

Edited Transcript

ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE N. S. W. YOUNG

LIBERALS - SYDNEY, N. S. W.

17 OCTOBER 1970

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

I think you will agree that this is neither the time nor the place for a long dissertation on political matters. I am here primarily to express, on behalf of the Government, our gratitude for the assistance we receive from the Young Liberal Movement throughout Australia.

I don't agree with the speaker who said that we are a pretentious country, or a country with an inflated idea of our own importance. We may be a little brash, perhaps and brashness is a good thing in a young country. We have got something to be a little brash about, when you consider that in such a short space of time - as far as history goes in the blinking of an eye - a harsh continent has been translated into one which is giving as high a standard of living to the people in it as any other country in the world and as great an opportunity as any other country in the world. Now this is something of which we need not be ashamed.

We also have frontiers and there are not many countries left that have them. I will admit that too many young Australians stay away in droves from the frontiers. I am talking of the mining towns in Western Australia, I am talking of the new developments in Queensland, I am talking of going out where something new is being built and something new is happening and people can work very hard and get very high rewards. Well those are frontiers and they are there for those who want to take advantage of them and the very fact they are there is, I think, of significance, in our national life. So I don't think we are pretentious, and I do think we have an opportunity here as a community of people seeking the answer to the age-old questions of how can a community best be run.

We have an opportunity to present to the world a pattern which might be better than any pattern so far devised and therefore I don't think we are pretentious, though we may be brash. I don't think we have an inflated idea of our own importance because although we haven't got great physical power, we do have enormous opportunity and I think the achievements we have already made augur well for the future for the Young Liberals and the other young members of the Australian community coming on with them.

Nor do I think the Young Liberal movement is without a cause. After all, there has been a history now of some twenty years of Liberal rule, and of course all the decisions made in that time were not right and of course some opportunities during that time were missed. But by and large, most of the decisions were reasonably correct and most of the opportunities were seized and the advancement that has taken place in that period of time is probably unparalleled in a similar period of time in any other nation's history.

2.

We have reached in this nation towards giving to the individual more opportunities to express himself in whatever field of endeavour he may wish to engage. We have advanced our material development enormously, and that is important, because only by advancing materially can you take resources to help the poor and the under privileged and advance other non-material requirements of a nation. And is it not a reasonable cause to want to continue, and to improve, what has been, I think on any impartial observer's judgment, very successful indeed. Surely we would not be able now to have ten thousand members of Young Liberals throughout Australia if there were not achievements to which they could look and which they would seek to better in the years ahead. So there is a cause, a significant cause - to defend Australia, to advance Australia, to improve the material benefits of Australia, and to further advance the non-material requirements of a nation.

I have heard, from time to time, talk of something which is described as a generation gap. And people who have spoken about it have spoken as if this is some new phenomenon just suddenly discovered, never having occurred before in the history of the world. Well, I don't think, for myself, there is a generation gap. I disagree violently with a lot of young people and a lot of young people disagree violently with me. But then a lot of young people disagree violently with a lot of other young people, and so it is not a matter of a gap between generations. It is a matter of arguments advanced and arguments rejected and discussion on those arguments.

I can't see myself that there are any new theories advanced which can't be discussed between the generations. I haven't discovered that, and I hope that by and large, you haven't discovered that either. There has always been some difficulty of communication between parents and children. Always, Because parents have got into the habit while the children were very young and while they were growing up, of telling them what they ought to do instead of sitting down and discussing with them whether they ought to eat their supper or whether they ought to go to bed at seven. They have got into the habit of telling them what they ought to do and it is a little difficult sometimes for parents to realise that children have reached an age where that no longer obtains. But this has always been so.

It has also always been true that at a particular period of development young people thought that their parents knew absolutely nothing, understood absolutely nothing, were as dead as a dodo, And then it has also been true that a little later on when young people have grown up a little bit and when parents have mellowed a little bit, it has been possible for discussion to take place and for young people to say, "My gosh. My parents have learned a lot in the last ten years, or five years". I think it's nonsense, that's all I want to say about the generation gap. Surely whatever age anybody is, it is their mind that counts, their ability that counts, the capacity to analyse that counts and there ought to be able to be a dialogue between somebody of sixty and somebody of sixteen, given those circumstances.

And there are many things on which dialogue should take place in this country. Many think now that all that is required is questioning of the society in which they live - criticism, which is quite proper - and questioning. But that can't go on for ~~too~~ long, because the very passage of time itself means that before long, those who today are questioning, and having the luxury of questioning, will tomorrow be saddled with the sometimes agonising discipline of providing the answers to the questions they are now asking.

I think it augurs well for Australia that there are groups of young people such as this who now question, but who in questioning are learning because they want to be able to contribute the answers tomorrow will demand. And this again is a reason why I am so pleased to be here. I will sketch some of the problems that I see will need to be answered in the years ahead, and these are just some briefly touched on samples.

We hear much today about the question of dissent and the question of how far dissent should be allowed to go. For myself, I would suggest that dissent must be protected, that there must never be any interference with the right of people to object to what a government is doing, to attack what a government is doing, to march if they want to, in order to bring attention to their objection to what a government is doing. This is a freedom which is essential. But freedom can degenerate into licence at some stage, and for myself, I don't believe this right should be extended to licence. I don't believe such a rights of other people are invaded and rejected by those who wish to dissent. I think people ought to be able to use the post offices if they want to; I believe people ought to be able to use the streets if they want to. I believe they should be able to drive cars and walk along footpaths and indeed what I am saying is that there are civil rights for the majority, and those civil rights are as important as are the rights of a minority to dissent.

This may not be easy and simple finally to clarify. Nevertheless, this is a question before us now. It will be before us in the future, and we must in this nation, I believe, reach a solution which will enable both rights to exist and which will prevent a repetition of what we have seen in other countries of people in brown-shirts taking over the streets as bully boys, and people in red-shirts fighting them in the streets so that all that happens is a difference in the colour of the shirt, and not a reasoned argument. . . . but a situation where the decision goes to those with the greatest muscle rather than those with the greatest right or the greatest capacity to persuade their fellow citizens.

We will have in the years ahead, problems concerned with what some people claim to be a racist approach by Australia in the field of immigration.

And this is not a simple or an easy matter. We have a restricted immigration programme. A policy under which it is easier for a person with a white skin to enter Australia than it is for a person of a different colour.

That policy is under attack. I cannot justify it on moral grounds. For the kindness or cruelty, the competence or incompetence, the worthiness or unworthiness of man can surely not be judged by the colour of their skins.

Yet though I cannot justify the policy on moral grounds, as I look around the world I see that wherever there are large communities of different racial origins in a country, racial problems in that country are greatly increased.

These racial problems are not just between those with white skins and those with black, as in America or Britain - but between, for example, Chinese and Indonesians, Chinese and Malaysians, Tamils and Ceylonese, Kenyans and Indians,

If it is true that in these circumstances, racial policy is exacerbated and racist stresses increased, then I do not wish to import these problems into this country; as I am sure I would do if large communities of different racial origins were established here. Indeed I think that it would be more immoral to do this than to continue with our present policy.

I think that it would lead to a growth of racist feeling in Australia whereas we do not have such feeling now.

But there is a difficult moral problem on which, in the fulness of time, it will be for those who are now young Liberals, and young Australians generally to decide. As for me, I make it clear that I am not going to change our present liberalised policy in any way.

And then we will have in the years ahead many, many discussions as to what is the proper role of a central government and what is the proper role of a state government. I have found myself that on this particular problem, the Young Liberals seem to be more conservative than the people who formed the Party in 1949, and on the whole, adopt the conservative attitude without giving very many reasons for it as to why that attitude is adopted! Well, fair enough.

I offer no solution here, none at all. But I do say that for the proper running of this nation in the years ahead this is a significant question and one which ought to attract the attention and the analysis of the young people of Australia who will, before long, be in a position where they will have to take some real stand on it. I won't develop that, but I do believe that it is of significance for our whole future.

So all these things - those are but some samples - all these and many others will be before us in the years ahead. Many problems have been overcome and many more, I think, shortly will be. But there will be no nation ever, and Australia certainly will never be a nation that has not got new problems before it, new answers required. And it will only get those answers to the problems now and in the future if there are sufficient numbers of young people prepared to devote their minds and their efforts and their attitudes to trying to work out what the best answers in the interests of the nation may be.

I think I will finish as I began, having given you I hope some indication of why I am so happy to be with you tonight and having given you I hope some indication that you really have a cause and that that cause is significant and more significant to you than it is to me and more significant to your children generally than it will be for me. Thank you for having me.
