

1963 AUSTRALIAN CITIZENSHIP CONVENTION

THE RIGHT HONORABLE SIR ROBERT MENZIES, K.T., C.H., Q.C., M.P.,

PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA.

Sir, Mr. Calwell, Dr. Schnyder, ladies and gentlemen;

Arthur Calwell and I have both had a pretty good write-up - or a speak-up - this morning, I because I have now become a thistle and he because he has just become a celebrated author. It used to be said, "Oh that mine adversary had written a book." Well, he has written a book. What is more, I am going to buy a few copies to present to my friends for the very good reason that if it turns out that what he has written is unconvincing it will do me a lot of good, and if it is convincing I shall have to mend my methods.

As for being a thistle, I met my old friend and political opponent, John Dedman, yesterday and I dare say that he is here this morning. He took up with me the question of the interpretation of the motto of this order which I had thought to mean, "Wha daur meddle wi' me!" - "Who dares to meddle with me!" But he assured me, if I remember accurately, that the interpretation is, "Meddle with me and I will jag you". I will check up on that and tell him about it when I see him.

The accent of this conference is on youth. Really remarkable things have happened in my own political lifetime. It does not seem so long ago - although it is about 25 years ago - that we had some experts brought to Australia who issued, with all the confidence of statisticians, a prognosis of future population trends in this country. They assured us that the population of Australia would never be more than 7,500,000, that it would reach that total about 1975 and that, thereafter, the population would begin to decline. You know, one cannot argue about figures. There they were.

Another remarkable thing was undoubtedly happening at that time. Through the activities of medical science and because of important measures of public health the expectation of life in Australia was growing very rapidly. For example, the expectation of life of a male child when I was born was about 50 years. Now, it is about 70 years. This process was going on. Therefore, a remarkable demographic fact was establishing itself in Australia. That was that the number of people who were of what we call pensionable age kept increasing and the number of people who were actively contributing in the earning phases of their life was becoming a smaller proportion of the population. That was the position just before the war and it was on those assumptions that a variety of things took place. You all know how these have been falsified in the light of history. But nothing has done so much to falsify them as the immigration programme. And inside the immigration programme nothing is more remarkable than the proportion of young men and women - boys and girls - to the total increase, through this means, in our population.

The Minister was kind enough to have me provided with a figure or two. That is what Ministers are for when the Prime Minister has to open something. I was astonished - although I should have known them - at the figures. There have been 672,000 post-war immigrants who were under 21 years of age on their arrival. A total of 700,000 children have been born to immigrant parents over this period. In other words - and Mr. Heydon assures me the figures are correct - one quarter of our people in Australia under 21 years of age either came here with their parents or were born here to immigrants since the war. This has been one of the most remarkable events in our history. Its significance can hardly be over-estimated. It presents a challenge to us. More importantly, it presents to us a great source of satisfaction, because it means that

the ratio which our earning population bears to the whole is increasing. Indeed, it has been increasing steadily since the war. It has been a silent social revolution which has been of immense value to Australia as a whole.

There is another thing I should like to say which has been prompted by what I have just been saying about the proportion of young people in our community. We talk, do we not - I know you do, because you come here year by year with great public spirit - about the problems of assimilation. Perhaps we tend to believe that the problem is one of the native-born Australians - let us say the old Australians - conscientiously setting about the process of assimilating other people who have come into the country. But let us not forget that the receiving body, the total Australian people - the body corporate of the Australian people - has itself changed materially. It now includes a tremendous percentage of groups of children who have come here or who have been born here of those who came here. In other words, the assimilating body itself is not static. This body includes in its many hundreds of thousands people who, to use this wretched word, have been assimilated into the Australian community. So year by year, decade by decade, it has become a remarkably new community. It means that we are not to get into our heads stuffy ideas that some of us are of the old brigade and it is very nice of us to be dealing with people who arrive here. We must realise that, although some of us as individuals may not have changed very much, Australia as a community is experiencing a sea change into something rich and strange.

These conventions provide a magnificent opportunity for us to reflect on some of these truths, to broaden our understanding of the problem with which we are dealing, to take pride in the past, and to exhibit courage and determination for the future.

It is a very great pleasure to me to be here. It is indeed a very great pleasure for me to be accompanied by my wife who, I would have you know, is at least as responsible for the twins as I am. The older I grow the more I realise that, although a good deal of hostility is to be found in the world - I know something about that - there is a tremendous lot of generosity. People give one credit for the strangest things. Many years ago nobody rushed up to me and said, "What an extraordinary chap you are to have a family of a couple of sons and a daughter". Oh, no! That was the merest commonplace. Nowadays, if I go to a club or some other place where men gather together I find myself saying to somebody, "You have some grandchildren, have you not, old chap?" He replies, "Oh yes, I have seven." Then I preen myself and say, "I have nine". Then he congratulates me and shakes hands with me. Not only for the earlier reasons I have mentioned but also for this reason, I think that this is a rapidly improving community.

Sir, I shall not occupy your time further. As I have said, it is a privilege for me to be here. It is a very great piece of luck that before I have finished I have remembered why I am here. I declare the convention open.

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Department of Immigration,

CANBERRA. A.C.T.

June, 4th, 1963.