

CIVIC WELCOME AT NARRABRI TOWN HALL

29TH SEPTEMBER, 1961

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. R.G. MENZIES

Mr. Mayor, Mr. Deputy President, and ladies and gentlemen, and boys and girls -

I live a most peculiar life, quite crazy. I left the office at 20 to 1 today and have to be back home in time for dinner, on peril of expulsion from my own house - everybody will understand that. Wherever I go in Australia if I am driving through a town that is big, or a town that is little, or a town that is middle size, I see some Hall and I say, in a gloating fashion, "I remember making a speech there once". I think it is unlikely that there is any Hall left in Australia in which I haven't had to speak. When I walked in here this morning I reminded myself, and you confirmed it, that I had made a speech here. I shall never forget this Hall - it has one of the highest platforms in Australia. (Laughter) It has a great moral for a politician to speak from a very high platform because he is constantly reminded how fast and how far he can fall! (Laughter) This is very health-giving to people in public life.

But the last time I was here I was here in my complete political capacity. There was a by-election. I am enjoying today's visit compared to my recollection of that one. I have never been so hot in my life - except in New Guinea. They turned on the heat from the heavens and the heat from the platforms and the heat from the audiences. I want to tell you - I hope you won't take offence at it - I was jolly glad to see the last of the place. Today is a very much more civilised occasion.

I was very interested just now, talking to you, Sir, the Mayor, to find out the system of local government because it varies from State to State. I myself have occasionally achieved credit with people like yourself by boasting of the fact that my father was once the President of a Shire and that my earliest knowledge of politics at a very tender age, right up in the bush, was when the Councillor from the North Riding came, clop, clop, clop, down the road, 24 miles from where he lived - he came down in a buggy - to pick my father up. Then they went clop, clop, clop down the road - and a fairly rough one - for another 25 miles, to where the Shire had its seat, and where it carried on its business. For a long time I thought that politicians were Shire Councillors. (Laughter) Now of course I have discovered that it is the other way around: shire councillors are politicians.

But it is a wonderful thing, a good thing, for anybody who presides over the central government of a nation, and who has great international problems to consider, to come into shire or municipal administration, by whatever name it may go, and see where the grass roots of Government are to be found. Grass still remains the most important crop in the world, so the grass roots of Government are, I think, very frequently, the most important aspect of it because you then produce people who have, beginning with a local sense, and local responsibilities, a feeling for public service. It is the feeling for public service that distinguishes a democracy from all other forms of government.

Now I want to tell you, before we move on to the next port of call, how delighted I am to be here, and how delighted I am at what you have been good enough to say Sir. This place is, I discovered, as I came in from the airport, the same distance, almost to a mile, from Sydney by rail, as Mildura is from Melbourne. And to a Melbourne man Mildura seems the last word in remoteness. To say of somebody that he has gone to live in Mildura is practically to say he has been blotted out of the book of life. I suppose you occasionally feel like that here.

I have now lived a fair number of years - unfair my opponents think - yet the longer I live the more I marvel at the tremendous developments that I have seen in my own lifetime. We, in our generation, I in mine certainly, have seen some of the most fabulous changes in the life of mankind. Not only great wars and terrible tragedies, but I can remember the first motor vehicle coming into the valley, the very first. It had been bought by the local doctor and it confirmed the belief that most people had that he must be very rich. It was a motor buggy; not a very comfortable affair, but very superior to the old horse. Fancy a fellow of my age being able to remember the first motor vehicle coming into a substantial part of the state of Victoria. Similarly I can remember the first moving pictures. They jumped up and down on the screen but they were marvellous. The first film I ever saw was the

Great American Train Robbery. And there is no doubt about it, the robbers were magnificent. But the film was jerky. (Laughter)

All these things have happened; radio wireless. We have got all the instruments of civilization put right into our hands except one, the greatest instrument of civilisation, which is our own spirit. You will test the civilisation of any community by finding out how many men and women there are in it who are prepared to do something, unselfishly, for other people. That is why I end, as I began, by saying I like to be brought back into contact with what we call municipal life, local government, for it is in local government that you find some of the most disinterested service to the community that you can find anywhere in the world.

Thank you very much, Sir. I am very delighted that you have given me this welcome.

---