

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S LIBERAL CLUB, MELBOURNE

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. HAROLD HOLT



24TH MAY, 1967

Lady Coles, Sir Henry, Parliamentary colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

First, may I thank you on behalf of Mrs. Holt and myself very warmly for that gracious welcome you gave to us and for all the friendly support that this received from those around the room. Secondly, may I join with you in the congratulations you have expressed to our good friend Henry. It was a great joy to me, I can assure you, not only to see him back again, but for the proof it brought that Liberal support was as strong in this State as it has ever been. And for him to achieve that after twelve years of office and some difficult decisions, as I said to him at the time, or said publicly at the time, was a personal triumph and a notable political achievement. And this State can count itself fortunate that we have his sane, balanced, progressive leadership for the years that lie ahead - I would think as many years as he cares to choose on the form that is so far disclosed.

And may I also congratulate Mrs. Goble on having been elected - and I say this in an Australian Women's Liberal Club. We are becoming more enlightened I think as we go on, we Liberals. We managed to elect a very able lady to the House of Representatives, the first time we've had one there for many years. In the Senate where we can organise these things rather better, of course, we are well represented by several lady Senators and I am glad to see Senator Breen here with us today and our joint friend Ivy Wedgwood who chairs the Government Members' Education Committee is also a very significant and valuable figure in the work of our Party. So that Henry and I have good cause to say thank you for what you are doing in giving us your support and from time to time sending from your membership people who can be good and worthy representatives in the Parliament.

It sometimes makes me feel a little uncomfortable to realise that more than half my life has been spent in the national Parliament and in my early days, the only effective organisation we had in this State was the Women's organisation - the Australian Women's National League as it was in those days. And I recall with great appreciation and gratitude the strength of support which they gave to us at that time.

Sir Henry may be interested to know that at one stage when my electorate had become rather enlarged and I represented 80,000 voters, 48,000 of them were women voters, 32,000 men voters. That gave a substantial majority of three lady voters to two men voters. I don't draw any significance from that because things have balanced out since that time and we've managed to maintain much the same sort of majority. But it gave me good reason to dwell on the value of the women voters in a particular electorate and on the support which came to us at the time from the women's organisation. And you've gone on giving us that loyal support down through the years.

Now, after seventeen years of Liberal leadership I think we can all take some pride and a modest satisfaction in the state of our own Australia and those of us who have supported Liberal policies and Liberal leadership through that period, either in the Federal or the State sphere, can justly claim that this has made a notable and significant contribution to the Australia of today. And whatever test you care to apply, I think we can fairly claim that this leadership, these liberal policies, have been good for Australia.

In the material tests we've more than doubled the gross national product of the country, we've developed the highest percentage of home ownership to be found in the more conspicuous evidence of an affluent society. We are a fortunate people. And I would only hope and wish that sometimes those who are so critical of what they find in Australia would pause and count the blessings they enjoy in this country. It is I think unfortunately a weakness in our national life at the present time that we are always looking for trouble and the things that can be criticised rather than taking stock of how well we stand as a country and as a people and in comparison with others around the world.

However, having got that comment off my chest, let me turn to a couple of matters which are of topical significance politically for us. One of course is the political event immediately ahead, the referendum. I hope you won't mind me saying a few words about this because we haven't had the kind of opportunities we would normally enjoy in an election campaign of getting our message across as widely as we would wish. No political party has had the financial resources to conduct a large campaign on this matter and yet it does have an importance for good government in Australia and for Australia's standing in the eyes of the rest of the world.

And when I say that I refer to two proposals - I will take them in their inverse order, having stated them as I have, because I do believe that what we decide about the aborigine proposal will affect Australia's standing in the eyes of the rest of the world. I have every confidence that there will be an overwhelming YES vote. It is unthinkable that it could be otherwise. The purpose of the proposal is to remove from the Constitution references which in the one case produce an outmoded and outdated situation - that is the item which talks about aborigines not being counted in relation to a census. Well, this was inserted in the Constitution at a time when aborigine people couldn't effectively be counted - they were living either a tribal life or a nomadic life, and there weren't the facilities for checking that there are today. And it has no continuing place in a modern Australian Constitution.

The other one which we suggest to be excluded is the only other reference which appears in the Constitution to aborigines, and although properly understood, it doesn't discriminate unfavourably against aborigine people it is regarded widely both inside this country and outside this country as having that effect. And because we can still deal satisfactorily by the combined efforts of the Commonwealth and State Governments with the problems of people of aboriginal race without these specific references in the Constitution, and because there is lingering around the world a belief that somehow through this provision we discriminate against people of aboriginal race, we thought it should be out of the written text of the Constitution.

But the other proposal is the one which causes more complexity for people. In the first place, it has associated with it the word "nexus". Some people have doubts as to just what "nexus" means, what its political or Constitutional significance may be. But it is really quite a simple business. In the early stages when the Constitution was being drafted, there was a feeling that more States would be created. So that there should not be an enlargement of the Senate relative to the House of Representatives which would diminish the stature of the House of Representatives, the planners of those days thought there ought to be a provision ensuring that the number of members of the House of Representatives was always at least twice that of the members of the Senate. Well, as time has gone on, although there has been a lot of talk about new States, it hasn't come as yet to anything and there is no increase in the number of States in sight. But there lingers on in the Constitution this provision which throws on the House of Representatives the necessity, if at any time it wants to increase its numbers, of increasing the Senate to the extent of half of any increase in the size of the House of Representatives.

Now, I don't think there is much doubt around the community that a Senate of 60, and it was enlarged to 60 from 36 back in 1948, is large enough for Australia's needs at this time. We are not proposing that the Senate can never be increased. We are saying that we don't want to have to increase it every time growth in population and other factors would appear to make desirable some increase in the size of the House of Representatives. And so we want to get rid of this formal obligation that we must increase the Senate any time we increase the House of Representatives. Very understandably, there are people who might think, "Well, in those circumstances, won't there be a danger that the Senate will be reduced to too small a size, seeing that the Constitution at the moment only provides for a minimum of 36 Senators, whereas you have 60 in practice, and won't it leave it open to the House of Representatives to just increase its numbers at will to any size it chooses?" In order to meet that kind of concern, we have inserted two new safeguards, or propose to insert them if the people will only give the affirmative vote we need. One safeguard is that the minimum number of Senators prescribed by the Constitution will henceforth be 60 as is the present number in the Senate, not 36 as the present Constitutional provision requires. And the second thing is that we say you can't increase the size of the House of Representatives beyond a point that would leave a minimum of 85,000 persons on average to each electorate. Now that is a very effective brake on the size of the House of Representatives.

The authors of the NO case have made a quite misleading, and I would say, dishonest reference in the case that if the "nexus" is removed the one braking device in the Constitution goes with it. Well, I've already pointed out that there is this other very effective braking device, that you can't just go on increasing the size of the House of Representatives inordinately. It must relate to a minimum of 85,000 persons. Now, how does that compare with other countries?

In 1948, when the size of the House was increased, the increased House produced an average of 66,000 persons. At the present time, there is an average of 94,000 and if the Parliament runs its full course, it will get up to 97,000, and of course as other years go on, unless some change is made, the number to be represented by any one member will go on increasing.

Well, you may ask why do we need more members, and in any event, why should we do this now? As to whether we need more, that's a practical question which I think could be sensibly argued. You need effective representation. When you get the member trying to represent too many people, the individual elector doesn't get the same service that he or she is entitled to expect. And already the Australian National Parliamentarian is representing more people than a member of the House of Commons.

Now, in the United States Parliament, they represent many more people but, in order to meet that situation, they had to build up big staffs around the member and instead of being able to get to your member to discuss your problems with him, you are liable to be with a second, or first, second, third or fourth secretary dealing with your particular situation. Now that's not in the British tradition and practice and we don't think Australians, accustomed to getting a personal response from their own member, would welcome the intrusion of some official between them and the man or woman they have elected. And so we have picked on what seems to us to be a reasonable minimum. You don't have to have a member for every 85,000. It can go higher than that. But you can't make more members than a minimum of 85,000 would stipulate. So there is this safeguard in the Constitution.

And there can be no argument - any one of us who has been in the Parliament for many years would be able to affirm quite definitely - that the complexity, the number, the scope of Commonwealth activities, these things, have grown enormously. As Henry and his colleagues here will know, in many fields which were originally exclusive to the States, not from choice on the part of the States but simply because of the demands of the electorate and financial and other limitations - the Commonwealth has been brought into such fields as education, housing, into health and a variety of other matters. And then, of course, immigration. That programme has brought with it a whole range of new problems, and at the same time added many people who are not on the rolls as voters but whose needs have to be taken care of. With Australia's involvement in military operations and other commitments around the world, again you have repatriation problems, personnel problems of men and women in the Services, which all have to be dealt with.

But this, I repeat, is a matter of judgment. Whether we do it now, whether we do it five years, whether we do it ten years, fifteen years hence, is something for the Parliament to decide. The fact of the matter is that until you remove the nexus(tape damaged) at the same time as you increase the size of the House of Representatives. And don't imagine that this is something that is going to happen very often. It's only happened once up till now in the history of our whole Federation. It took 47 years, from 1901, before the size of the Parliament was increased. If we go on to the next election, the House running its normal course, it would be 20 years since there was any increase, and the most that is proposed would be an increase of the order of 12, 13 or 14 members in the House without any addition to the Senate.

Well, you may say, why should we be bothering about this now? First, I would say, and on the evidence that we do this so rarely, it is very difficult to get a time when the three principal parties are all agreed that a change of this sort should be made and that this is the opportune time to do it. If this opportunity slips by I don't know when it will occur again.

The second thing is that we must have a redistribution of the electorates, not to gain any political advantage for one party or another, but simply because over the years, and with the enormous growth around Australian cities in particular, they have become quite unbalanced. Mr. Calwell and I both represent, I think, electorates with less than 40,000 voters, but Billy Snedden out in Bruce represents now well over 100,000 - by the time we get to the next election it will be nearer 120,000. And this is not an isolated instance. Wherever the new growth has occurred around the capital cities, you find these abnormally enlarged electorates. In the heart of the cities, as people become more prosperous, they've tended to move out, and so the inner electorates have become smaller. Common decency and justice demand of us that we have a redistribution of electorates to help to balance out the representation. If we are going to do that, and if we have at any time over the next several years in contemplation some modest addition to the number of members of the Parliament, then surely it is appropriate we decide on that first and then have a redistribution on the basis of the numbers with which we agree should be brought into our account. And this is why, a very rare event for the Australian Parliament, you find the three leaders of the three principal Parties, the Liberal Party, the Labor Party and the Country Party, all coming to you urging at the one time that you give a YES vote on both of these proposals.

Now the opponents are to be found in the ranks of the Democratic Labor Party, the two Senators in Canberra, and in a few Liberal and Country Party Senators who haven't gone along with the majority. In the House of Representatives - and this I think is an impressive fact - the voting in favour was unanimous,

from all parties from all around Australia. In the Senate, although there is this handful of Senators who are taking the opposite line, the voting was 45 in favour to 7 against. And I think most people who have any doubts on this matter might have sufficient faith in the judgment of their representative and the democratic system to feel that when you get such an overwhelming support in favour of proposals as is evidenced in those voting figures, you can go along safely with what is recommended to you.

I don't want to spend a great deal of time on the NO case, but there are just two or three aspects which I would like you to carry in your mind in case you encounter some waverers yourself. The NO case, the official NO case as printed, is I believe, a deplorable piece of argumentative presentation. I would have hoped that having a case prepared by members from Parliament, in this case from the Senate, we would have had a calm, logical analysis of the case, the arguments for, the arguments against, and we have tried to do that in the YES case - perhaps it has made it a rather more tedious and duller document for people to read - but at least anybody who takes the trouble to go through it will find that this is the way in which the case has been presented. But the NO case sets out to conjure up all the fears, all the bogies, the whole string of the cliches you'd expect to find in some of the less responsible areas of the press about politicians - too many politicians and howmuch they cost us, what damage we're going to do to the Senate, and the damage we're going to do to country interests.

Well, let me take a few of those arguments in reverse order. The country interests -there are representatives from country electorates in the House of Representatives in each of the three Parties. The Country Party itself, of course. In the Liberal Party we have as many representatives from country electorates, and the Labor Party has members from country electorates. And yet every one of those representatives from a country electorate (tape damaged) a unanimous vote.

The Senate is traditionally regarded as the custodian of the interests of the States, and yet, here again I repeat, 45 out of 52 voted in support of this. So you don't get much comfort out of that argument if you are a NO voter. Well, then, without going through all the rest of them, let me just say a word about the cost of all this. A great bogey is conjured up: "We've got enough Parliamentarians, we don't want more. It's going to cost us more in taxes." Well, I gave a figure in the House of Representatives the other night that the cost of the House of Representatives and of the Senate taken together worked out at less than 40 cents a year per head of the population - as I put it just a little more than the price of a packet of cigarettes. And the cost of an individual senator or member of the House of Representatives - and this includes his travelling expenses and matters of that sort - worked out at about $\frac{1}{4}$ of one cent.

Now if we were going to increase members by about 12 or 14, the cost of those extra members of the House of Representatives would be somewhere between 3 and 4 cents per head of population. I don't think that's going to represent too much of a financial burden on anybody. A par in the "Melbourne Herald" on Saturday night questioned my figure of 40 cents and said the figure was nearer 79 cents. Well, my information had been given to me by officials in my own office having studied the Year Book which sets out the cost of Parliamentary government. I went over it again myself today and I found the only way you could build up the cost of the House and the Senate was by including furniture and services and matters of that sort. So I threw those in too. The argument was about additional members of Parliament, so you don't bring in the cost of the extra salaries of Ministers and extra Ministerial travel because the argument is not whether we have more Ministers - we are not likely to have any more Ministers even if the number of the House increases slightly. And even throwing that in, it got up to a figure of the two Houses combined of under 50 cents or if you like 5/- a year. So don't be frightened by that particular bogey.

Now, what I would like to say before I conclude - and it does have a reference to the Senate - is a word or two about the course of conduct pursued by the Senate in this last Session of Parliament. As you know we came back from the last elections with a record majority, an all-time record majority in the House of Representatives. If ever a Government was entitled to claim that the people had given it authority, a mandate to govern, we could fairly claim that. And we have set quite briskly about the business of putting into effect the policy undertakings we gave at the election time. Several of them have already been given effect and others are well advanced, but we are finding increasingly that the composition of the Senate at present, in which you have the produce unfortunately of two deaths of staunch Liberal Senators, a situation now where the Australian Labor Party with the help either of an independent Senator, Senator Turnbull, or one of our own Liberal Senators who decides to desert us on a particular occasion in order to record a vote against us, or any one of that combination of the ALP plus the DLP can defeat the Government in the Senate.

Now, the Senate was never designed for that course of conduct. It was designed as a House of Review so that it could study in a more leisurely way legislation coming up from the House of Representatives and send back suggestions for the consideration of the House of Representatives. It was designed, in addition, to see that the rights of the States were not trampled upon. But it was never intended to act as a block upon the legislative process and the capacity to govern of a democratically elected government. And I would never have assumed that a Labor Party which is pledged to abolish the Senate, would turn to the Senate, to use the Senate to defeat a democratically elected Government - not just on some minor matter or some clause in a Bill but to defeat the financial programme of a government. Now I can say to his credit that this would never have been acceptable to the former Labor Leader, Arthur Calwell. Nor do I know any Labor leader in my time in Parliament who would have used the Senate or his numbers in the Senate in this way. When I have heard Mr. Whitlam speak on occasion of the respective positions of the Senate and the House of Representatives, it would have been difficult to imagine that he would have lent himself as he has in recent times to this veto on the bill we put through in relation to postal charges.

Now, we all know that increases in postal rates are unpopular. Of course they are. No government likes to put up charges for the services it gives. But if the wage bill is continuing to rise, and the Post Office is a very large user of labour and cannot escape the extra costs which regular increases coming out of the Arbitration Commission bring to its employees, then there has to be some adjustment. In point of fact, over the period since 1959 when these charges were last raised, consumer services have gone up on an average 22%. In the Post Office the increase proposed was in the order of 15% to meet the growing costs and to offset losses which were likely to accumulate. But the merits of the proposal is another matter to argue and we as an elected government have to accept responsibility for these decisions we take. What I'm putting to you now as a matter of high principle is whether a government, democratically elected as ours has been, should be subjected to the resistance and the effective veto of a chance majority from a hostile political force in the Senate. I believe that, if the Senate pursues this course - already, of course, it will have thrown out of balance our Budgeting for the next financial year - we will have to review the whole financial position as a consequence of the denial to us of the extra revenue we believed to have been needed. But it is set now on a collision course with the government and with the House of Representatives, and is building up a constitutional issue of major dimension between the two Houses. I would hope that inside our own Party there is a clear appreciation that this is more than a piece of Party manoeuvring, more than an attempt to score a political point or two. The Senate would appear under the new Labor leadership to have set itself quite resolutely upon a course which must inevitably bring it into collision with the House of Representatives and with a democratically elected majority of record proportions.

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Now, how we deal with this in the future remains to be seen, but I hope we shall have your sympathetic understanding in any action that we have to take in relation to it.

Now, that took me rather longer, Lady Coles, than I had intended to occupy you. Thank you for your very attentive hearing; thank you again all of you for the support you continue to bring to our Liberal Party.
