find that the standard of debate had fallen since those more spacious and leisurely days when I first came to Canberra. Now, I am happy to say I don't think the standard of debate has fallen, on the whole. I can hear, I think, a higher percentage of thoughtful contributions to debate than I could have at that time.

I was a bit nervous about broadcasting. Very nervous about it because,..... broadcasting, of course, has one great advantage which all you gentlemen of the Press will understand perfectly. It does mean that if anybody cares to listen to you, he does know what you said. (Laughter). You understand me perfectly. But I gather that only about one or one and a half per cent. of the people listen. That's, as a corrective factor, not perhaps as great as it might have been. But in the early days, I felt that it was almost ludicrous when the broadcasting came in and we had these things standing up - you know, these microphones. Somebody described it as looking like the petrified forest.

In those days, gentlemen, private members who sat round here, would be seen to be moving very anxiously to the nearest microphone when they were about to deliver a speech. There was then a non-technical theory that you had to be close to the wretched instrument to be heard by your constituents. And indeed, some of you will remember that on one celebrated occasion, one member of happy memory was having a little difficulty with his upper denture in the course of making a speech. There was a certain clatter and occasionally a hissing and a certain amount of obscurity which produced, I regret to say, some laughter in the House. He said, "It's all right. It's my upper set. By the way, Doc. (addressing his dentist who lived in some place 500 miles away), by the way Doc, don't forget I've got an appointment with you on Saturday morning." (Laughter)

Well, there's another comment I'll make on that. I thought that broadcasting with this business of getting into line with the microphone would produce more and more set speeches and less and less debate. I think in the long run that hasn't happened. It did in the start. It was quite clear that it didn't matter what Jones, Brown or Robinson had said, Smith was going to say his piece into the nearest microphone and his constituents, as he hoped, would be listening to him and they would then understand. I think all that has rather died away. I think on the whole there is more debating in the true sense, more cut and thrust, more answering of arguments to and fro now than there was in the two or three years after broadcasting was introduced. And from that point of view, I think there is much to be thankful for.

I would think, on the whole, the average level of debate, yes, has risen. There are many thoughtful speeches. I was tempted to think that might be due, particularly in recent years, to a rising level of educational attainment, until I remembered myself that formal education - let's remember it - has hardly ever been the test of distinction in the political field. George Pearce, about whom I will speak a little later, who was a very great Parliamentarian, was a bush carpenter. His formal education terminated, no doubt, when he was thirteen or fourteen years old. You can't go by that. Some people have talents and improve them all the way through their lives and some people have some talents and improve them early and neglect them later. The real test is whether a man has a continuing mental attack on the problems that he deals with. And from that point of view, I think that the debate which has improved, I think, has not improved solely because of formal education, though that's of great assistance, but has improved because it is increasingly seen how serious a matter the government of the country is.

Now I wish I could say that I thought the standard of reporting had risen. I don't think it has, quite frankly. I remember saying to John Curtin, when he was Leader of the Opposition, "You know, John, you can speak, why do you read?" and he said, "Well, I am an old journalistic sweat, but you know,

if I want to be reported, I must hand it out." Now, there is a bit of truth in this, isn't there? A bit of truth. A recent debate in the House that I listened to with great interest consisted of one speech that was read and a reply that was brilliant and destructive of the whole argument, but it was the first one that arrived. I don't think, if you will allow me to say so, that the standard of reporting has been maintained, and that is, I think, to a substantial extent, the responsibility of Ministers who read out Second Reading speeches and of other people who read out speeches in the course of debate and find it convenient to hand them over.

The whole glory of Parliamentary debate is that it is debate, that it has cut and thrust and nobody ever produced any cut or thrust by the mere process of producing a piece of paper. This is the clash of minds. It is the debate which swerves from one side to the other under the pressure of events, which accommodates itself to a new argument, to a new thought. This is the most fascinating thing in the world.

It is because of this, you know, that Winston, when the House of Commons was to be rebuilt after the War, said, "We will not have it any bigger. We will not have a House of Commons that can hold all the Members of the House of Commons. People, strangers to his way of thinking, thought, "Well, how crazy." But they did it, because the whole idea was that if you have a place so vast and wide that all the intimacy of discussion disappears, you might as well have Parliamentary debate conducted by a series of essays printed and distributed and a division list at an appropriate time. The importance of Parliamentary debate is, I think, something, well, in my mind, it is something essential to the continuation of democracy. And that's why I am glad to say that I think, on the whole, the average level of debate is better now than it was when I came up here.

Now, I've been going a long time and therefore perhaps I might just say a few words to you about some of those who have been here and who are no longer alive. It would be impertinent of me to discuss the living. But there have been some very interesting people here and I have time only to mention four or five of them to you.

There was Mr. Lyons himself, the first Prime Minister under whom I served. He had a bland manner. He had a genial manner. He was the perfect family man. This has great appeal in Australia, and very properly, but it is sometimes not realised that Lyons was a positively brilliant Parliamentarian. I don't think I ever knew a better. Let me explain to you what I mean.

You fellows have all known, you've seen this. Question time, and So-and-so has got a curly one and unless a Minister knows what it is about, he may easily fizzle it a little or he may be driven back into a series of requests to put it on the Notice Paper; this is a testing time, Question Time Without Notice. I remember on two or three occasions when I was his Attorney-General, going to Mr. Lyons and saying, "I just heard a very nasty question, a very difficult question is going to be put to you today. It is a rather complicated matter and there is no earthly reason why you should have heard of it." And he would say, "Well, no, I haven't, but do you know about it?" And I would say, "Yes, I've managed to." And he would say, "Well, sit down and tell me." Then I would explain this matter as best I could. And then I went away in my then youth and innocence, saying to myself, "I hope he remembers what I've told him." This was a

stupid thought of mine because sure enough, up came the question and, sure enough, up Lyons got and made a reply so charming, so bland, so accommodating, which didn't answer a single point (Laughter) that I had mentioned, that when he sat down, the questioner who had begun full of malice, would be seen smiling and saying, "Thank you very much." (Laughter) Now, this is not to be sneezed at. (Laughter)

When they say a man is a great Parliamentarian, you must never just think that means he has been in Parliament a long time. It means that he knows every noise and every creak in the machinery and he understands the human beings who are in Parliament and is able to proceed without becoming involved in avoidable arguments or talking himself out of his own Bill. We've seen all these things happen, haven't we? I think that Joe Lyons was a great Parliamentarian. I learned a lot from watching him and listening to him. Not enough, but a lot.

Well, then, the next man I want to mention is the late Mr. Scullin. Now, he was Prime Minister before I came here. He was Prime Minister from the end of 1929 until the end of 1931, beginning of 1932, and I came here about this time in 1934, and when he had been defeated and when the United Australia Party came in, Scullin became the Leader of the Opposition as a former Prime Minister and he held that post for - oh, I've forgotten - two or three years perhaps. Then he announced he was retiring from it. I was staying in this Hotel (which then, of course, I hasten to say, was not as good as it is now) and so was he and we walked down together to the House, and I said, "Sir, why are you retiring, or is that an impertinent question?" He said, "No. I don't mind telling you. You see, I had a short but very torrid time as a Prime Minister." (He encountered the whole blast of the Depression). "Well, I know what happens in the Prime Minister's Office. I know how many matters are the subject of despatches, of cables with other governments and other people and there are some things you would love to be able to talk about which you can't talk about because they are in a certain stage of negotiation. Now (he said) the only man who ought to be the Leader of the Opposition is a fellow who has never had that responsibility so he can put all the embarrassing questions in the world. I can't and I won't because I know what is going on inside the Administration and so, I am disqualified by former office."

I was very impressed by this though I didn't follow the example (Laughter) later on myself. But let it be remembered, this was completely illustrative of Jim Scullin. He was a very fine man. He was a man of sensitive honour and integrity. He was indeed. I don't think he was a very great thinker, if I may say so, with respect, you know. He wasn't one of the great statesmen in that sense, but he was a man of intelligence and activity and an acutely conscientious man, and I think that the Labour Party was indeed fortunate to have a man of his quality, even for this brief period in which it was in office in 1930 and 1931.

Now, of course, no talk about these people would be complete without mentioning Billy Hughes. Well, I can't say too much about this because I saw Hughes only in his declining days - 1934, well, he was never going to be Prime Minister again. He had a beautiful waspish wit which could be produced out of a blue sky in Cabinet, but quite frankly, his ideas were no longer constructive and his estimates of public opinion, an element to which he attached a great deal of importance, were not very frequently right. Now, I don't know. I am going to read

Fitzharding's book on Billy with loving care because I would like to discover a few things about him. All I want to say is that in my time there was nothing about that he had to do or say which would exhibit more than a gleam of what he must have been at an earlier stage in his life. But his wit was devastating, and his use of his deafness, masterly. (Laughter)

I remember on one occasion, for example, he brought up a proposition in the Lyons Government which was so hopeless that even the rest of us, in our ignorance, realised how hopeless it was; he didn't get a supporter. Everybody said, "No" for a variety of reasons. Now in those days, those old days, we didn't have a Secretary to the Cabinet, we didn't have Jack Bunting sitting around or somebody making notes. The Junior Honorary Minister - we even had those at that time, illegally - but the Junior Honorary Minister was supposed to retain some memory, and the Minister concerned would put his submission over and get the Prime Minister to say "approved". This was the record. I remember one day when Billy had brought up some proposition which was really too bad for words, you see, (Laughter) and we all picked it to pieces, but he had taken his little machine out of his ear and so at the end of it all, he picked up his submission and passed it over to Lyons and said, "Well, I take it you can sign this." (Laughter)

I said something just a while ago about George Pearce. You know, there was a great legend about Pearce. Because he had gone in almost at the same time as Billy, though from another State, because he had followed Billy's fortunes in crossing the floor of the House, the tradition was that George Pearce was a sort of Vicar of Bray. I would just like to tell you that in my opinion, speaking about Canberra, I have never sat in Cabinet with an abler man than George Pearce. This needs to be said in justice to his memory. He was a man of extraordinary experience, of course, and he had great wisdom and he wasn't just somebody who could say, "Oh, well, you know, I remember." He would analyse a problem just like that, and having analysed it, he didn't leave all the loathsome bits and pieces on the table as so many people do, if they analyse a problem, but he always knew which one to pick out and say, "Well, now, that's the thing. That's the determining factor," and give you his reasons for it, and his influence on these matters was tremendous and not negative but positive at all times. Some day, justice will be done to George Pearce. As it is, I look back on my great good fortune to have sat in a Cabinet with him for three years, as one of the things in my life.

Well, then, I have just time to mention quite briefly two men who deserve far more than some mention. One is John Curtin and one is Ben Chifley. I can speak a little about them because they have gone.

Curtin and Chifley will never be understood until you realise that they were utterly different. I have never known two men more unlike. They were great friends, but two men more unlike, I would never expect to see, because Curtin's instincts were towards a sort of broad philosophical approach to matters. He liked nothing better than to sit down and put his feet on the table and have a talk to you about something that didn't bear on the Bill before the House but bore on the general philosophy of politics or indeed of the world. He was not the greatest speaker in the world, with great respect, because he leaned too much to long Latin endings which rather blurred the fine edge of his speech. But he was a very good speaker, of course, and would have been greater but for that. This was part of his



makeup. He did have the kind of mind which liked to range over a wide variety of problems and if he had had the opportunity in his life of professing one of these subjects in a university, he would have done it with great distinction. He was, of course, a charming man, a delightful man, and a good friend.

Chifley was just about the opposite because his mind didn't range over a wide variety of objects. He dealt with the economic problems and financial problems. He had had no preliminary training for them. He achieved a complete mastery of them. He didn't aspire to be a great speaker because his voice was against him but he still spoke to the point, and he was a great man to be able to sit down with and discuss matters with. I would say that he had immense strength in a narrow field. Curtin's strength was distributed over a variety of fields. I think that if John Curtin hadn't had Ben Chifley as Treasurer, his Government might have fallen earlier or something else might have fallen out differently. Two utterly different men.

Now, it is easy to say that Chifley.... well, he was an enginedriver and he lacked formal education. True enough, and yet, you know, one of the interesting things about that man was that I discovered over a period of years that he had what I thought, at any rate, an almost immaculate literary judgment. He read widely, his judgment was good, he could determine what was shoddy and what was not. It was an illuminating experience to sit with him on the Literary Fund when from time to time we advised about publications and fellowships and the like. He had clear views, strong views; I thought tremendously informed and sound views on these matters and it was entirely to his credit that while I was thinking of some very periphrastic way of explaining this, you know, so as not to hurt anybody's feelings, he was quite capable of sitting up and saying, "Well, if you don't mind, Miss So-and-so, I think it's all bloody nonsense," (Laughter) which shows the immense advantage in life of having for a time been an enginedriver and not a barrister. (Laughter)

So there they were, two different men. The Labour Party, if I may say so, has great reason to be thankful to them and I venture to say that each of them in his turn contributed to making this Parliament a place of some distinction. Let me say gentlemen it is a place of some distinction. It has had, over the whole of its history, a number of men of great distinction and we do well to recognise that. I get pleasure out of it as I look back over these thirty years. Indeed, as I look back over the thirty years and remember all the people who mattered, who emerged like that, I take leave to doubt whether I will have many happier memories at the end of my life than recalling them and the work that they did.

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