

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH  
SOCIETY DINNER, HOTEL CANBERRA, WED. 16TH SEPTEMBER, 1959

Sir, I think that every speech on an occasion like this ought to begin with a species of confession, and my confession will begin by the telling of a story which has a moral but it happens to be exactly the opposite moral from the one that I'm supposed to maintain.

I remember, that many years ago - it must be many years ago - because I was a lawyer and quite respectable! I was a member of the Bar Council in the State of Victoria and a complaint had been made against a rather well-known member of the Bar. It came before the Committee of Council and a very respected and respectable senior member of the B.R., who was present, put his steel-rimmed spectacles on, looked at the rest of us, took them off, withdrew his chair 6 inches from the circle and said "I want to make it quite clear that the man about whom this complaint is made is a man for whom I don't care and therefore I declare myself disqualified by bias and I will take no further part in the proceedings". He celebrated that by going back another 6 inches but, of course, not by leaving the room. These are the niceties of life that I think you all ought to come to understand.

Well, on this occasion I'm disqualified by bias. But it is the other kind of bias, because Lord and Lady de la Warr are very, very old friends of mine. We have known each other and, if I may say so, liked each other for a quarter of a century. It is one of the happy things in my own life, and in the life of my wife, that we should have them both in Australia and that he, a dubious character (Laughter) was once described by a former Country Party colleague of mine as the best pig-farmer in Great Britain. And I remember being delighted to know that he was a very good pig-farmer - I had no reason to doubt it - but I was particularly pleased because in spite of that unpromising beginning he did not propose a stabilization scheme for pigs. But really, we are old friends. I couldn't tell you how delighted I am that he has come out here, and that he has come as Chairman of this great Society.

You know, it is a great mistake to take it for granted that people take up posts of this kind just for fun. They take up posts of this kind because they have something in them that tells them that this particular thing is important. After all, my friend, Lord de la Warr - apart from, as I imagine, establishing the Red Indian tribe known as the "Delaware Indians" - always imagined that - though the features haven't persisted as much as one might have supposed - has had a rich and varied experience of life. If I spoke to you about his biography you would all be fascinated and he has had a lot of experience of politics and he knows how politicians think. That is not a very easy thing to know. For example, the Commissioner of Taxation over there, he doesn't know how politicians think, but we always know, or we think we know, how he thinks, which is perhaps all the more important.

But Lord de la Warr has really had a remarkable all-round experience of political affairs and when I found that he was to be Chairman of the Royal Commonwealth Society I can't tell you how pleased I was because this is no task of theory; this is a task of practice, of somebody who understands what's going on.

And so having discharged my obligation to declare my bias, as any Company Director, I believe, would, the next thing I want to say to you is that his arrival here and his mission around Australia, helps to remind us, if we need to be reminded, that the Commonwealth, this British Commonwealth of ours, has changed. Great things, remarkable things, stirring things, have happened to it and, in particular, have happened to it in the last 14 or 15 years. And we

may easily find ourselves divided into two schools of thought: Those who say "Well we know the old. Has it changed?" and those who say "We now begin to understand the new which is quite different, in many ways, but which is enriched by the memories and practices of the past".

And this is the crucial question. Are we to go on changing as little as possible, being as reluctant as possible, or are we to say; "Well here we are. There are many differences. There are indeed, sometimes, different personal allegiances, but we are a remarkable group of Nations, not resembling too intimately the state of affairs of 25 years ago, or 50 years ago, or 75 years ago, but an association of countries with certain common feelings and, as I always hope, with certain common passions and faiths". And if that is the position then the Commonwealth has not looked back, except to derive pride from its past. It looks forward to see what it can do for the world and in the world, not only in your lifetimes, and mine, but in the lifetimes of many, many millions of people in the future. And Lord de la Warr is a Chairman who has that forward looking mind; not anchoring himself by regret, but propelling himself by a clear vision of the future and that, Sir, is the second reason why I'm delighted to see him.

And the third reason is really involved in the second. I remember a few years ago, I hope nobody will quote this against me, though that wouldn't be a novelty, but I remember some years ago addressing a patriotic society in London and feeling rather horrified by the fact that 95% of those present were old dodderers like me. You see, this was a sort of old men's and old women's association. We were all eminently respectable people. We couldn't have been better. We said the proper things and we listened to the proper things. The British Commonwealth is not an old community. The British Commonwealth in point of fact, viewed in the eyes of history, is one of the young, vigorous things in the world. Let's get that into our minds. True, we've gone through a phase. We've seen all sorts of changes, but it is the future that matters. And I hope that one of the results of Lord de la Warr's visit to Australia will be that all over this Continent, and not least in Canberra, we will see scores and hundreds and thousands of young men and young women who are proud to be British, who have a sense of the destiny of the British Commonwealth, who will join this Society and work in it and with it so that our grand-children, one or two of whom already show a disposition to be rather offensive, so that our grandchildren wont be heard to say in a few years' time "Poor old fellow. Bit of a dodderer" but will come to believe that they've inherited something, something of pride, something of responsibility, something of passion, that means so much to the world. And for those three reasons, one of bias, and the other two of reason, I am delighted, Sir, to accept your invitation to speak in support of this toast.

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