

8TH DIVISION ASSOCIATION'S ANNUAL SINGAPORE DINNER, SYDNEY

16th February, 1962

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. H.G. Menzies

Sir,

I am very greatly honoured and very flattered by your invitation to be here. I'm afraid that I have been something of a nuisance over this matter because at first a date was fixed - your date, the 15th - and then it turned out by the inscrutable wisdom of the electors (Laughter) that certain things had to be done and I needed to have a conference of the Premiers, and so I had to put you to the great inconvenience of altering, for this purpose, yesterday for today. But all of you notable warriors will understand that I couldn't be here last night, because, like the apostle, I was "fighting wild beasts at sphenus". (Laughter, applause)

And even when we had finished the Conference of Premiers this morning - rather unexpectedly from my point of view, because there were a few items still left - I pointed to the most important remaining one at five past one today and said, "Now I have a Conference this afternoon with the First Sea Lord of England" - who is visiting us on matters that are quite germane to your experiences - "and I must be down in Sydney tonight, I have an important engagement, so could we meet at 2 o'clock". Then, you know, remarkably enough, it turned out that one Premier had to catch a plane at two, another one had to catch a plane at 2.30 because, you know, when you have the money in the bag you don't hang around (Laughter) You might be robbed. (Laughter) And I gave my celebrated imitation of a man to whom time was no object so long as it finished by four o'clock. In the result, at ten past one we had concluded all our business! (Laughter) And I went home and packed my bag and came back to the office and tried to clean up some of the accumulations of legitimate business over the last two days, and then saw the First Sea Lord, and then came down here. Tomorrow morning I go back - I'm happy to tell you that I've made no appointment tomorrow until noon (Laughter) and that, I'm happy to say, will not be with any Premier who wants money. (Laughter)

But tonight, first of all I deeply appreciate the honour you have done me in inviting me to come - I know of no qualification that I have to be here. But in the second place I want to tell you how much I have enjoyed being here - so far - because we have heard two speeches which, to me, were very moving speeches, by Dr. Fisher and by the famous and celebrated Gen. Gordon Bennett. (Applause)

Sir, the one concession that I must make before I say a few things that may matter a little more is this: that having sat in conference with the Premiers and the Treasurers, and with Treasury officials, wearing one suit all the week and getting rather baggy in it, as you might imagine, I brought down a freshly pressed suit with me and when I went over and put it on tonight I found that the pockets were full of papers. I thought "Now how odd. What papers have I?" And all of a sudden when I looked at them I realised that this must have been the coat I was wearing on polling night, (Laughter) because the first piece of paper showed what at 10.30 was my estimate of the number of seats I was losing; and at 11 o'clock I crossed that out and added a few names to it; by midnight I had no more seats to add. It was obviously a season of prayer and fasting. (Laughter) And I thought "Now that's very interesting" because this has all reminded me of what it is like to be on the verge of defeat - and perhaps that is something to remember on a night like this.

I hope you will allow me to say without making any invidious distinctions, how delighted I was when I arrived at this Hotel tonight to be received by that great and good man, Charles Anderson. (Applause)

I am, as you know, the last man to engage in party politics. (Laughter) This is completely foreign to my nature. But I am told, remotely, that you have an election on in New South Wales - not mine, but somebody else's. I hope that without trespassing in the arena of party politics you will allow me to say that I don't understand how any electorate that had the honour to be represented by Charles Anderson should forgo it at a General Election. However, whatever happens to me, he'll be back. (Applause)

Now, Sir, General Bennett has tonight referred to a number of historic events all of which I know I can confirm. I thought perhaps I might just say this to you about them and I want to develop this because I want to demonstrate to you, if I can, how what appeared to be defeat has turned out to be of the most enormous significance to Australia.

At the very end of 1940 we had a report by the military experts on the position in Singapore and in Malaya and it was so disturbing that that was the very reason why, at the end of 1940, having a shrewd idea that I wouldn't remain in office too long after I got back because my majority was even sketchier than it is at this moment, I went off to England. The prime purpose of the journey was to see whether we couldn't strengthen the defensive position in Singapore in relation to Malaya and the Far East because there was an enormous deficiency of aircraft and there was a great weakness in landward defence. There was a naval base, there were all sorts of provisions of that kind for sea warfare, but there was a tremendous deficiency, particularly in aircraft. I don't think I've mentioned this before, but if I grow old enough, and silly enough, to write any memoirs I will have to state in some detail that the prime object of that journey was to secure air defence, particularly by fighter aircraft, in and around Singapore and Malaya.

Of course, at that time, it turned out to be impossible. It's easy to forget these things, but at that time, when I was in England in early 1941 there was no second front - except the fronts that the British were fighting on with their Commonwealth allies - America was neutral, the Middle East presented a dreadful problem, we had all the problems of getting things through the Mediterranean, and in the result you couldn't succeed in getting modern aircraft, or even sub-modern aircraft, for the Far East. All that they had were needed in the battle for the old country, or for the battles that were being organised in the Middle East.

The result was, as we all know, that when the Japanese came in - and at that time, frankly, I thought they would, that was why this expedition was taken on - there was such a deficiency in air cover that their tactics on the land and by the sea succeeded. Well this was a tremendous tragedy. I don't blame anybody for it. I think that as the facts then stood it was an unavoidable one.

But I don't think we ought to stop there. I don't think we ought to say that this is just the final history of the event. If, Sir, on the 15th February of every year you just celebrated a defeat, this would be a depressing event. But I don't believe it myself, because I want to give you two, or three, outstanding reasons why the efforts and the sacrifices and the sufferings of the Division, and of the Air Force attached to them, and of the Navy which served so heroically in the defence as the Japanese came down, are immortal events, and why I believe that they have not been thrown away.

The first reason that I give you is one that has been referred to by General Bennett himself. I have never been able to understand why anybody, at any time, doubted his courage. (Applause) He had shown his courage far too frequently to be accused by other people, and lesser people, of a lack of it. This is too silly. He's long since forgotten it. I refer to it only to assure him that people like myself have never, never entertained such nonsensical ideas.

I remember - I wasn't the Prime Minister, I had been relieved of that post by a discriminating group of people, before these events - sitting, as an Opposition member of the Advisory War Council, when he produced his training manual on jungle warfare and I can confirm everything that he says about it. This became of supreme importance in the New Guinea and the Islands campaigns, and was a tremendous contribution to ultimate victory.

But may I go beyond that? You have all been reading lately about the proposals that are on foot for a greater Malaysia - Malaya, plus Singapore, plus North Borneo, plus Sarawak, plus Brunei - these proposals promoted by the Tunku Abdul Rahman, our great and friendly leader of Malaya to establish on this crescent a greater Malaya which would represent a friendly group of nations closely integrated with each other, standing between us, geographically, and more than geographically, and the Communist threat coming down from Asia. This is a remarkable conception.

And why has it been promoted by Malaya as a friendly power, as a member of the Commonwealth? Why has it been promoted with the whole of those ideas in mind? It has been promoted because behind you you left in Malaya an undying sense of comradeship, of mutual help, of admiration. One has only to go to Malaya today, as I've had to myself once or twice, to realise how high the stocks of Australia and of Australians are in that country. And I wouldn't have you underestimate for one moment the significance of that in these great moves that are now occurring to establish a greater Malaysia which under no circumstances would tolerate becoming Communist, but which, in the broad sweep is on our side, and on the side of the free world.

Now I ask you to remember that ladies and gentlemen. This is from the point of view of a practising, working politician, who has had some responsibility for the affairs of his country. This is a great thought that you ought always to have in your minds. It must have been - God knows that people like myself can't understand it - it must have been a bitter moment to reach the point of acknowledged defeat. But to acknowledge defeat for the time and to go for the rest of your lives thinking that that was the final defeat, would be the greatest tragedy of all. And I beg of you, throw it out of your minds. Because all those events have left their indelible mark on our friends in these countries, and, I believe, on the future of South-East Asia.

Sir, that is my attempt to estimate the impact of all these things on the minds of the leaders and members of these countries in south-east Asia.

But I now want you to come back to our own country. We are not always as interested in foreign affairs as we might be; though rather more than we were. If we are more interested in foreign affairs than we were it is largely because we have, as a nation, become conscious of the significance of South-East Asia, the significance of these countries lying close to us with the threat lying behind them. This is one of the great reasons why Australia has become more conscious of foreign affairs, more conscious in particular, of South-East Asian affairs than it ever was before.

In the result what has happened? One of the early things that my own deplorable government did was to be one of the promoters of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation; and today, SEATO is something of enormous significance to Australia. Here we have a defensive organisation of mutual help, of mutual understanding, of mutual economic assistance, which embraces not only Great Britain and the United States and France and Australia and New Zealand, but also Asian countries - Pakistan, and Thailand, and the Philippines. This is a unique organisation. So long as it exists, so long as all its members stand up to it, we have, in this corner of the world, a defensive mechanism on which we can place our most tremendous reliance. It is a regional agreement in a region about which few people thought, and few people cared, only 20 years ago.

Now if it is true, as I believe it to be, that today we are deeply concerned in this area, that today we are deeply concerned to see that we take our part in this great joint organisation, that this is something that enables us to hold up our heads in the company of our great and powerful friends like the United Kingdom and the United States, then I want to say, Sir, to you, tonight, and to all your members, that what was done by our forces, apparently so unsuccessfully, apparently ending in some form of disaster, has, in fact, been one of the great things to bring the Australian mind to understand how important this great South-East Asian Organisation is. (Applause)

In other words, Sir, you can go through two periods on these matters: you can go through a feeling in which emotions are high and sentiments are high; you can become accustomed, if I may just mention a few names at random to think with pride of people like Albert Coates and "weary" Dunlop and the miracles that they performed; you can think of Charles Anderson; you can think of Gordon Bennett up there with very little knowledge, already acquired, until the events happened and they had to be learned by hard practice. You can think of all these things, and there is a high feeling about them, there is a deep emotion about them. I share them; you share them. But in the long run, in the eye of history it becomes necessary, after a while, to say "Was all this wasted?" "Did all this come and go and be forgotten except in a few warm hearts and a few lively memories?" "Or were these events events which actually altered the course of history in this part of the world?"

It is because I believe that they did alter the course of history in this part of the world, it is because I believe what I have been saying to you about our relation to South-East of Asia, to our great allies to whom I have referred, it is because I believe that that I also believe that your annual celebration is not to be regarded so much as a melancholy event in which people look back with sorrow - though of course we do - but as an event from which you look forward with pride, and with a realisation that these were great things, done for Australia and, as I firmly believe, done for the world.

Sir, I don't want to detain you any longer. It would have been sufficient, from my point of view, to come down perhaps, and to say, and say truly, that I think it is a tremendous compliment on your part to invite me to be here. I would have hated to miss being here. But above and beyond that it has given an opportunity to me - what you might call the more or less precarious head of the Government - to tell you something which perhaps only a man who was Prime Minister around that time and who is now, by the mercy of providence, Prime Minister again some 17 years after it all ended, can see in proper retrospect, and who could tell you what I have told you tonight. I believe it; I mean it; and I hope you will accept it.

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