

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. R.G. MENZIES, C.H., Q.C.,  
M.P., AT ST. MARK'S LIBRARY, CANBERRA, ON 27TH AUGUST, 1959.

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My Lord Bishop and Ladies and Gentlemen:

I like that little touch of my friend Sutcliffe's about another Prime Minister. (Laughter.) There is a certain delightful ambiguity about it; but if he is, in fact, intending to give me a guarantee, as a very important civil servant, that I will still be in office next year, I would be delighted to have it. But each time I open the paper and I read about the latest uproar that has been created by something my Government has done, I begin to have my doubts. (Laughter.)

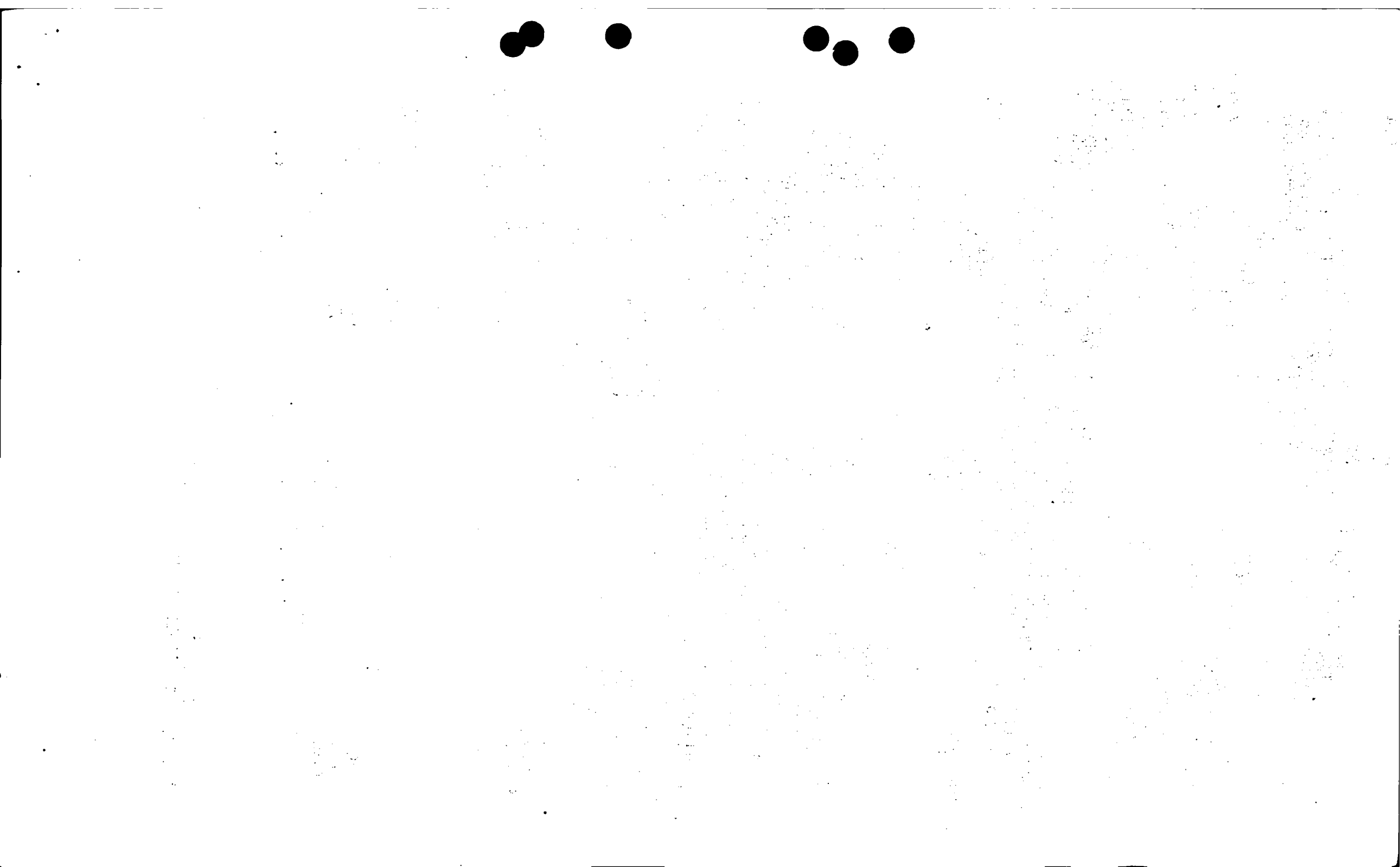
Sir, I thought that instead of talking about some particular current problems of international affairs, it might be a good idea to say a little about some perhaps less obvious aspects of what goes on in the world. We are very much inclined, aren't we, to classify the world; to talk about the democracies in a sort of comprehensive expression without, perhaps, working out very closely what we mean by such an expression.

Back in 1919, somebody coined a great phrase - in fact, it was before that - about making the world safe for democracy - one of those great rotund phrases that attract the mind superficially. But I think we ought to do a little thinking about what it means and what we mean by "democracy", and in the course of my little talk to you, I will suggest that we have not been very clear in our minds about this matter, and that a good deal of well-meaning stuff goes on in the world under the name of democracy which is not very useful, and may even be rather dangerous.

Since that phrase was coined, what has happened to the world? There was a comfortable feeling in those days that the world was steadily advancing to what we understand by democracy - parliamentary democracy. People pointed to a species of parliament in Russia; they pointed to the Reichstag in Berlin; they pointed - sometimes a little hesitatingly - at the Chamber of Deputies in Paris. And there was a general feeling that the whole thing was going on and that in due course everybody would be in line with us and adopting our kind of parliamentary self-government.

Well, the fact is that since this phrase was stated, hundreds of millions of people in the world have passed even out of the expectation of any form of democracy, or the immediate expectation of any form of democracy, because the rule of dictators - a rule that has considerable attraction for many millions of people - had extended itself since then over hundreds and hundreds of millions of people. And I think that under those circumstances we ought to give a little thought to the problem of the spread of democracy. A greater area and a greater population are under dictatorship today than anybody dreamt of 30 or 40 years ago. Of course, there are reasons for that. They are reasons that I have had occasion to think about in the past.

Parliamentary democracy began with us - not with Australia but with the people of our race, the people of Great Britain. It was not exotic; it was a slow, steady growth from the soil - local government, larger areas of government, then a parliament on an entirely undemocratic basis, then a series of reform acts which made the parliament established on a democratic basis. All these things occurred not hastily overnight but slowly over a course of centuries, and in the present century the extension of the privilege of democracy - the privilege of the vote - to women; so that you have a complete suffrage.



I think, myself, and I have always thought so in my own life, that in Great Britain they do understand the working of this machine - this system - perhaps better than any other people in the world. And they ought to, because over the course of centuries, and perhaps unconsciously in the early stages, they invented it, and it grew up and they grew up to be part of it. We in Australia have inherited it. I am rather disposed to think that in terms of true democracy, we have no superior in the world in terms of democracy. I rather think we are probably the most democratic country in the world.

In the case of Germany, in the case of Russia, people had a little more disposition to take orders; a little more disposition to like governments with a touch of authority; and the result was that the parliamentary institutions which were adopted in those countries did not have their roots in the ground, and they blew away in the first high wind. That is not so with us. We were born and bred in a particular outlook on government and on the rights of the people and on the function of parliament and on the function of an executive; whereas in countries such as those I have mentioned with a what I might describe crudely as a sort of an instinct for being ordered around, parliamentary government was overthrown and overthrown quite readily. It did not have its roots in the soil as in our case. Now, in the case of some of these countries these things may well change as time goes on. But the point that I am making to you is that when we speak about our democracy - our system of parliamentary self-government - we are talking about something that we ought to understand; something that is deep in the line of tradition in our country, and that therefore it won't be easily overthrown.

A man who arrived in Australia and by reason of some temporary trouble or some disorder, set himself up to be the master of this country - to be the dictator of this country - would, in fact, be greeted with howls of derision; not with black rage but with contemptuous laughter, because we don't look at things in that way, and we never will. But that rule does not apply everywhere. Therefore, we had better look at our own democracy and ask ourselves one or two questions. The first of them is: Are we making, as far as we can, democracy, as we understand it, a good thing? Are we making democracy safe for the world, to reverse the old tag?

Well, I think there are many admirable things about our democracy. As I say we are, I think, at least as highly advanced in that field as anybody else in the world. But we still have some very quaint manifestations of things which are the enemy of true self-government. We have a tremendous amount of complete selfishness in our approach to public affairs. I know from long experience that nobody who was affected by any government action ever came along and said, "I'm against this because I'm going to be worse off" - perish the thought! He always explains to you that his attitude is one of complete disinterest; he is thinking only of the good of the country. Well, whether it is cynicism on my part or not, I think that in the majority of cases, the first reaction in the minds of many people is a selfish reaction. And until we get to a state of affairs in which a man may genuinely ignore the small damage to himself, because he sees the large advantage to the country, to the nation; until we have reached that point; we won't be able to look the world in the eye and say that our system of government is the very one for them, and that they are complete fools not to adopt it.

The theory, I suppose, of parliamentary democracy is that you are elected to parliament by a sufficient number of generously minded, or misguided, electors. You are elected for an almost intolerably short term of three years. What are you elected for? Just to reflect particular interests? To bow in the wind of current opinion? To yield to pressure groups, more and more organised every year? Is that your function? Because, quite

frankly, if that is the function of a member of parliament, any third-rater will do, because you don't need to be extraordinarily able or have high character or strength of mind to bow as some passing event may invite you to bow.

A member of parliament has a very great duty to his people, and one of those duties, of course - as has been said by better men than me before today - is to bring to the service of the country their own judgment and industry and character, not distorted by anybody else's opinion at all, with the sure knowledge, of course, that if what they do, if what they say they stand for, if what their judgment requires them to decide at some particular point, does not commend themselves to the electors they will be out. From the point of view of democracy, it is much better for a man to be out by exercising his own mind and character than to be in by abandoning them. Pressure groups - all this tremendous organisation that goes on to have special interests put forward, no doubt it is inevitable, but we must beware of letting it set itself up as a substitute for the true duties of parliament and the people who sit there.

Then of course, we have other disabilities. We might as well be frank about them. We have a great deal of intolerance, and I don't suppose that any country will ever, in the true sense, become the perfect democracy until it has achieved an attitude of perfect tolerance, because if democracy means anything, it means that the other man's significance in the community must always be recognised; the other man's views in the community must always be recognised. And intolerance of minorities, or intolerance of people who appear to us or to some of us to be a little odd in their views, is not democratic; it is something that we must always watch.

And then, of course - and I think it more every year - our democracy is always being challenged by sheer sensationalism. You have only to open your newspaper any day and you find some sensational treatment of something, not calculated to improve the judgment of the reader, but to distort it; to make him feel that that particular thing on which his emotions are being wound up, is really the overwhelmingly significant thing of the day. Let us see all these things in proportion.

Well, those are what you might call a few of the orthodox moral homilies, but they are not irrelevant to the consideration of democracy, because I say that in spite of whatever defects there may be, I am proud to say that I believe Australia is as near to the ideal of parliamentary democracy as any country in the world.

Now, Sir, having said that, let me just refer to the same problem in the international sense. There is a common error made - in my opinion, it has been made in most countries and by many people since the last war - and that common error is the error of assuming that a system of government that is good for us is good for other people, automatically. To take one example, Australia has trust responsibilities to the north, in what I will call, compendiously, New Guinea; a large native population - inevitably, since we have not been there for very long, a primitive community, with its own infinite variety of languages - I am told there are literally hundreds of languages, not dialects, but hundreds of languages. And with a native population - an indigenous population - which varies from those who achieved education as we understand that term, to those in the remote parts of the island who are still living in a state of primitive savagery, so that anybody from the outside who goes in, goes in at his own risk.

There you have the most complex structure - a complex of languages, a complex of cultures, ranging from European culture to the most primitive up in the mountain fastnesses. And yet, at any meeting of the Trusteeship Council, there will be heard some well-meaning person who wants to establish a time-table and say that within "x" years self-government - parliamentary self-government - is to be established in the territory. And that has a great appeal to people. They say, "They are God's creatures; they are human beings. Why shouldn't they have the right to rule themselves?" And yet, if we walked out tomorrow, leaving them with what we are pleased to call parliamentary self-government, the result would be disaster in that area, and everybody knows it.

But, of course, the second fallacy in the minds of these rather occasional and earnest people who want to put everything into a time-table, as if all countries were the same, is that some of them really believe that all countries are the same; that what is good for us must be good for somebody else. It is a very comfortable assumption that because parliamentary self-government is good for us, and we understand and we know how to make it work, and occasionally we get a bit of value out of it and occasionally we get a bit of fun out of it - because of all this which suits our temperament completely, a lot of people are willing to say that it must be good for Indonesia, or it must be good for New Guinea, or it is a splendid system for some other country. How do we know that it is? Why do we assume that a system of government which is not only a matter of our choice in our own time but is a matter of inheritance; a matter that has been bred into us; a matter about which we have instincts - why should we assume that a system of that kind can be imposed or conferred in one blow on countries that have no such tradition, no such experience, no such instincts? It is quite unreal, and I think that we ought to beware of it.

You won't fail to notice that there are two or three cases in very recent history in which what we are pleased to call the boon of parliamentary self-government has been conferred on some large number of people to whom almost the first thing that has happened has been the attempt to run a parliament fails; the parliament is dissolved; then somebody comes along and says, "I will take executive charge of the government and I will, of course, take suitable steps to have a constitution drafted and then I might have a constituent assembly to get it dealt with." And so the first fruit of the creation of self-government is a species of dictatorship; and we have seen it. Make no mistake, it exists in two or three countries in essential particulars. It is only a phase, I know, and it will be succeeded by some broader system of administration; but whether that will be what we call the ordinary parliamentary system as we understand it, I don't know. I think what we have to face up to is that we have a pretty full-time job making our own system of parliamentary self-government serve the purposes of the community to the highest possible extent without worrying too much about encumbering our neighbours with advice or instructions as to what kind of system of government they are to have. Because the truth is - though you won't be here to confute me and I certainly won't be here to be confuted - that in a hundred years' time there will probably be as many clearly different systems of government in the world as there are nations in the world; each will thrash its own out.

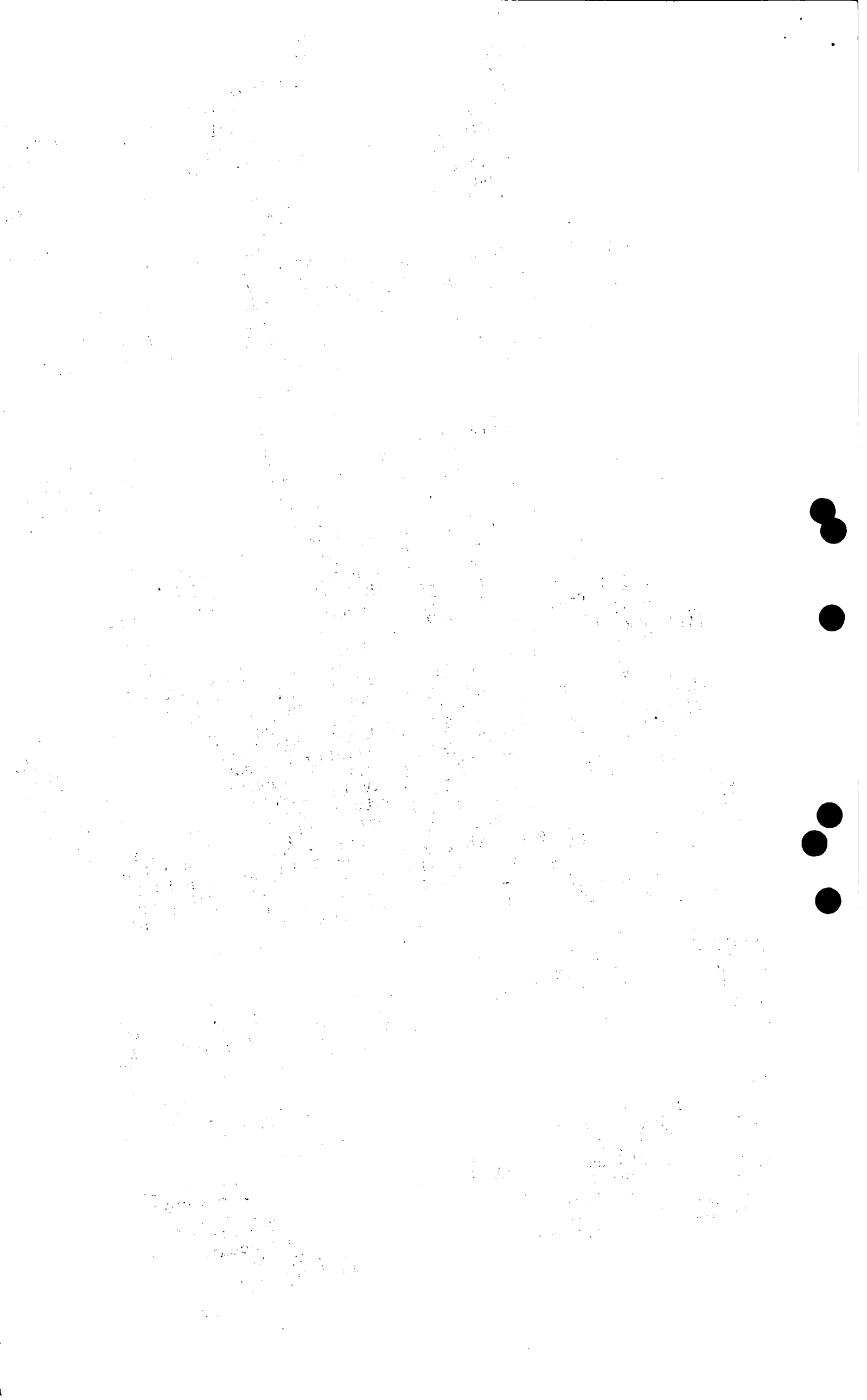
Therefore, we must be careful about making this assumption - not uncommon, I regret to say, in the western world - that the system that is good for us must be good for other people, and therefore all you have to do when the time comes, or not infrequently before the time comes, is to say, "Here we are, now set up a parliament; give everybody the vote, and all things will be added to." Well, it is just not true. We may be very proud of our system - and indeed we are - but we are not to be assuming that it is going to be equally good for everybody else.

In the nineteenth century they understood a few of these things very well. I know it is the fashion nowadays to say that they were a lot of rather stuffy people, but it was a very great Foreign Minister of England who, in the nineteenth century, laid it down as axiomatic that one of the first things about foreign policy was not to interfere with the internal affairs of other countries; concern yourself with your relations with them, to help them, as indeed we are very proud to help in many places; to give them, on their request, such advice or experience as we may have; but never to be butting in - in our homely phrase - on how they conduct their internal affairs. And that is a pretty good rule. Occasionally, exceptions may have to be made to it. Occasionally, as in the recent events in Laos, you may have to watch very carefully - the rest of the world may have to watch very carefully - to see that what begins by looking like an internal matter, does not achieve an international quality and invoke international action. But that, of course, truly considered, is not an exception but a mere illustration of the rule.

May I, Sir, before I finish, just make one little gloss on what I have been saying to you. People, public people particularly, and men particularly, like to make speeches after dinner. It is a very suitable occasion on which to make a speech, because everybody is well fed and in a cheerful mood and the lightest witticism evokes roars of laughter. And in that delightful atmosphere, people are in the habit of getting rid of all the problems of the world with a sweep of the hand, making powerful speeches about Anglo-American relations, or something of that kind. It goes down very well; everybody is for it, in the broad; and then everybody goes home and says "That was a wonderful night; a most powerful speech." And yet, you know - with great respect to my fellow after-dinner speakers - a good deal of it is wasted; a good deal of it was rather uselessly said, and for this reason - I'll take the same illustration: The great democracy of Great Britain and the great democracy of the United States. People will speak about these two democracies as if they were the same kind of thing. They are not; as if they had the same system of government. They have not; as if the approach of their leaders to the formulation of policy was conducted in exactly the same way on both sides of the Atlantic. It is not. The most important thing in the world to discover, if you are going to avoid bickering, which occasionally happens between Britain and the United States, is to understand the large differences of government that exist, not just ignore the differences and concentrate on the fact - the undoubted fact - that there is a parliament - whatever you call it, whether it is called Congress or Parliament - and that everybody has a vote, as if those two things, in this simple manner that I was describing to you earlier, represented the whole definition of democracy, and therefore we have the same system.

I have had a great deal to do with the United States administration in my time, and the leading men there, and a great deal of occasion for studying their system of government; and I am constantly struck by the remarkable differences between their system and ours. And if one establishes those differences, then which one is it that we are wishing on to our neighbour. You see, we come up against an awkward problem on the threshold.

In our country, in Great Britain, ministers work out their policy in the Cabinet room and finally a policy emerges; it is announced. And that is the policy of the government. The government may be thrown out by a parliament that does not like it, but until it is, it is the policy of the government, and anybody around the world can read it and say. "Well, there you are, the policy of the British Government, the Australian Government is so-and-so." The whole thrashing out of this thing occurs behind closed doors, and after a lot of close study very frequently of a lot of documents and consideration of conflicting arguments.



But in the United States of America, they are accustomed to public evolving of policy. So that it gets thrashed out by public discussions in committees, by somebody making a statement to the press and somebody else disagreeing with it. All this is in the process of formation.

I remember having one of many very fascinating talks with the late John Foster Dulles who was a man of great character indeed, but was regarded here for a long time, and in Great Britain, as a man who had no policy except one that changed from day to day. Well, the reason for that was that - he gave me this by way of illustration: He came back from a very important conference in Europe. He prepared a report to the President on his way back. He despatched it to the White House when he arrived at his house that evening, and found on his hall table a summons to attend a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee next morning at 10 o'clock, and he felt that he had to go. I wouldn't have, I fear (Laughter.) But, so deep-rooted in the American mind is this question of congressional committees that here he was, the most pressed, the busiest man, with all his responsibilities, with no opportunity of talk with the President at all, going before a committee with all the glare of lights and television, no doubt, and the press, and was cross-examined from 10 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock in the afternoon on how his mind was working on this thing. And the result is that he is put in a position, you see, of threshing out, coram publico, what the policy might turn out to be, saying, "Well, of course, on the one hand I agree that that is a consideration" and then, of course, somebody has only to write down the bit that suits him and off it goes and the next fellow writes down what he thinks.

(TAPE CHANGED AT THIS STAGE)

A minister in our country knows every noise that parliament makes. He is familiar with the procedures of the parliament. He is in constant contact with the members of parliament and in particular with members of his own party that support him. And the result is that he is very seldom taken by surprise by something that emerges. But in the United States that is not the position. Ministers don't sit in congress; most of them, in fact, have never been there - I mean never been members of the Congress. The result is they have to deal with their legislation and all that kind of thing by what we would regard as remote control. That suits the United States of America. It has one great advantage, of course, from the point of view of the President: he may pick the best man at that subject - whatever it may be - in the country; put his hand on him and say, "You come along and administer Commerce or administer Agriculture or administer Defence" or whatever it may be. And that, no doubt, is an advantage. But against that, we have always seen the disadvantage of having an executive which is detached from parliament, detached from the legislature; and to that extent, not susceptible to the daily collection of impressions and the daily making and answering of criticisms.

All right, I like our system; the United States likes its system. But you have only to look at those two illustrations to see that people who assume that we both have the same system of government are doing a disservice to our good relations, because when you are discussing or thinking about your relations with your friends, it is a good thing to have a clear understanding of what differences there are in your methods, so that you may not be led into a dispute about something which turns out to be based on pure misapprehension of the machinery or procedures adopted by the other man or the other country.

Well, Sir, that is a very rambling discourse. It lacks the compactness of one of your sermons, Sir, (laughter) but I hope that, like your sermons, it may give us something to think about.



CHAIRMAN: Ladies and Gentlemen, you have now got an unrivalled opportunity. You may ask questions of the Prime Minister. Do take advantage of your opportunity.

QUESTION: Mr. Chairman, when Mr. Menzies was talking about democracy in the first part of his speech, he mentioned that one of the most important characteristics of the member of the House or the Senate or any other parliament, should be that he exercise his own judgment, his own decision; in fact, he should be rather like the idea in Burke's letter to the electorate of Bristol. Coming from the U.K. about two years ago, I find that in Australia, the awful thing the Liberals invented in Birmingham in 1870 or thereabouts, the caucus, is very much stronger out here, and for that reason I wonder whether Australian democracy is not, to some extent, tempered by the influence of caucus and is not, therefore, altogether a true reflection of the individual member's personal opinions, or the opinions - if we must be on a mandatory basis - of the electors who put him up for the post?

MR. MENZIES: Well, Sir, I hope I did not convey the impression that I believe that all parties ought to be abolished or that we will ever have a parliament that consists of 124 independents, because, quite frankly, I think that would be terrible. Parliament would simply cease to work, in my opinion, under those conditions, and I would hate to be the independent Prime Minister who presided over 21 independent ministers. I would not want that post.

But what I had in mind, of course, was that conceding the importance of party alignment - we all have them, in all aspects of life. We like to be with our friends who have the same common approach to a problem as we have. And therefore nothing that I say runs counter to that. But I do say that a member of parliament who presents himself to the people as possessing a body of views of that kind, to which he will be faithful and in which he believes, is not to allow himself to be diverted from his proper course in carrying out those ideas by some temporary schmozzle, by some temporary complaint, or a little whipped-up popular temporary movement or agitation, unless he agrees with it. That is the point at which he must say, "I am here to exercise my judgment and not merely to take orders which lie outside the scope of what I have admitted to the electors and on which they have elected me.

I think you are quite right: That the caucus idea has developed a great deal. It is, I think, pretty rigid in the Labor Party; it is somewhat looser in my own, because some more liberty, I think, is permitted. I am sure it is permitted, except on vital matters which affect the life of the government; in which case, of course, any member of my party is free to vote against the government, so long as he knows he is voting to put it out. And that, I think, has a somewhat stimulating effect. (Laughter.)

But I must say to my friend at the back that though I concede these points about Australia, I thought I had perceived them in equal degree in Great Britain. I think that if a party in Great Britain held the Treasury Benches - as one did not so long ago - by 7 or 8 votes, you would find that that caucus instinct would be very, very powerful, even if it represented only the instinct of self-preservation. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Do you think that the establishment in some of the countries of the new British Commonwealth of semi-dictatorial governments is likely, in the long run, to upset the unity of the Commonwealth and take those countries out of it?

MR. MENZIES: It is very difficult to answer a question like that dogmatically. If I thought that the establishment of semi-dictatorial governments here or here would continue until the whole thing became a straight-out dictatorship, not a preliminary stage to getting a parliament or a constitution, but an established thing, then I would think that it was almost impossible to contemplate how such a government could fit into the conception of the British Commonwealth. Because, although we have watered down or altered a number of the old elements which were once thought to be of prime importance, I think the fact still remains that we do set out to be an association of free and self-governing communities, and an inveterate dictatorship would, I think, lead me - if I were one of the people to doubt it - to doubt very much whether such a country ought to remain in the Commonwealth.

But, of course, I am bound to say to you that I know one or two of the pseudo-dictators. I am perfectly certain that in each case it is regarded as an interim stage only to enable the country to be put into a proper state of organisation and to enable democratic institutions of some kind to emerge. If that is so, then one must not be in a hurry. If it turns out not to be so, and it became as great a matter of plain dictatorship as Germany under Hitler or Italy under Mussolini, then I think I would be voting against them.

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