

# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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## SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. HAROLD HOLT, M.P.,

ON

# REFERENDUM

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[From the *'Parliamentary Debates'*, 18 May 1967]

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**Mr HAROLD HOLT** (Higgins—Prime Minister)—by leave—I move:

That this House, having studied the arguments set out in the official No case, reaffirms its view that it is in the interest of good parliamentary government in Australia to remove the need now existing under the Commonwealth Constitution to increase the number of senators whenever the number of members in the House of Representatives is increased, and to impose the limit proposed on the extent to which the House of Representatives can be increased.

I have taken this opportunity to propose this motion because, although this House previously assented unanimously to the legislation that enables us to introduce referendum proposals and to present them to the people and this was followed by the support of an overwhelming majority of the Senate, since then the official Yes case and the official No case have been published. Tonight it is my purpose to refer briefly to the elements in the case that we put before the Parliament when the proposal to break the nexus between the House of Representatives and the Senate was adopted, and at the same time to make some examination of the principal arguments that have been advanced in the official No case.

Honourable members will recall that the first of the principal purposes of this refer-

endum proposal is to remove the need to increase the number of senators whenever the number of members of the House of Representatives is increased. This is what we term familiarly as the nexus between the House of Representatives and the Senate under the Constitution as at present worded. The second purpose is to impose a limit, which is put before the people for the first time, on the extent to which membership of the House of Representatives can be increased. It is too seldom realised that as the Constitution stands, the Parliament has unlimited powers to increase the size of the House of Representatives whenever it so wishes, provided at the same time it increases the size of the Senate. I have heard this referendum described by its critics as a proposal to increase the size of the Parliament. We do not need a constitutional change to do that. We need a constitutional change for this reason: If at any time the size of the Parliament is increased, we must accompany an increase in the House of Representatives with an increase of as nearly as practicable half that number in the Senate. I remind the House that section 24 of the Commonwealth Constitution provides:

The House of Representatives shall be composed of members directly chosen by the people of the Commonwealth, and the number of such

members shall be, as nearly as practicable, twice the number of senators.

In the official case for the Yes proposal the Leader of the Australian Labor Party, the Leader of the Australian Country Party and I have joined as spokesmen for our respective parties. We have put the case in favour of an affirmative vote. We have put the view that the Senate consisting of sixty senators—ten from each of the six States—needs no increase at this time. Membership of the House of Representatives is based on population growth. We have been going through a period of rapid and continuing population growth, and this situation faces us as far ahead as we can see. The House last dealt with the size of the Parliament in 1949. If this Parliament runs its full course twenty years will have elapsed by the time we reach the next general election. In 1949 each member of the House of Representatives represented on an average 66,000 people. Today the average is 94,000 people, and by 1969 the figure will be well over 97,000.

There are some people—this appears to include those who have presented the official No case—who take the view that there should never be any increase in the size of the Parliament. This is the logical conclusion to be drawn from the argument advanced in the No case. It does not seem to matter that since membership was last increased the population will have risen by 1969 from eight million to twelve million. What does a mere 50% increase in population matter? What does a mere increase in the complexity of the business of government matter? What does a mere increase in the variety and number of subjects that this Parliament is called upon to deal with matter? Even in the eyes of those who have joined together in presenting the official No case there must be some point at which they recognise that the increase in population has brought about some need for an increase in the size of the House of Representatives. However, while the nexus remains the change can be accomplished only if at the same time we increase the number of members in the Senate to half the extent of the increase in the number of members in the House of Representatives.

We have proposed that the number of electorates in each State should be deter-

mined by dividing the population of the State by not less than 85,000. This does not mean that automatically there would be an increase in membership for each 85,000 people, but it does set a minimum. For the first time in the history of this country a limit would be imposed upon the extent to which the numerical strength of the Parliament could be increased. We as members of the Parliament are willing to accept that limitation because we want the public to be assured that we are not seeking any inordinate increase in numbers. All we want to ensure is a Parliament that effectively represents the interests of the people whom we represent in this place. Of course, there is a different way of going about it. It so happens that we as members of the National Parliament represent on an average more electors than does a member of the House of Commons in the Parliament at Westminster. Yet I have not heard the people of Britain complain that they are over-governed, that they have too many parliamentarians. They value the services they receive from their members. Theirs is a strong democracy.

As I said, we could go about parliamentary representation in another way, as is done in the United States of America. There a member of parliament represents far more people than each of us does or would propose. However, to carry out his duties a member of Congress or a member of the United States Senate needs a very large official staff. Thus the people are served largely by officials. I do not think the Australian people or the people of the United Kingdom want that sort of representation. They have become accustomed to being able to go to their own parliamentary representative and have him look after their interests—not have them looked after by a first secretary, a second secretary or a third secretary as part of a large staff as has been found necessary in the case of a Federal member in the United States so that he may provide some representation for his constituents. I doubt whether there is very much economic difference between the systems that operate in the United States and Australia.

I repeat that this is the first attempt to write a specific check into the Constitution; the first attempt to limit the rate of growth of the House of Representatives. With today's population a quota of 85,000 would

give a membership in the House of Representatives of 136, an increase of thirteen seats throughout the whole of Australia. The Senate would be left unchanged at sixty. This would mean that each seat in the House would represent 85,000 people compared with the figure of 66,000 when the Parliament was last increased in 1948 coming up to the election of 1949. Unless this nexus is removed any increase in the House of Representatives must be accompanied by an increase in the size of the Senate on a two to one basis. By this proposal that we put forward to break the nexus there is no question, as I shall establish, of eroding the proper role or powers of the Senate or of preventing its future enlargement if the Parliament so decides. The prevailing view is that the Senate of sixty can discharge effectively its role as a house of review and as custodian of the rights of the smaller States.

I have mentioned the United States of America. It has just on eighteen times our population and has a Senate of just on 100 members compared with our Senate at present of sixty. Yet the Senate in the United States enjoys a prestige and an authority which I think would be envied by any upper chamber in any part of the world. So the effectiveness of the Senate does not depend on numbers. Its powers are defined and established in the Commonwealth Constitution. Other countries with a two house system operate successfully without the need for a nexus between the two houses. I have done some research on this matter and apart from Australia there is only one country which I have been able to discover—it is Norway—with anything approaching such a nexus. The proposal is designed to allow the smallest increase in the House of Representatives which we believe to be consistent with effective representation without the necessity at the same time to make adjustments in the size of the Senate.

I do not want to spend a great deal of time on the positive side of our argument because this was covered quite adequately in the second reading debate when the proposal was originally before us. It is all on the record. I have made my statements on the matter on television and over the radio, as have the Leader of the Opposition (Mr Whitlam) and the Acting Leader of the Australian Country Party (Mr Anthony),

who have joined in the support of the case which is now being presented to the people. But it does become necessary to make some analysis of the official case presented for the No argument. The case has been presented, as I understand it, by the two members in the Senate of the Australian Democratic Labor Party, assisted by a Liberal Party senator, Senator Wright, and certain others of the small group who voted against this proposal in the Senate.

**Mr Stokes**—They are all senators.

**Mr HAROLD HOLT**—Yes, the only people who have joined in resisting the Yes case—in the official case anyhow—are senators and they are a very small minority of the total membership of the Senate. The voting in the Senate on the proposal was forty-five in favour of what we are now advocating and seven against.

I find the No case saddening. It is quite disheartening in a way to find in these days that men who represent the people in the Senate—they are a small minority of the total membership of the Senate—can resort to these fusty, old-fashioned appeals to prejudice, picking up the sort of clichés that have been bandied around by critics outside the Parliament and with which we have had to cope from time to time. I will refer further to that matter later. To me it is a sad thing that there is still a body of men to be found in the other chamber who cannot make an objective, dispassionate and logical appeal to the people on the strength of the argument they can present but instead must resort to prejudice—to actual dishonesty in at least one instance, as I shall demonstrate—and to misleading argument in order to try to frighten people by the bogies they create or the picture they conjure up of the dreadful things which this wicked House of Representatives, chosen by the people, will do to the people of Australia.

Let me go into that matter in a little more detail. The case for No reads:

Vote NO because:

We do not need more parliamentarians.  
Australia is already over-governed.

A Yes vote would be a vote against the interests of the States, particularly the small States, and country districts.

Honourable members will note the appeal there to people in the smaller States. The supporters of the No case direct a sectional

appeal to country interests. Let us see how these arguments stand up to the most superficial analysis, and I would hope that my analysis could go a good deal deeper than that but it does not have to go very deep in order to explode the arguments for the No case. First I deal with the proposition that we do not need more parliamentarians, stated quite absolutely without any reference to this point of time or any other point of time. The same argument could be applied with as much logic when the population of Australia is 20 million, not building up to 20 million at the 11.5 million stage as we are now. If that is the strength of the argument it can apply at any time. When is the time that you need more parliamentarians? This Parliament has not shown itself over eager to increase its size during the period of our federation. In fact, since 1901 when the federation was formed there has been only one substantial increase in the size of this Parliament. The House of Representatives numbered seventy-five when the Parliament was first constituted. The number had actually declined to seventy-four when in 1948 the Government of the day decided that it had become necessary, for a variety of causes, to increase the size of the Parliament. There was a substantial increase in the numbers in the House of Representatives to 121. This was done because the House had not been touched for forty-seven years.

If this Parliament runs its normal course, by the time of the next election twenty years will have elapsed since the Parliament was last increased and our population will have increased by almost 50%. We are not proposing a major increase. We have set a limit on the increase we can achieve. We say that there must be not fewer than 85,000 persons for each member. I stress that, because if we read the No case we get a picture of this Parliament increasing step by step every few years. It is not in the nature of the animal for that to happen, as we know. It is very rare to find all parties in the Parliament supporting a proposal, as they have on this occasion. It is rare to find a government and an opposition saying at the same time: 'This is what we should do in relation to the Parliament'. It is even rare to find a situation in which a redistribution of electorates, despite the fact that some may have

become disproportionately large in relation to others, should be carried out. They should be carried out. There has not been, on an average, a redistribution every six years in the life of the federation. Usually, changes have merely been in the boundaries. Only on one occasion, as I have mentioned, has there been a significant change in the number of members.

I said that I would demonstrate that there is at least one quite dishonest statement in this document. It is to be found on the first page of the No case. It is this:

In this referendum the Government wants you to remove this safeguard—

That is, the nexus—

from the Constitution. If you do that, you will be destroying the only braking device against unnecessary increases in the size of the National Parliament.

How can men of honesty say that, when all honourable members know that part of our proposal is the provision that we cannot increase the number of members beyond the point where there are fewer than 85,000 persons in each electorate. This just baffles me. Either those who prepared this case have not understood the proposal or this is an entirely dishonest presentation of the facts. There is a braking device against unnecessary increases and that braking device is the size of the Australian population. The No case goes on to state:

Moreover, if you vote NO and retain this nexus provision, you will preserve the position and power of the Senate and will prevent the Senate from being weakened.

This is a picture conjured up to frighten people into believing that this upper chamber is to be weakened and shorn of its authority. Will anybody who reads this document pause to ask: If this statement is correct why is it that forty-five out of fifty-two of these senators whose powers are going to be weakened have joined in supporting the Yes case? I hope that in a democratic system majorities still count for something, and when they are overwhelming majorities I hope that they will have some persuasive effect. I have no need to labour the point, Mr Acting Speaker. If the Senate were in serious danger of having its power or authority weakened by this proposal, would the overwhelming majority of senators have joined in supporting it?

I come now to the next argument in the No case. It states:

Always think of the Senate as the States Assembly, which was its name in the draft Constitution. It is your House, designed to protect the interests of your State. Thus any attack on the Senate is an attack on the protection of the interests of your State in the Federal Parliament.

The first comment I make on that statement is that all honourable members in this place, with the exception of my friends the honourable member for the Australian Capital Territory (Mr J. R. Fraser) and the honourable member for the Northern Territory (Mr Calder), are representatives from individual States of the Commonwealth. If this proposal were an attack upon the position of the States would we have had a unanimous vote in this House by people who are elected from States, who are representatives of States, and who are accountable to electorates in those States? The question has only to be put against the facts for the answer to be automatically supplied. I can go further: The Senate has always been regarded as an additional safeguard for the States—as a custodian of State rights. If the interests of the States were threatened by our proposal would we have had forty-five out of fifty-two senators, elected as representatives of those States and charged with the role—as they see it—of safeguarding the interests of the States, joining in this proposal with us?

The next point refers to the interests of country districts: Here again the bogey has been conjured up: 'Don't vote Yes because if you do terrible things will be done to the country electorates'. In each of the three parties constituting this House we have representatives of country electorates. Some are in the Country Party—as the name implies. The Labor Party certainly can claim to have representatives from rural electorates. And of course there are many in the Liberal Party. Do those representatives of rural electorates consider that rural interests are being threatened by this proposal? If they do, it is very odd that they should have joined in a unanimous vote on this matter in this chamber. Again, this argument just does not stand up to examination.

In the time available to me I cannot go through all the arguments set out in this document. I do not avoid any of the difficult arguments. I have referred to what the

authors of the document have set out as being the central propositions favouring a No vote. However, I would like to refer honourable members to the passage appearing on the second page of the No case. There the authors have set out what they consider the growth in numbers will be in steps over a period of years. I have already pointed out that this is not the way that this system works—as the history of our federation has demonstrated. It is rare for the Parliament to increase its size. I repeat that it has been done but once in the history of our federation. I cannot see—and I am a fairly seasoned politician in this place—the Parliament, or for that matter governments, coming along very frequently with endeavours to increase the size of the Parliament—not when we consider all the discomfort involved in the procedure of redistribution of electorates and all the other implications of that process.

Let me just mention one of the more important implications. Inside this chamber there is a check—an inbuilt safeguard. Three parties are represented. Each of those parties, understandably and very properly, watches closely the movements in the numbers of electors and the size of electorates. If any of the three parties came to the conclusion that what was being proposed was unfair or unreasonable, the parliamentary action which it could take, either here or in what is now almost chronically an evenly divided Senate, could have the effect of checking the process in the lower house. Let me give an illustration. We are a coalition Government. If we brought forward proposals for an increase in the size of Parliament which our colleagues in the Country Party felt would work seriously to their detriment, they would not join with us in such a decision. Nor would we be able to give effect to that proposal without their support. On the other hand, if what we proposed seemed unreasonable to the members of whichever party happened to be in opposition at the time, they could, with the numbers that they could reasonably count upon in the Senate, make the proposal extremely difficult of achievement, not merely by their voting strength but by the campaign they could wage in the electorates throughout the country. Quite apart from anything that the Constitution provides, there is, as any politician in this place

would know, an inbuilt check and a safeguard against arbitrary, unreasonable increases by either side of politics.

Some minor arguments have been introduced into the No case and I even regret having to make reference to them because they are in a sense petty and almost puerile in what they convey to the public. However, these arguments are put with some strength and emphasis in the concluding passages of the No case. Honourable members will find there a reference—I deplore that it should have come from a member of either House of the Parliament—to increases in parliamentary salaries and the cost of government which allegedly will flow if the nexus is broken. On the last page of the No case honourable members will find it stated that the last increase in the numbers of members of Parliament resulted in fewer sitting days and that members' pay increased from \$3,000 to \$7,000 a year. Then there appear, in capitals, the words: 'What next?' Does anybody seriously argue that the duties and responsibilities of a member of this House have decreased since 1949, that being the last time when there was a vote on the increase in the size of the Parliament? Certainly no member present would accept that as a statement of fact. We all know the increase in the number and complexity of matters with which we, as members of the Parliament, have been called upon to deal.

Let us take the salary aspect. Why do those who support the No case not say honestly in this document that the period to which they are referring is between 1947, when the pay of a member of Parliament was fixed at \$3,000, and 1967, when it stands at \$7,000? Why do they not go on to say that over that period, there have been quite substantial increases in the basic wage? [Extension of time granted.] I thank the House for its indulgence. These facts are certainly relevant to the argument and are of general interest to honourable members. The increase in the salary of a member of Parliament over the period from 1947 to 1967 has been 133%. Over the same period the basic wage has been increased by 201%, that is, from \$10.90 to \$32.80. But what is more significant—we are dealing now with the community as a whole—is the movement in the average weekly wage. Between 1947 and 1967 the increase

in average weekly wages was of the order of 285%. This Parliament has not been greedy. I shall not labour the point. Whatever cheap advantage those who joined in the No case seek to gain from this point, I say that it is not substantiated by the facts.

**Mr Whitlam**—The cost of this House is 30c per head of population.

**Mr HAROLD HOLT**—I will come to that. Those who have put forward the No case begin their great peroration by saying: 'Vote no—we do not need more parliamentarians'. We say that at the present time we do not need more senators. An overwhelming majority of senators—forty-five to seven—join with us in saying that. They continue: 'Vote no—protect the small States and country districts'. I have already referred to that argument, and I hope that I have demolished it. They also say: 'Vote no—prevent unnecessary increases in the size of the House of Representatives'. In principle at least we can agree with them here. We do not want unnecessary increases in the size of the House of Representatives, and we have taken the responsibility of proposing, for the first time, a limit, not previously imposed by the Constitution, upon the size to which the House of Representatives may grow. Their final adjuration is: 'Vote no—prevent unnecessary increases in the cost of government.' This terrible burden of the cost of government! Let me give the House the relevant figure.

The total cost of the House of Representatives and the Senate works out at approximately 40c per head of population or, in the old currency with which some of us are more familiar, 4s a year. That is a shade more than the price of a packet of cigarettes. That figure works out at less than a quarter of 1c for each member of Parliament a year. I know that there are some cynics in the community who say that honourable members are not worth much more than that. They can have that opinion of us, but they can scarcely argue that it is a heavy financial burden upon them. If we were to increase the size of the Parliament by thirteen or fourteen members two years from now—

**Mr Irwin**—The cost would go up by one fag.

**Mr HAROLD HOLT**—I hope that honourable members would not go up in smoke.

The additional cost would only be of the order of 3c or 4c per head of population. Perhaps we have dealt somewhat flippantly with some of these arguments. Frankly, if they are examined carefully it is difficult to understand how a serious-minded body of men could argue them seriously. I say that it is not their purpose to do so. Their purpose is to create an atmosphere of prejudice and fear and to play up bogies which will frighten people into casting a No vote, because history has shown that the Australian electorate tends to say no when it is in the slightest doubt as to what should be done about a proposed change in the Constitution.

I come to my final point. I have faith in the good sense and the maturity of the Australian electorate. I am sure that the Leader of the Opposition, the Leader of the

Country Party and the Acting Leader of the Country Party, who is with us tonight, think the same. I believe that we have an electorate which has increasingly demonstrated itself to have become much more mature on political issues. I believe the people will dismiss as a lot of fustian the sort of argument, based on prejudice and fear, with which their intelligences have been insulted by those who have put forward the No case. We on the Yes side have not tried to put forward a glamour case. We put calmly, temperately, moderately and logically the case that we see for a common-sense and practical parliamentary reform. Because I believe that the Australian electorate is sufficiently mature to weigh these considerations, I am confident of the outcome when the referendum vote is taken on this nexus proposal.