

PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
THE RT. HON. R.G. MENZIES, IN MELBOURNE, ON
13TH DECEMBER, 1961

PRIME MINISTER: I would just like to start in my own way, if I may. As you know I have a long established practice of not making a comment on election results until they are reasonably clear, and in a normal election they would have been reasonably clear by now. But it seemed to me that if I refrained from saying anything too long it might lead to misinterpretation so, while the results are not final, perhaps I ought to say something about them.

It would be foolish to say I am not surprised by the vote. So is Mr. Calwell, and so are you. We are all surprised.

It was reasonable to assume that after 12 years and with the argument that had gone on about the economic policy there would be some losses on the part of the Government - that was to be expected, and we all expected it. But the odd thing about this election - not so odd, well I'll use the word "odd" - is that in Western Australia, in South Australia, in Tasmania, and in Victoria, the movement of votes has been no more than you would expect after a Government has been in office for 12 years.

I don't know yet what the final result is in Kalgoorlie or in Stirling, I don't know. But Kalgoorlie was one of those miracle wins in 1958 in a Labour stronghold and if Mr. Browne is defeated, which he doesn't concede yet, and I don't concede, it will be by a very narrow margin; and similarly with Mr. Cash in Stirling. Also in Western Australia the prospects, I think, are very high that the Government will win three Senate seats. In Western Australia the changes are merely fractional, if any. Well, they exist of course, but they are very, very marginal. The same in South Australia, same in Victoria. On a big swing against the Government who would have thought we would hold Maribyrnong? Yet Maribyrnong looks like being held. Seats once regarded as marginal like Corio, are strongly held, and so on. Tasmania, no change. So that in four States out of six the movement in the voting has been no more than one might have sensibly expected

New South Wales, where the Government's economic policies, I think, were more violently resented than in other States, well there were a couple of marginal seats. I admit that I am very concerned about the position of Mr. Osborne in Evans. I don't yet know finally any more than anybody else what is going to happen in Hume. And there is Cowper. Yes, let's face up to it, the losses, or prospective losses, in New South Wales are greater than I would have expected.

But the key State has been Queensland. And the Queensland vote is not to be explained on the basis of the little lag that comes at the end of a 12 years' term; nor is it to be explained more than fractionally by the economic policy. It is not reasonable to assume that its impact in Queensland would be more violent than in New South Wales, or in Victoria. But undoubtedly in Queensland the electors had come to believe, as I think quite wrongly, that Queensland had had a poor deal in the treatment of the States by the Commonwealth. I don't want to argue about that - I may be arguing about it quite a lot before I am all that much older.

I think there was a wide misunderstanding on this matter, but unquestionably on Polling Day, and no doubt for weeks and weeks and weeks before it, the people of Queensland felt that Queensland was a neglected State. Nothing else could explain this phenomenal overturn of votes, particularly concentrated, in quantitative terms, on Ministers like Mr. Hulme and Dr. Cameron, each of whom has done a splendid piece of work in his own right, but who were between them held responsible for what was said to be the neglect of Queensland.

And in the result, well I don't yet know what is going to happen - maybe 50-50, maybe a very fine majority resolving a few doubts, perhaps, rather improbably, out.

All right, well, if we are out we are out. I'm not saying we are out - I don't think we're out - but if we are then all I can say is the people of Australia have given me their confidence for a long time and therefore I have no personal grievance, none at all. I don't say that we are out - I would think that the worst was 50-50 or, to be more precise, 61-61. I suppose that by the end of the week we will know what the results are - they have been rather long drawn out. I feel rather like King Charles, you know, who apologised for being such an unconscionable time a-dying. But the time has gone on and no doubt we will know by the end of the week.

Whichever way it goes - a dead-lock or majority - I am inviting my Ministers and my Members, that is to say the surviving Members, to meet me in Canberra on Tuesday of next week. Members have to meet because they have to deal with such matters as the election of a leader and deputy leader; and of course Ministers will need to meet because we will need to concert our ideas on what we do. And I don't profess to know the answer yet.

Suppose we were even - 61-61. All right, well, you might very properly say that that will inevitably lead in due course to a dissolution and another election, since neither side could carry on an effective Government in the House with 61 all. We put a Speaker into the chair, we are out-numbered; the other side put a Speaker into the chair and they are out-numbered: we are in exactly the same case - if it's 61-61. But you can't dissolve a new Parliament, of course, until the Parliament has been created and that depends on when the writs are returned and the procedures for calling a new Parliament together - I won't prophesy about that, but no doubt that would be relatively early in the New Year.

If, on the other hand, we have a majority in the new House, well, we have a majority, and we go along.

It is very interesting to recall, you know, that after the 1954 election, when Dr. Evatt produced his promises, and we were not long after a spate of unemployment and the budget, which was called the "horror budget", you remember, by somebody or other, and we were a little bit unpopular - a "little bit" is a euphemism I think - we did win in 1954: we had a majority of seven. Well, there it is, it was a small majority. In the next election it was seventeen, and in the next one it was 32. So that one mustn't become too dogmatic about the size of majorities. The one thing I am interested in at present is to have one. And, as I say, I don't yet know.

It's all very well to say that in a campaign you must expect casualties - of course you do - but I do feel very sad about losing good colleagues. If I might talk particularly about Ministers - I have said something about Mr. Hulme of Supply, and Dr. Cameron of Health, for he has a wonderful record of achievement for this country, and I am told today that Mr. Osborne is in grave danger - he has been doing extraordinarily well at Repatriation - it is a great pity that such men should be lost to the service of the country. But still we have elections so that people may say what side they want - and being a democrat I am all for it - so I must have my sorrow for my colleagues in private; and in public recognise that it is not for me to complain - I have won five elections up to this one so I can hardly accuse the people of being unkind or ungenerous.

I am not going to repeat the speeches that were made during the campaign: I think it is tremendously important that the Government should remain in office; but I think it is very important that Australia should have a Government with authority, because, overseas in particular, there are questions to be thrashed out in the next six months in the resolution of which the voice of Australia ought to be clear and powerful.

If it turns out that we have a majority, all right, we naturally will go on. A majority is a majority. And, if you might allow me to say something that is quite homely, a majority is better than a minority, from the point of view of a Government. If it turns out that it is a dead-lock then quite plainly, at the appropriate time, and I don't profess to know because I haven't looked at the prescriptions on this matter - you know about the reassembling of Parliament and so on - then it will become very important that next time the people should produce a Government that is in possession of a majority. And of course the whimsical part about that is that it means that if there is another election somebody will have to change his mind, or his vote, because if everybody votes in the same way and we are back again in a deadlock, the only sufferer will be Australia, because it will have committed itself to having no Government. Anyhow, Tuesday morning I will talk to my Ministerial colleagues and Tuesday afternoon to the Members.

QUESTION: Are you suggesting, Sir, that the election would be perhaps in March?

PRIME MINISTER: Look, I don't know. Anybody can work that out as well as I can. You see a lot of people think that you can at once proceed to have an election. Of course you can't. The old Parliament is dissolved and the new Parliament hasn't been created; and the new Parliament is created when the writs are returned and Members are sworn in. I don't, off-hand, know when that is. I am going to Canberra - I will be there tomorrow - and I will have an opportunity of looking into that. But until the new Parliament is assembled and created, officially, you know, technically, then there can be no question of dissolving something that doesn't exist. I'm not going to offer a view on the dates.

QUESTION: Do you concede, Sir, that a possible majority of only one, after providing a Speaker, is a working majority, that could be carried on indefinitely?

PRIME MINISTER: If we have a majority of two, and one goes into the chair, then we have a majority of one on the floor of the House. These are interesting speculations. You know there was a time in the history of the Commonwealth Parliament when a Government existed for quite a time on the casting vote of the Speaker - not a very satisfactory state of affairs, I would pray to be delivered from it. But if it came to me I would accept it - being a realist - on the principle that a majority of one is a majority.

QUESTION: When was that Sir?

PRIME MINISTER: Before the First World War - you must check it up - 1914 wasn't it? (1913 or 1914, something like that). A majority of one - and the Speaker got worn out making casting votes.

But of course in this Parliament, which has even numbers - they were odd numbers at that time - 75, you see, 38 to 37, so they were even-steven on the floor of the House - the Speaker had to give the casting vote. But if you have 62 - 60 then the Speaker, if everybody votes, does not have to cast a casting vote, the Government wins by 61 - 60.

QUESTION: Wouldn't this create extreme difficulty in cases of the Prime Ministers' Conference?

PRIME MINISTER: I would think so. Of course we have the practice in the House of Representatives of having pairs and if you have a majority you can adjourn Parliament for long enough to permit of an attendance. So that technically it's all right, but substantially I agree with you: I wouldn't think it a very happy state of affairs.

QUESTION: If you had to approach another election, Mr. Menzies, would you take the optimistic view that a greater number of people had voted at the last Polls to frighten you rather than to encourage Labour?

PRIME MINISTER: You know I am neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet. Of course there are factors in this matter. No doubt there were a lot of people who said, "We'll give him a fright", "They need a better opposition", "We'll stir them up". You know, and I know, that there are lots of people like that, but whether they represent a determining factor in an election I wouldn't like to say. I admit their existence. There may be other people with quite different views, but I don't think, you know, that a second election at a relatively early date would necessarily be a Chinese copy of the current one, no. But I would hope that that election would decide the problem so that ordinary Australians would know where they were, and what Government they had. That is the important thing.

QUESTION: Would you care to further define a Chinese copy?

PRIME MINISTER: Is that one of those expressions I use that is capable of misquotation? You know you would almost think I was stirring up the Immigration policy. It is a phrase with which you, I know, are very familiar. I'm not at all sure you weren't the first fellow to teach me years ago. Well let's call it a literal copy.

I remember once making a statement about something and saying that I thought I detected the fine Italian hand of Mr. so-and-so in this statement, and there was a frightful uproar. "He would have me know that he had no Italian blood whatever..." One must not use these literary allusions, you must make a note of that.

All right, well, you know the old biblical instruction, Mr. Tebbutt - I'm speaking to you because I know that you're susceptible to these things - "Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation". I don't know what that means, in effect, but Douglas Wilkie - he knows everything - he'll tell you. Any more macabre questions?

QUESTION: Just one more, Sir, on the Common Market. Does it affect your immediate consideration, your immediate plans?

PRIME MINISTER: Well it doesn't affect mine, if you are asking about mine, because I had not contemplated that I might have to go there before March, April, or whatever it might be. But if it's 50-50 and if, therefore, we are all getting ready for another election, well, of course, it would become impossible for Mr. McEwen to be there. I had always thought that he might be there ahead of me, because he is in very close contact with these matters, and that I think would be a pity, but still...

QUESTION: What do you think of Mr. Calwell's view that, if the result is 61-61, the Labour Party has a mandate because of the majority of primary votes and therefore should ask the Liberal Party to supply a Speaker and form a caretaker Government?

PRIME MINISTER: Well I think that is exactly what I would expect an Opposition Leader to say - but of course it is useless observation. Parliament makes or unmakes Government. Why, how amusing it would be if I said, "Well, yes, I'm very impressed by that", so I resign and I tell the Governor-General to send for Mr. Calwell and then Mr. Calwell elects a Speaker in the new Parliament and I toss him out on a vote of no confidence. Let's talk practical sense - that is a very unreal remark. I don't blame Mr. Calwell for making it because he is as surprised as I am by the results and is therefore, perhaps, a little excited. Oh, no, that shot is not on.

QUESTION: Sir, the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Calwell, has also said that this will be the first time that either the Liberal or Country Party has had to face sustained pressure and he feels that the Liberal/Country Party is the kind of Party that crumbles on pressure.

PRIME MINISTER: I notice he said that. Well, all I can say is that his Party must be the greatest authority on crumbling in the history of Australia, and I'll always be willing to take his expert opinion.

QUESTION: Do you think that perhaps his gains in these elections have given the Labour Party a new sense of power unity?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know. Who am I to explain the mind of the Labour Party? I have been trying for years to understand it without success. He needn't worry about my side of the House crumbling.

QUESTION: If it's 61-61 then, Sir, you will remain in office and have an election, that is the general thought in your mind?

PRIME MINISTER: If it's 61-61 we will meet the Parliament, the Parliament will make a decision - your guess is as good as mine as to what this decision will be - then I think you might lay a reasonable shade of odds that we will be out electioneering - in the summer, in the tropics!

QUESTION: Will you use television this time?

PRIME MINISTER: Well I did last time. Whether one uses television or whether television uses one, I wouldn't like to say, it's a very difficult medium. Well, go home boys, thank you very much.

Do you know this is the fifteenth election I've had personally, do you know that? Fifteen. And I thought I knew every noise an election campaign made and could form a pretty rough idea as to whether the tide was coming in or out. I confess to you this one was a surprise - this was a dumper, in Queensland. Is that the right expression? I'm not a surfing character.

QUESTION: Are you being kept in touch continually with the results or are you just waiting...?

PRIME MINISTER: Oh, about half a dozen times a day we find out what the last thing is. But you see there are very curious... Now Maribyrnong: I'm told that nothing more will emerge from Maribyrnong until Friday night, and there you are. And of course other seats - Maranoa. Well, of course Brimblecombe will hold Maranoa because Maranoa is running true to the pattern. You see they will all come in. Hume, we won't know finally about for some days.

QUESTION: Would you say it all supports Churchill's thesis that preferential voting is unsatisfactory?

PRIME MINISTER: No. I believe in preferential voting, I do indeed. I am a great sceptic about proportional voting, but preferential voting for the Lower House is, I think, first class. Quite frankly I've never understood why they don't have it in Great Britain.

QUESTION: Proportional voting has gone on for the Senate throughout your 12 years of office?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, I know. Once the system of voting for the Senate is established, it is very difficult to change it because only half go out at a time. And to have half elected under one system and another half elected under another system is very difficult, and there it is. But make no mistake, under the system of voting for the Senate no Government will have a Senate majority, no Government that lasts more than a year or two will have a Senate majority for all its time. You look back on it. From 1949-51 I had a minority in the Senate and we got out of that on a double dissolution; from 1955-58 I had 30-all in the Senate and therefore under the Constitutional rule that where the voting is equal in the Senate the negative prevails, I wasn't in command of the Senate in 1955-58, but we got along.

QUESTION: The Senate is not your major worry in any case?

MR. MENZIES: No.

QUESTION: Do you feel that the original purpose of the Senate has been lost?

PRIME MINISTER: Do you want to buy me into a brawl with those two fellows you know about? No thanks, no. This is not a time for philosophising about the Senate. It is a time for being philosophical about your own position.

QUESTION: Mr. Calwell said he thought since democracy is better served by a clear-cut two-Party system instead of a multiple-Party system...

PRIME MINISTER: Well was that blow directed at me or at the DLP? We'll save up all these reflections until after Christmas.

QUESTION: When are you going back to Canberra Sir?

PRIME MINISTER: I was going back this afternoon but it turns out that I can't. I'm going back in the morning.

QUESTION: May I ask one personal question, Sir? What is the symbolism of that tie? It isn't one of your collection that I'm familiar with.

PRIME MINISTER: Well, when I was in Western Australia in this election the Party chartered a plane from MacRobertson Miller's to take me up to Geraldton - with a number of your brigade you know - to a big meeting there, and they presented me - the Captain of the aircraft presented me with a MacRobertson Miller tie. And there it is: it's red - that gives me a bit one way; and it was given to me for nothing - that's very satisfactory; and they tell me that Ansett controls the MacRobertson Miller - so that gives me a bit the other way. I put it on this morning thinking this was a very happy compromise - 61-61.

QUESTION: Has this been your most tiring election, Mr. Menzies?

PRIME MINISTER: Oh, I don't know, I did about the same campaign as I did last time. I find flying very tiring and when you do about 12,000 miles you're weary. And of course I don't like great heat. But still I must keep my mind off that because if there is another election, and if it's in the summer, I shall have to carry an air-conditioning set under my waistcoat.

QUESTION: You said that Mr. Calwell is as surprised as you are Sir. When did this surprise start? Can you tell us what day, or the result, that started this surprise?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, on Saturday night at about 10.30 or 11 I would have put down the losses at 8 or 10. I then listened in until midnight and I then "rumbled it in my brain" as I lay in my bed and on Sunday morning I sat up and said, "By jove, thinking it all over, this might be 14 or 15". And so my surprise you might say, was a sub-conscious one between midnight and 8 o'clock on Sunday morning.

QUESTION: This was before you heard a radio or read the paper on Sunday?

PRIME MINISTER: Oh, yes. You can't read a paper on Sunday in Melbourne, except the Sydney papers which go to bed - the ones we get - when there are about 600 votes, 400 votes, 200 votes.

QUESTION: Are you finding it possible to relax now, or is it still a ... ?

PRIME MINISTER: I'm a good sleeper. When I put my head on my pillow I believe in going to sleep. And I have had many strange and some bitter experiences in my political life, and I've always put my head on the pillow and said, "That's that". That is why I remain outside the Lunatic Asylum, I suppose, - or whatever they call it nowadays.

QUESTION: Could we take a quick shot at this small kite you obviously deliberately flew a little earlier, Sir, about Members having to elect a Leader and Deputy Leader? Have you any new thoughts on any leader or deputy leader there might be?

PRIME MINISTER: No, no, no. But still it has to be done, because you must, in whatever you are doing, be able to speak with authority. I haven't heard of somebody who is going to oppose me, but still they have a perfect right to. It's a free country.

QUESTION: Sir, are these results likely to change your thinking - the Government's thinking - as far as the economic policy is concerned?

PRIME MINISTER: You mustn't ask me anything about policy because that is the kind of thing that my colleagues and I will have to consider in the light of the circumstances as they emerge. No, I have nothing to say.

All right, boys, now, you have bashed me into the ground, that's enough.
