

OPENING OF CUSTOMS HOUSE,
MELBOURNE



6th October, 1967

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt

Mr. Minister, Ministerial colleagues, representative of the Opposition, representative of the State Premier and of the Lord Mayor, other distinguished gentlemen all of whom I am glad to see here with us today.

Indeed, as I look around I see not only many of my Parliamentary colleagues and some of the former administrators of this significant Department of State, but a good many of the larger customers of the organisation - perhaps customer is hardly the word. Contributor would be more practical in our expression of it, but in a sense of course we are all contributors through the Commonwealth to this valuable, revenue collecting Department. I am glad to say that its revenues are collected rather less painfully, at least to the victim, than some other form of action that we have had to devise, and it has been the more popular on that account.

It is for me a pleasure to open a Commonwealth building which is by the testimony of our own vision at the same time functional, decorative and aesthetically satisfying, and which will itself be an addition to the grace and dignity of this fine city of Melbourne. I have opened quite a number of different buildings since I took office but it so happens that this is the first administrative building I have opened in the capacity of Prime Minister. Most of the other Commonwealth buildings have been associated with an outreach of Commonwealth activity of one kind or another - the Murray I Power Project, the Space Station at Honeysuckle Creek, our Army Barracks at Townsville and the Communications Centre at the North West Cape.

I mention these by item because it helps to illustrate the ramifications of Commonwealth administration in these modern times. But the Customs administration is of ancient lineage and provided one of the earliest revenue levies in Australia long before there was such an item as income tax.

The Victorian Customs came into existence in 1836 and the record shows that tobacco and spirits were at that time running rather contrary to the form one would have expected in these matters.

They were being smuggled into New South Wales - and not from that area - and into Van Diemen's Land, also via the Port Phillip district. An Officer of Customs was appointed at an annual salary of £200 and a Tide Waiter at £100. I saw this reference in the notes supplied to me - I thought there was a misprint for a "tired waiter", but he would get just about that much in tips in a reasonable quarter these times. In their first quarter of operation they collected £329. Two years later their collections were £12,000 a quarter, so they must have been covering their expenses and salaries at that point of time.

Today Customs and Excise revenues are running about £300M. a quarter so at least this is one direction in which the Government has shown no lack of progress, gentlemen. I sometimes ponder what would happen to our revenues for Commonwealth purposes, and that includes of course State purposes, if people stopped drinking spirituous liquor and gave up the smoking of cigarettes.

Whatever the moralities of the matter might be, it is the sort of prospect which haunts a Commonwealth Treasurer. There is no sign however of any diminution in our expenditures in these directions and so we can rate the Customs and Excise administration as one of the largest revenue gatherers for the Commonwealth. I think you get in, Senator, about 24% through this organisation of the total revenue of the Commonwealth.

This is the 4th Customs House which has been established in Melbourne - in 1837 it was a weatherboard cabin; in 1839 the first Customs House which could be fairly described as such was constructed, and in 1876 the old Customs House opposite, a very graceful, historic and dignified building was established. While over the years age may have withered them, Customs have not staled in the variety of their exactions.

And so we come to the present building of which I have spoken in such appreciative terms, and I ask you Senator to accept and to convey to all associated with this, to you Mr. Carmody, the congratulations of the Government for a fine building which is a welcome addition to the Commonwealth range.

It's widely recognised throughout the community that the Customs Department is a unit which operates in a very efficient way. We often read of spectacular finds by Customs officers - I think most members of the public get the message that there is an efficient body of investigators at work. I'm told, although I don't have time normally to enjoy these amenities myself, that the television serial "Contrabandits" has given us some insight into the exciting ways of Customs investigators, and I am advised Mr. Carmody that you carry yourself a badge of this particular organisation.

What is not so often recognised is that as well as safeguarding the revenue, the Customs Department plays a large part in the welfare of the community. And I am not thinking here so much of that area of its activities which results in the exclusion of certain forms of literature from the general consumption - I think there we have a part to play with the States as well - but it does play a major part in preventing the entry of noxious plants and animal products into Australia. We have been fortunately spared the degradation of some of the exotic diseases and some of the weeds which would otherwise hamper agriculture in this country. The entry of some of these could prejudice the wellbeing of our primary industries or the health of our citizens.

Another important aspect somewhat in this field of the Department's work is in preventing the illegal introduction of narcotic drugs. Here is one Department where LSD really means hard cash, but not loosely in the sky with the diamonds....I think the popular song is running at the present time. It came to my ears that in their desire to avoid making any souvenir presentation to me which would involve the expenditure of Commonwealth funds, the Minister and his Department had in mind to present me with a confiscated opium pipe. Well, I felt that in the current circumstances this might be misunderstood. It would certainly have leant itself to the cartoonist, I have no doubt, but it might have been taken as some encouragement on my part in this unfortunate direction.

But we do read much in the papers these days of the sad and harmful effects of these drugs, and the Department makes an important contribution in ensuring that these and other potentially harmful drugs are kept in the hands of responsible people.

Despite all these activities the cost of collecting Customs and Excise - I've already mentioned that this amounts to 24% of the Commonwealth's total revenue - is surprisingly small. Over the past 5 years, at least, the total cost of operating the Department of Customs and Excise is well under 2% of total Customs and Excise collections, and this is a tribute to the efficiency of the Department.

I can personally testify to that efficiency from an experience of my own just on nearly 30 years ago when I was for six weeks Acting Minister for Customs. When Robert Menzies, as he then was, told me I was to take on this task while he was looking around for a permanent Minister, I must confess that my heart sank. I had seen all these schedules and all this esoteric language associated with the Customs administration, and I wondered how I could handle this Department without exposing my ignorance in the Parliament to my discredit. But I then found - and I'm sure this would have been the experience of those of my colleagues on this platform who had their own period of administration of the Department - that this, as one of the oldest Commonwealth Departments, had built up a body of experience and knowledge in relation to almost every conceivable situation which could occur to harass the Minister-in-Charge. They were able to give sound, detailed advice which made the task of administration relatively easy.

I'm not implying, Senator, nor to you my colleague, the Leader of the Government in the Senate who occupied this post for more than 7 years, that you have had a cushy time, because when things are slack here, there's always a certain amount of activity in the Senate to keep you occupied if all else fails! But certainly one can look to a most efficient body of men and women in this Department to ease the task of the Minister. I think it is also a tribute to the co-operation which the community gives, even if sometimes a little reluctantly, to those who have laid upon them the duty of collecting the nation's tax revenue from this particular area.

It may interest some of you to know that taking all Commonwealth tax revenues together, less than 1½% is spent on their collection, which the businessmen in the audience, I am sure, would regard as a remarkably low figure. Although the community generally co-operates very well in the broad with our tax collectors this has not always been the case as my researches into the records for this occasion have led me to discover. The report of the Border Tariff Abolition League of 1866 - a League formed to fight against the Customs duties imposed on goods moving between New South Wales and the rest of Australia - contained this passage - "Families have been searched, children detained and interrogated upon family affairs; the vehicles and goods seized and then restored again. It's no wonder that a spirit of resistance has sprung up amongst the people of Moama and your Committee regrets to find that children are being trained to tell falsehoods when questioned by Customs officers".

Well those were the bad old days - we have improved on that since. But as the flow of goods and people into and out of Australia increases, so does the work of the Customs Department. It is a product of this increased flow that has led to the construction of this large and modern building. In it, as the Minister has told you, all the administration of Customs in Victoria will be housed - the first time that this has been possible for many years.

I mention one particular matter because we are becoming

increasingly tourist-minded these days - I am speaking not so much of our own journeys abroad but in relation to the potentialities of revenue and stimulus to the economy from a growing tourist industry. We have set up, recently a Tourist Commission, and we look to increasingly successful promotion of our attractive capacity abroad. But one of the problems of travellers is, as we have discovered in our own journeying, the Customs officer. We believe that our own Department is not only efficient in this direction but has taken a realistic view of the needs of travellers, particularly those who come to us from other countries. And one way in which the Department has contributed to our welcome to tourists has been to abolish declaration forms and by doing so, we have in this arm of Government supported the efforts of those who are concerned in encouraging tourists to visit us.

I am glad to be able to report another measure which I do not think the Minister has yet given publicity so I have that pleasure here today. It concerns passengers and crews of overseas vessels travelling around the Australian coast. I am happy to announce, and I assure Senator Cohen it has no connection with impending events in relation to the Senate, that from 1st January next there will be no Customs duties or sales taxes levied on goods consumed between Australian ports. Most of you have been on board a vessel at some time or another and you know what a shock to the system it is when you strike the Australian coast and find that the prices of the commodities consumed on board these ships receive the full weight of sales tax and excise levies. And this step has been taken as a contribution to the attraction of tourists to Australia, by making their movement to this country the more convenient and agreeable. It is also a recognition of the large distances covered by overseas vessels as they move from one Australian port to the other, and I am sure it will be welcomed by all travellers.

Before I declare this building open, and unveil the commemorative plaque, let me recall again a piece of history. In 1876 the old Customs house was completed. And the Melbourne "Argus" of the day reported on this event as follows -

"The people of Melbourne have for some months past become so accustomed to the sight of unfinished public buildings, that when one is at last completed it is looked upon almost as a new erection. Those who were unaccustomed to the dark and winding labyrinths to be found in the interior of the building frequently lost an hour in wandering about the cold and dreary passages before they found the room they had been searching. This has all changed now, and where there were formerly cold damp passages and rooms of uninviting interior there are now to be found bright and warm-looking corridors and cosy rooms in which business can be transacted with both pleasure and comfort".

I am sure you will agree that that kind of description can very aptly be applied to the fine building in which we find ourselves at this time. There have been no unreasonable delays in the construction of this building, and this has been due to the effective planning and provision of the Department of Works and the efficient operation of the builders. I am sure that with its modern style, its air-conditioning throughout and attention to the needs of efficiency in the circumstances of today, this building will represent an advance just as great over the old house as was that house in its turn over the first permanent Customs house.

It is with great pleasure I now formally declare this building open and unveil the plaque.