

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

SPEECH

BY

Rt. Hon. SIR ROBERT MENZIES,
K.T., C.H., Q.C., M.P.,

ON

PARLIAMENTARY ARRANGEMENTS.

[From the "Parliamentary Debates," 15th October, 1963.]

Sir ROBERT MENZIES (Kooyong—Prime Minister)—by leave—Sir, at the last general election in December, 1961, the Government's majority was reduced to two, which meant one after the election of a Speaker. It is therefore not surprising that the Government has, throughout the life of the Parliament, been under repeated pressure by the Opposition to go to an early election. Indeed, Sir, when the new Parliament met, a no-confidence motion was submitted by the Opposition on 27th February, 1962, the proceedings taking the form of a no-confidence amendment to the motion for the adoption of the Address-in-Reply to the Governor-General's speech. This amendment was defeated by 60 votes to 59.

Mr. Bryant.—Pretty close!

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—Yes, indeed. That is the point. I am glad you follow me. On 14th August, 1962, in the Budget

debate, the Opposition moved a motion of censure in the normal way by moving, "That the first item be reduced by £1". Had this motion been carried, the Government would, of course, have been defeated. The motion was defeated by 58 votes to 56, there being at that time a vacancy in the Opposition-held seat of Batman. On 2nd April, 1963—that is, this year—the Opposition moved, "That this Government no longer possesses the confidence of this House".

Opposition Members.—Hear, hear!

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—I am delighted to hear it. This motion was defeated by 59 votes to 58.

Mr. Armitage.—How many do you want to win by?

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—After the election, Sir, I propose to win by eleven or thirteen votes. I am indebted to my friend. That was a very good question.

Now, to come back to the facts. The motion was defeated by 59 votes to 58. There was a vacancy in the Opposition-held seat of Grey, but a Government member was absent, unpaired, from the division. On 18th April, 1963, there was yet another censure motion, which was defeated by 57 votes to 55. On 20th August, 1963—again this year—the Opposition moved an amendment to the motion for the second reading of the Appropriation Bill. The amendment concluded with the words—and these are significant words—“the House is of the opinion—

Mr. Cairns.—Are we to have an election or not?

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—Restrain your fears. The amendment concluded with the words, “the House is of the opinion that the Government no longer possesses its confidence or the confidence of the nation”.

Opposition Members.—Hear, hear!

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—It is wonderful how helpful they are on all great occasions! This amendment was defeated by 59 votes to 57, there being a vacancy in East Sydney, an Opposition-held seat. It will thus be seen that already, in somewhat under two years, the existence of the Government has been challenged no fewer than five times, three times with an increasing note of urgency in the last six months.

Mr. O'Brien.—Shocking!

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—No; it is wonderful. You are easily shocked. You will be even more shocked in a month's time.

Sir, in each case it must be reasonably assumed that the Opposition was serious in its intentions, and that it would have welcomed success. Any other assumption would be unwarranted and offensive. Any such success would have meant the defeat of the Government and, under established constitutional practice, an election.

Mr. Webb.—What is wrong with that?

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—Would you mind listening a little? It will be one of

the few times when you will have to listen to me.

Mr. Webb.—If you are here.

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—Quite right. You can always listen to me if I am here, but not if you are not here. I repeat that in each case it must be reasonably assumed—and I gather that this is agreed—that the Opposition was serious in its intentions, and it would have welcomed success. Any other assumption would be unwarranted and offensive. Any such success would have meant the defeat of the Government and, under established constitutional practice, an election.

The Opposition knows, as I do, that in the present state of the House of Representatives, the crossing of the floor by one member sitting on the Government side would bring about the defeat of the Government, as indeed would the inadvertent or voluntary abstention of two Government supporters from a division. These are elementary mathematics. In short, the Opposition has five times sought to force an election which would be one for the House of Representatives alone.

Mr. Cross.—That is right.

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—You do not disagree with that, do you?

Mr. Cross.—Not at all.

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—Of course not! I have it on record now. Five times the Opposition tried to force an election. Do not abandon your leader too quickly, my dear boy. I emphasize this point because I observe that it is now being said by the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Calwell) that an election for the House of Representatives alone, that is, before July, 1964, would be wasteful and improper.

Mr. Calwell.—Hear, hear!

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—He says, “Hear, hear!” and the honorable member for Brisbane (Mr. Cross) does not agree with him! Harmony breaks out on the Opposition benches! This is indeed a curious argument for the Leader of the Opposition to employ, having regard to the events that I have recited. Are we to understand that all of his no-confidence motions were deliberately designed to fail?

I would be reluctant to make any such charge of political insincerity against an opponent whose constant devotion to his party I freely recognise. I add to this short history of events that, as honorable members have observed, in the last no-confidence amendment, less than eight weeks ago, the special inclusion of the words, "or the confidence of the nation" was a direct demand to test the opinion of the nation by a House of Representatives election.

Opposition Members.—Hear, hear!

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—Thank you very much. I submit that these facts conclusively establish that there can be no legitimate objection on the part of members of the Opposition to a dissolution of the House of Representatives, a dissolution which they have done their best to secure on five critical occasions.

Mr. Speaker, I will now proceed to set out some additional reasons for recommending that, without an actual defeat of the Government, there should be a dissolution of the present precariously balanced House, and a new election. There have been times in history when peace seemed secure and when there were no international problems of moment—

Mr. SPEAKER (Hon. Sir John McLeay).

—Order! Honorable members will refrain from interjecting.

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—I am sorry, Sir, but I must instruct honorable members opposite. I remind them that there have been times in history—does anybody deny it?—when peace seemed secure; when there were no international problems of moment; when, in any event, there were no material differences between the political parties on foreign affairs; when there was stability of government; and when circumstances were conducive to long-range policies. The present position of Australia is quite different. Australia is a Commonwealth country, with a significant voice in Commonwealth affairs. It has, apart from its vital association with Great Britain, the United States of America, France, Pakistan, New Zealand, the Philippines and Thailand, in the South-East Asia Treaty Organization, an alliance with the United States and New Zealand in Anzus.

Pursuant to these arrangements my Government has, during the current Parliament, first made an agreement with the United

States for the establishment by it, on Australian territory in the north-west of Western Australia, of a naval radio signalling station, the value and significance of which would, of course, be of the greatest urgency and moment in the event of a war in which the United States was engaged. Indeed, without its prompt and full use, the operations of the United States naval forces of all kinds would be grievously handicapped. My Government believes that in any foreseeable future any such war must be one of defence against Communist aggression and that any such aggression would put the security of Australia at risk. In short, in such events the United States forces would be defending Australia.

In our contract with the United States in respect of this radio installation, therefore, my Government, while providing for general consultation and access by Australian naval forces to the signalling facilities, has not required or obtained a joint control of the station. Such joint control would, of course, enable an Australian government to veto the American use of the station in peace or in war, or require an Australian censorship of the messages transmitted. The Opposition in Parliament has, I believe, made it clear that should it come into office it will re-negotiate the treaty and will insist upon joint control; that is, upon a veto by either party on the activities of the other.

Sir, the station is about to be constructed at the cost of many millions of pounds by the United States. It is, in my submission, important that the inter-party problem in Australia be resolved. In these international engagements, certainly it is essential to security.

Secondly, we have also made a clear but unilateral declaration of our attitude to the new state of Malaysia. This was made by me on behalf of the Government on 25th September, 1963—only the other day, in a sense—in the following terms:—

But for the benefit of all concerned, honorable members would not wish me to create or permit any ambiguity—

Mr. Uren.—Are you happy, Jack? You do not look at all happy, Jack.

Mr. SPEAKER.—Order! The honorable member for Reid will restrain himself.

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—Of course he does not like Malaysia.

Mr. SPEAKER.—Order! Honorable members will refrain from interjecting.

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—I do not mind, Sir. I have plenty of time.

Mr. Cross.—Time is running out.

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—Yes, it is running out for you, but not for me. That is why I say I have plenty of time, and so I repeat what honorable members opposite appear to dislike—the statement I made on behalf of this country in this House. I begin my quotation again—

But for the benefit of all concerned, honorable members would not wish me to create or permit any ambiguity about Australia's position in relation to Malaysia. I therefore, after close deliberation by the Cabinet, and on its behalf, inform the House that we are resolved, and have so informed the Government of Malaysia, and the Governments of the United Kingdom and New Zealand and others concerned, that if, in the circumstances that now exist, and which may continue for a long time, there occurs, in relation to Malaysia or any of its constituent States, armed invasion or subversive activity—supported or directed or inspired from outside Malaysia—we shall to the best of our powers and by such means as shall be agreed upon with the Government of Malaysia, add our military assistance to the efforts of Malaysia and the United Kingdom in the defence of Malaysia's territorial integrity and political independence.

These are words with which all honorable members are familiar. Sir, this declaration has attracted wide international attention, and is clearly of crucial importance in Australian foreign and defence policy. It is most important that the other nations concerned should know whether it carries the clear backing of the Australian people. The Opposition, speaking through its leader on the same day in the House of Representatives, has announced a view which, while listening to it, I thought reasonably helpful. But a close study of the text of the speech makes it clear that the Opposition's position differs very materially from that of the Government. It is true that the Leader of the Opposition said—

The Labour Party supports the concept of Malaysia and welcomes its creation. We believe that this experiment in nationhood should be given its chance, free from attack or interference from other nations, to prove itself.

But, Sir, he went on to say that the continued presence of Australian troops in Malaysia—

Shall be covered by a treaty clear, open, and if possible, mutual, which gives Australia an effective voice in the decision of the treaty powers.

Mr. Don Cameron.—Is there anything wrong with that?

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—If you have patience you will hear what I have to say about it. Whatever this may turn out to mean, since any treaty involves mutuality, it does not mean support for the declaration made on behalf of the Government by me as Prime Minister. I say this for two reasons, which I will state as succinctly as possible.

In the first place, Malaya—and this I am afraid has been overlooked—was not, and Malaysia is not, an alined country. It is a non-alined country or, in the old vocabulary a neutral country, and because of that it is not a party to Seato. It has been, and is, a matter of high policy for Malaya and Malaysia to be regarded as a nation jealous of its independence but not as one having, in peace-time at any rate, mutual contractual military obligation with any other country. In this respect Mr. Speaker, it resembles India. True, Great Britain has a defence arrangement with Malaysia. But this arises from the fact that Great Britain was the "colonial" power, and that, in granting independence under a carefully evolved constitution, I found it desirable to give effective assurances to the new nation that its complete independence would be protected. In short, the British agreement does not run counter to Malaysian non-alinement, but, in effect, helps in a practical way to preserve Malaysian independence.

Australia, not having been the colonial power, stands in a different position. If what the Opposition wants is, as I understand it, that there should be a mutual treaty of defence between Australia and Malaysia under which Malaysia becomes our ally for military purposes in advance of any armed attack upon co-operating Australian forces, then the answer is that such a treaty would, in the absence of a revolutionary change in Malaysian policy, be impossible achievement.

Again, what Australia does under the Government's declaration is to support Great Britain in the defence of Malaysia's "territorial integrity and political independence". This being so, we believe that disadvantage would accrue to Australia if we conditioned our help upon the securing of a detailed treaty. For the reasons I have indicated, any such treaty could not reasonably be expected to express any advance military obligations by Malaysia to us. This being so—this is the vital question—is it better for Australia to have a simple but clear declaration of intention on our part which, in its very nature, preserves our own judgment as to the nature, extent and disposition of Australian forces to be deployed, or for us deliberately to enmesh ourselves in a mass of written detailed rules and regulations which would limit our own freedom of action while conferring upon us no actual rights to secure reciprocal military obligations on the part of Malaysia? In short, Sir, the Government believes that the Opposition's proposal is impracticable and would be damaging to the complete authority of the Government of Australia over its forces in the event of an attack upon Malaysian security or political independence.

The problems which exist in our near neighbourhood are too critical to admit of uncertainty in our national policy. To deal with them, there should be a government with an effective mandate and authority; and the sooner there is one, the better for all concerned.

There is another great issue of international policy which needs to be resolved. I speak about this with some delicacy. It is the declared policy of the Australian Labour Party, I understand—I have not heard the outside voices yet—that Australia should negotiate for and participate in a nuclear-free zone south of the equator, with an agreed prohibition of the accumulation or deployment of nuclear weapons in that area. If this came off, as honorable members no doubt hope it will, with Australia as a party, our allies under Seato and Anzus could not, except against the will of Australia, use nuclear weapons in the defence of this region, including Australia, even though powers north of the equator created and used them.

Mr. Cross.—Nonsense!

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—You must explain it to me. The Government, though it has, in line with the unanimous opinions of the Prime Ministers in conference in London, refrained from establishing nuclear military power itself, would regard the Opposition's policy, if it succeeded, as suicidal—

Mr. Pollard.—Bomb-happy Bob!

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—Now, Reggie, behave yourself! The Government would regard the Opposition's policy, if it succeeded, as suicidal, since it would operate to handicap our defending allies who possess nuclear weapons while leaving Communist nuclear powers, who are north of the equator, completely free to deploy and use nuclear weapons wherever they chose. It is time for this issue to be resolved by the people.

Opposition Members.—Hear, hear!

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—I am delighted to find such unanimity about an election.

To sum up, I would say this: Since the 1961 election, the Government has, after the election of a Speaker, and given completely normal circumstances, a majority of only one in a House of 122 voting members. It will, I am sure, be understood that in the existing circumstances a proportion of the time of myself and other Ministers has to be devoted to what I may call the almost daily problem of political survival, with all the cumulative strains involved.

Mr. Pollard.—What are you here for, anyhow?

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—I am here, apparently, to listen to you. I have listened to you from that seat for a long time, and I hope to listen to you for a long time further. However, since you are apparently unaware of what is involved in office, I will repeat what I have said. I do not mind. It will, I am sure, be understood that in the existing circumstances a proportion of the time of myself and other Ministers has to be devoted to what I may call the almost daily problem of political survival, with all the cumulative strains involved—and one of the strains is listening to the honorable member for Newcastle, who is interjecting. And,

Mr. Speaker, this occurs in a period of Australian history in which an Australian government, whatever side it comes from, should be able to devote the whole of its energies to the international, defence, economic and developmental problems of the nation. These are growing and frequently pressing problems of magnitude and complexity. Their solution calls for close and concentrated attention, undistracted by the parliamentary crises—

Mr. Jones.—Why don't you—

Mr. SPEAKER.—Order! The honorable member for Newcastle will remain silent.

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—With great respect, Mr. Speaker, he came here only to make a noise and he will never make a noise except from the back bench, on whichever side he is.

Their solution calls for close and concentrated attention, undistracted by the parliamentary crises which are inherent in an almost equally divided House. In particular, Australia is increasingly significant in and affected by the political and economic activities and arrangements of other nations. It therefore needs a government that can speak and act authoritatively on behalf of Australia. The nation is entitled to this, and to choose unambiguously who shall speak for it. I repeat that, for the reasons I

stated earlier, the Opposition cannot legitimately object to an election which it has repeatedly done its best to secure.

I shall mention times, because there has been some very funny gossip, stated as fact, in certain organs of opinion. I therefore yesterday morning advised His Excellency the Governor-General that the House of Representatives should be dissolved at the close of the current business on or about 31st October, and that an election should be held on 30th November.

Opposition Members.—Hooray!

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—I share your joy. I had a personal interview with His Excellency yesterday afternoon. I am sorry to disappoint the prophets. His Excellency has to-day accepted this advice in writing on the usual condition, of course, that before dissolution the Parliament should have made the necessary financial provisions for the services of the country. Well, all honorable members understand that. This means that the debates on the Appropriation Bills must be completed before dissolution.

There are, of course, Mr. Speaker, other important measures, some of them arising out of the Budget, which will have to be disposed of. I expect, particularly in the light of my announcement to-night, that all the necessary business will be completed by or before the end of this month.