



**PRIME MINISTER**

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
FAREWELL DINNER FOR THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL  
AND LADY STEPHEN  
CANBERRA - 14 FEBRUARY 1989**

Excellencies,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

When in 1982 you, Sir Ninian, announced your decision to retire from the bench in order to take up the Governor-Generalship, I remember that many people in the community expressed surprise, and not a little disappointment, that Australia would no longer enjoy the benefit of your wisdom in the law.

Many people seemed to think that the Governor-Generalship was not a sufficiently substantial post for a man whose ten years on the bench of the highest court in the land had been years of outstanding service.

But the High Court's loss was very definitely the nation's gain.

Very few of Australia's Governors-General, and indeed, very few of our Vice-Regal couples, have won such respect and affection as have our distinguished guests of honour tonight.

Where many people had imagined the Governor-Generalship could involve only the ritual performance of empty ceremony - and where some still saw it as the avenue of intrusion into the affairs of elected Governments - Sir Ninian Stephen showed that the post could be very different indeed.

You, sir, showed the Governor-Generalship was a post of real substance, and you imbued it and refreshed it with an articulate, accessible, distinguished and may I say a very Australian spirit.

So I am sure I speak for all Australians tonight when I say that this nation owes a debt of gratitude to you for your work over the past six and a half years.

The magnitude of the work is conveyed by these few statistics.

During his time in office, Sir Ninian presided over 275 meetings of the Federal Executive Council, involving some 5850 items of business. He appointed 40 Ministers and signed into law 1120 pieces of legislation.

And he had to serve Prime Ministers of two different political parties. In this respect of course I trust his successor's task will be only half as arduous.

But these executive duties have not, I think, been the most gruelling part of the Governor-General's routine - nor have they been, in other than a formal constitutional sense, the most significant part of Sir Ninian's success.

In a recent newspaper interview, Sir Ninian said he saw his job as Governor-General as being "to represent the Australian nation to the people of Australia".

It's a seductively simple-sounding formula which in fact presents a challenging, important and very appropriate role for the Head of State as we enter the 1990s and approach the centenary of Federation.

And how well both of you, Sir Ninian and Lady Stephen, have fulfilled this role.

If Governors-General are effectively to represent the nation to its people, it is vital that they be seen by the people - by all the people, in all parts of this country, separated as we are by vast distances.

In the hectic Bicentennial year alone, Sir Ninian and Lady Stephen hosted a total of 510 receptions, dinners, lunches and other gatherings at Yarralumla and Admiralty House. In addition, they attended 146 functions in Canberra and 254 elsewhere, and made well in excess of 200 speeches.

For the past six and a half years Australians have seen, and come to respect and enjoy, the personal qualities which Sir Ninian and Lady Stephen brought to the task.

Whether at Australia Day 1988 on Sydney Harbour or at the Fruit Festival at Cobar, here in the national capital or in a country town hall, they have conducted themselves with dignity, a generous and genuine interest in all they have met, and a clear concern for the Australian nation.

In Canberra itself, Government House has been a warm and a homely place. Visitors to Yarralumla - be they young Scouts and Guides on their first visit to Canberra, foreign Heads of State, people attending the recitals of Australian music and verse - were charmed by a couple whom they found friendly, interested and approachable.

I might add - and it is, as you will see, quite relevant to this evening's proceedings that I do so - that I particularly commend the Australian style you have brought to the interiors of Yarralumla and Admiralty House with the superb selection of Aboriginal art that now adorns these buildings.

Throughout your time in office, Sir Ninian, you have outlined your vision of a dynamic and vibrant Australia; an Australia unified by common ideals and a common commitment to the future; an Australia which, on that common ground, gains strength from the toleration, indeed the encouragement, of diversity.

I salute you for your clear-sighted advocacy of the importance of building a multicultural nation - most recently manifested in your call for Australians to maintain the linguistic diversity which is part of our rich inheritance of immigration.

Neither of us wishes to see an Australia which is insular and backward-looking; an Australia impervious to new ideas; an Australia which refuses to adapt to changing circumstances. Your role in ensuring that historic transformation takes place has been a crucial one.

Let me say that tonight's dinner has a special significance for me, not only because as Prime Minister I know and appreciate the way in which the Governor-General has conducted the formal aspects of his office, but also because of the close personal relationship which we have enjoyed over the past six years.

When you became Governor-General in 1982, you, like your predecessor, Sir Zelman Cowan, faced the difficult task of healing the wounds created by the events of 1975. Those wounds were slow to heal, and it is a great tribute to you and to Sir Zelman that you were able to bring reassurance to many of those who had begun to distrust the office of Governor-General.

But I believe that you have succeeded in doing much more than that. When on Thursday Bill Hayden is sworn in as Governor-General, he will be receiving an office which has been revitalised; an office to which you have given fresh direction, and which, in the process, has acquired new meaning and importance in the eyes of many Australians.

Sir Ninian, I have concentrated most of my remarks this evening on you. But may I make it clear that just as in your work you have been strengthened by the support, encouragement and contagious enthusiasm of your wife, so in thanking you for your period in office the Australian people also thank Lady Stephen.

Let me say to both of you it has always been easy to refer to you in the formal fashion as "Excellencies". You have indeed brought excellence to the performance of your task.

We wish both of you well in your retirement. I am delighted that you Sir Ninian will be passing on some of your wisdom to the students of the Law Faculty at Melbourne University.

I now call upon the Leader of the Opposition to support my remarks.

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