

FEDERAL COUNCIL, LIBERAL PARTY OF AUSTRALIA

HELD AT HOTEL CANBERRA, CANBERRA

6TH APRIL, 1964

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies

Mr. President and Delegates :

I have been reading with considerable pleasure over the last few days the reports made to this meeting from the Branches and I am most gratified by the references in them to myself. I am even more gratified by the references made to my wife and on her behalf I want to thank you very sincerely for them. (Applause)

You know, I want to take you back quite a few years to the beginnings of our Party. In 1944 when the Opposition in the Federal Parliament had suffered one of the severest drubbings in memory, we were in a state of some confusion and I resolved then and there that something had to be done. There were splinter groups everywhere - some 13 or 14 parties - and I got together with some of our stalwarts - Bill Anderson there was one of them, associated with a particular group - and all the letters calling the groups together went out of my office on the Opposition side of the Parliament. We know what the result has been and it was brought perhaps to its greatest climax in November when we had our great victory. (Applause)

Now my contribution to that victory was to set the date of the election but it was the Party which rallied and in no election have I led a Party which was more united and more determined and more cohesive than was our Party last year. (Applause) This indeed was the seventh successive election success (Applause) It is often said after a series of victories such as we have had that in the normal course, the pendulum principle, that we might expect to lose two or three elections and to be out of office for some years. I have it in my ageing bones that having won seven elections, there is no reason whatsoever why the Liberal Party should not win the next two or three or four or even five more elections for we have been blessed by an Opposition which has fallen from one confusion of mind to another.

This Federal Council Meeting is for all of us a spirited occasion. We will have differences in detail and application expressed but they will not mean differences in the principles of our Party. In a Party of less virility than ours, you might say that the reverses of 1961, coming after an unprecedented twelve years of office, could have caused disintegration, internal revolts and surrender to external pressures.

The opposite turned out to be true. We had, at Canberra, two years of unsurpassed loyalty, steadfastness and, in its literal sense, integrity. That was the principal reason for our great victory on November 30th, 1963.

But there was another reason, which is to be remembered at all times. We rediscovered the profound appeal of Liberalism to intelligent and eager youth.

It may be more than useful to elaborate this proposition, and to analyse some of the reasons for it. In all the great meetings I addressed, I found, for the first time for some years, a great preponderance of listeners in the younger

age-groups. And they were listeners, eager to hear and to understand, plainly concerned about the problems, including the international problems, of our country. It did both my heart and my mind good to see them.

Labour speakers had no such experience, as their leaders have reluctantly conceded.

What do the newer Australian generations want from those of us who are actively engaged in the formulation and execution of policy?

Do they just want "security" in the sense of that word which connotes a powerful paternal government which accepts and performs all duties, leaving it to the citizen to enjoy his "rights". If so, the Australian Labour Party might suit them. It does not understand democracy. A true democracy requires in the citizen the acceptance of duties and the self-respecting reception of rights.

A democratic country is an independent country because it has independent - proud and balanced - citizens.

It is a trite saying (though the Socialists don't understand it) that independent nations are not made up of dependent people; that the greatest privilege of democratic citizenship is to serve a community in which he shares power and responsibility.

It was once the claim of our opponents that we were reactionary, i.e., that we wanted to turn the clock back, to restore laissez-faire, to say "each for himself and the Devil take the hindmost, as the elephant said as he danced among the chickens." (Laughter)

We have, over many years, demonstrated the falsity of this charge. We have greatly aided social justice. We have not just kept the ring and allowed victory to go to the strong. We have encouraged free enterprise, have recognised the making of a people as one of the dynamic inducements to the taking of capital risks in the development of the nation. But we have insisted upon the performance of social and industrial obligations; we have shown that industrial progress is not to be based upon the poverty or despair of those who cannot compete.

After over fourteen consecutive years of political office at the centre of the nation, we can point to a range of achievements, in industrial justice and peace, in social services, in a growingly successful attack upon poverty, in widely distributed rising standards of housing and of living generally, which can be matched by very few countries in the world. (Applause)

How has this been brought about? The answer is, to my mind, clear enough.

We have been human, with a sense of human destiny and human responsibility. As the etymology of our name "Liberal" indicates, we have stood for freedom. We have realised that men and women are not just cyphers in a calculation, but are individual human beings whose individual welfare and development must be the main concern of government. (Applause)

We have no doctrinaire political philosophy. Where government action or control has seemed to us to be the best answer to a practical problem, we have adopted that answer at the risk of being called Socialists. But our first impulse is always

to seek the private enterprise answer, to help the individual to help himself, to create a climate, economic, social, industrial, favourable to his activity and growth.

Our opponents have an exactly opposite point of approach. Their first instinct is the Socialist one: "The right way to deal with this matter is for the Government to run it!" Private enterprise and effort are the alternatives to which they reluctantly turn only when the Socialist plan proves to be constitutionally incompetent or in practice unworkable.

The validity of this brief analysis is, I think, seen with increasing clarity by a younger and, on the whole, better educated generation, who want the opportunity to make their own way and place in the world, and reject the feeble notion that the chief end of man, from the cradle to the grave, is to be ordered around by, and live dependent upon, "the Government". But this utter contrast of approach between Liberal and Labour is still, in the minds of too many people, obscured by two things.

One of them is that the Socialists, especially at election times, put their Socialist objectives and principles under cover. They appeal to the "profit motive", that diabolical thing, by offering to the electors both rewards and fairies. In appropriate electorates, they are, for all practical purposes, Liberals, but with more money to spend! It is not long since their leader promised that, if elected, he would, so to speak, suspend the Socialist objective for the life of the Parliament. What his outside masters would have done about it we will, fortunately, never know.

These are, of course, pretty shoddy manoeuvres, and have lacked success with the general body of electors for a long time. But they have deceived far too many people who ought to be our supporters. It is for us, in this organisation, to make clear the great basic conflict of principle and method to which I have referred.

The other factor which tends to obscure the true nature of the conflict, is the allegation that the Liberals themselves "are Socialists when it suits them." Witness the Post Office, the telephone service, the railways, the great Snowy Mountains Scheme, not one of which, of course, could have been either created or sustained by private investors. To say these things is merely to prove what I said earlier. We are not doctrinaire. We have no instinctive passion for government control or operation for its own sake.

Our first question is not whether the Government could do this thing, but whether private citizens could. If the answer is that they could, our answer is that they should. We deal with each case on its merits, without dogma or prejudice.

Sometimes a middle course must be followed. I will take two examples.

The first is, broadcasting and television. Labour, the Socialist party, wanted and wants Government stations only. We have stood for a dual system, with commercial stations competing. We have much reason to be thankful that such a system exists.

The second is Civil Aviation. Our internal flying services were pioneered by private enterprise. A Labour Government established T.A.A. - the Australian Airlines Commission - and tried to give it a monopoly. The Act was successfully challenged on constitutional grounds, and private enterprise continued.

When we came back into office, we did not seek to destroy the Government airline, which was well managed and efficient. But we wanted competition. We thus evolved our "two major airlines" policy - one government, one private. In the result, the public interest has been magnificently served. Here we have the contrast between doctrinaire socialism and the practical approach of a Liberal and enterprise-encouraging administration.

As I have many times said, Socialism is both reactionary and out-dated. I can understand how it attracted the support of radical thinkers after the industrial revolution in Great Britain and later at the turn of the century, when industrial power was in a limited number of hands, when the rights of employed people were imperfectly recognised, when trades unions were too commonly regarded as subversive bodies, when the economic doctrines of laissez-faire held sway, when social services were almost non-existent, there grew up in many minds a belief - an egalitarian belief - in the virtues of uniformity.

There was, and is, no uniformity among personalities, or talents, or energy. We have learned that the right answer is to set the individual free, to aim at equality of opportunity, to protect the individual against oppression, to create a society in which rights and duties are recognised and made effective. In this free society, the tyrannical notion of an all-powerful State is rejected, and dogmatic Socialism with it. In its place, we have put opportunity without any class privilege, social and economic justice, and the civilised democratic conception that governments are not the masters of the people, but their servants.

I have stated, I venture to believe, our Liberal creed. We must believe in it, preach it and practise it, for its success and survival are essential to the future of our nation.

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