



EMBARGO: 7.30 P.M. Monday
15 May, 1967.

REFERENDUM: THE "YES" CASE

Talk by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt

(This talk opening the "Yes" cases for both referendums will be telecast and broadcast by the A.B.C. in all states this evening).

I want to talk to you about the referendum which will be held throughout Australia on Saturday, May 27th.

This referendum is necessary because your Federal Parliament proposes - and this is subject to your decision - to make certain alterations to the Commonwealth Constitution which the Parliament considers desirable. We have passed the legislation to do this, but, under the terms of our Constitution, Parliament's action must be approved by you, the people, before that Constitution can be altered.

For reasons I shall outline, we hope you will say "Yes" to what we have in mind. When I say we, I include the Leader of the Country Party, Mr. McEwen, and the Leader of the Labor Party, Mr. Whitlam. We have joined in preparing the official "Yes" case, which should have reached you through your letterbox. When I say we, I can include also all Members of the House of Representatives who voted unanimously for the proposals we shall be putting to you, and, in the case of the Senate, all Senators in support of the proposal relating to aboriginals and an overwhelming majority of Senators - the vote was 45 to 7 - who voted in support of the proposal to break what is called the "nexus" relating to the number of Senators and Members of the House of Representatives.

You will gather that we are putting two matters before you. One concerning our aboriginal people and the other described as the Nexus Referendum. I shall speak first about the Nexus Referendum.

The word "nexus" may need explaining. It is a short way of summarising the words in section 24 of the Commonwealth Constitution which now read this way:-

"The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members directly chosen by the people of the Commonwealth, and the number of Members shall be, as nearly as practicable, twice the number of the Senators."

This section, as you will see, ties the House of Representatives to the Senate in terms of numbers. That is what the word "nexus" implies. Now to put the matter simply, all the main political parties in Federal Parliament believe that this "nexus" should be broken. As matters stand, any increase in the House of Representatives made necessary by population growth must be accompanied by an increase of half that total in the number of Senators. We do not believe this to be necessary. We think it requires us to create more Members of Parliament than the situation is likely to call for at any particular time. We have in mind two things -

- 1) To remove the need to increase the number of Senators whenever the number of Members in the

House of Representatives is increased:

- 2) To impose a limit on the extent to which membership of the House of Representatives can be increased.

The first would break the "nexus" and the second would write a safeguard into the Constitution against excessive increases in the number of parliamentarians.

I am sure that, as believers in the democratic system, you will be impressed by the fact that the vote in support of these proposals in the House of Representatives was unanimous and that the leaders of the three principal political parties have united to ask you to give your support to them. We did not embark on this course lightly. Indeed, legislation for this purpose was introduced by my predecessor, Sir Robert Menzies, in 1965. We see the proposals as commonsense, practical parliamentary reforms. We see your response to them as a test of political maturity and a rejection of the prejudice and misleading arguments with which you will find yourselves assailed.

The generally accepted view of all the main political parties is that the Senate of 60 members - 10 from each of the 6 States - needs no increase at this time. The Senate was intended to be a House of Review and by tradition is regarded as the custodian of the rights of the smaller States. Its powers are defined and established in the Constitution and its effectiveness does not depend upon increased numbers. We have had six States since Federation and no change in that figure is in sight. Membership of the House of Representatives, on the other hand, is geared to the population and we are confronted with a rapid and continuing population growth.

When the present size of the House of Representatives was decided in 1949, Australia's population was just on 8 millions. If the present Parliament runs its normal course, with the next general election being held in 1969, our population should have reached 12 millions - an increase of 50% in the 20 years which will have elapsed since 1949. We have no proposal for an increase in the size of the House of Representatives in any way proportionate to that increase in population. Indeed, we are proposing to you that the number of Members of the House of Representatives be determined by dividing the population of each State by not less than 85,000. In 1949 each Member of the House of Representatives represented on average 66,000 people. Under our proposal we would continue to represent not less than 85,000 people, and this despite the enormous growth in the subject matters dealt with by the Commonwealth Parliament and their increasing complexity. Australia is a rapidly growing nation with widening interest and responsibilities. Matters which in the past occupied little or no time in the Commonwealth Parliament are now matters of major concern, which in the judgment of the electorate call for Commonwealth attention and participation. I have only to mention as examples such matters of vital concern to you as education, housing, national development, employment, external affairs, immigration, health and social services.

If you say "No", you cannot break the "nexus", what will follow. The result will not be that from now to eternity the number of Senators will remain at 60 and the number of Members of the House of Representatives at 123. At some point of time, because of population growth and other factors, the demand for a more representative Parliament will be irresistible. But the "nexus" rule would still apply. You will be told by our opponents that ours is a proposal to increase the number of parliamentarians. We do not need any change in the Constitution to bring that about.

Parliament has unlimited powers to increase the House of Representatives so long as at the same time it increases the size of the Senate. Twelve more Members of the House of Representatives would mean 6 more Senators. Twentyfour additional Members in the lower House would mean 12 more Senators and so on. One of these days our population will have reached 20 millions. If the increases in the House of Representatives to service the needs of this growing population have to be matched as to half the number of Members of the House of Representatives by additional Senators, then we certainly might have a surfeit of politicians. Surely the sensible alternative to this clumsy kind of operation is to say "Yes" and break the "nexus" - at the same time saying "Yes" to the provision which will limit the extent to which the House may be increased now or in the future.

The core of the matter is whether you believe, with us, that the Senate membership should not necessarily be enlarged whenever population growth invites an increase in the popular House. If you agree with us you will, far from facilitating the growth in the number of parliamentarians, be limiting the increase which can be made.

It cannot be repeated too often that a "Yes" vote will not only remove the out-dated link between the Senate and the House of Representatives; it will also limit the rate at which the popular House can grow.

The advocates of the "No" case put on a show of indignation at the prospect of an increase in Parliament and throw in the glib phrase that we are already over-governed. Great Britain, a small island, has a House of Commons numbering 630. You don't hear the English people complaining about the size of the House of Commons, which is the voice of the nation. The British people believe deeply and profoundly in the institution of Parliament.

The "No" case strikes me as a crude appeal to prejudice rather than an appeal to the commonsense of the Australian people. A small minority of Senators - you could number them on your fingers - are in open opposition to reforms supported unanimously by the House of Representatives and by all the main political parties. The case they put to you is the baseless suggestion that your National Parliament has conspired in some way to undermine the Senate, and they add a sneering imputation that the Members of the National Parliament, elected by you, are lazy and inefficient. For good measure, this handful of "No" spokesmen hint darkly at unnecessary increases in the cost of government. This is another red herring. The cost of parliamentary government in Australia is remarkably low. The relevant figure for operating the House of Representatives works out at about 30 cents per head of the population. Not very costly when you think of the role the House of Representatives plays in our national affairs and in relation to your own lives.

I have enough faith in the good sense of Australian electors to believe they will examine the pros and cons of this question calmly and objectively. They will reject the spirit in which the "No" spokesmen have approached them. I confidently expect a mature judgment from mature people.

Now let me say something about the second referendum question - the one concerning our aboriginal people. There was no opposition to it in Parliament in either House and I would anticipate overwhelming support for it by the electors.

The aboriginal people of Australia are mentioned explicitly in the Constitution twice only.

Section 127 of the Constitution says:

"In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted."

At the turn of the century, when the Constitution was framed, the principal reason for including Section 127 was the practical difficulty of counting the aboriginal population at that time. It is, however, no longer a serious difficulty. The basis for the existence of the section consequently no longer remains.

It is completely out of harmony with our national attitudes and modern thinking. It has no place in our Constitution in this age.

The second alteration Federal Parliament wants to make is the deletion of the words "other than the aboriginal race in any State" from Section 21 (xxvi).

This section says:

"The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:

"(xxvi) The people of any race, other than the aboriginal race in any State, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws".

We have been influenced by the widespread impression which exists that the words "other than the aboriginal race in any State" are discriminatory.

Unanimously, Federal Parliament wants to remove these two references to the aborigines, because one of the provisions is out of date and because the other is widely believed to be discriminate against aborigines.

Let me remind you again in conclusion that I can speak for the three leaders of the principal political parties - Liberal, Labor and Country Party - for a unanimous House of Representatives, and for an overwhelming majority of members of the Senate, when I ask you to vote "Yes" to the two questions which will be before you on the ballot paper.

CANBERRA. 15 MAY, 1967.