

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL
WOMEN'S BOARD MEETING HELD AT CANBERRA ON
20TH APRIL, 1964

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

Madam President, Mr. Byrne, Your Excellencies and Ladies :

I feel completely unnerved (Laughter) by two circumstances. The first is that when I was cajoled into coming here - I use the word "cajoled" though I might have said "ordered" or "compelled" (Laughter) - I was under the slight misapprehension that this was a board meeting. Well, it is the biggest board of directors I have ever looked at in my life. (Laughter)

And the second unnerving circumstance is that today was, I think, one of the very few occasions that I can recall when I was marched into a roomful of women in complete and respectful silence. (Applause) Those are two special circumstances but, of course, there is the overriding circumstance that for a man to stand up - I exclude the idle members of the Diplomatic Corps (Laughter) - before an audience of 400 women is a very great ordeal, believe me, because opinions differ as to whether men understand women or don't. I am one of the few fellows honest enough to admit that I don't and, therefore, I will just have to say something on my own account.

"The decade of opportunity" - this is a splendid topic. It would have been even better if I hadn't been reminded in the lobby outside that in 1951, I had made a profound observation on this very matter, an observation that I had long since forgotten, but still, "the decade of opportunity" - that is a good title and more than a good title, a very good theme because it is constructive. It means that you are not here to ventilate the grievances of the past but to envisage the opportunities of the future. This, I think, is a thing equally valid for you as it would be for a corresponding number of men gathered together here. "The decade of opportunity".

Now, I had a look at your objects and if I may quote a rather abbreviated snippet from them, I saw that one of the purposes is to provide information and assistance to achieve equal status for women in political life. Now, of course, countries vary. In Australia, I believe that there is, for all practical purposes, an equality of status in political life. This varies, of course, from place to place, but in my own State of Victoria, and in the case of my own Party, the selection of candidates for Parliament is made by a convention of people representing equally men and women. The fact that they almost invariably select a man for a candidate is not my responsibility (Laughter). I think there is, in substance, equality of status for women in political life but we can't end there, can we? Equality of status, I suppose, means equality of opportunity. We all, man or woman, have our chance, politically, by vote, by influence, by representation in Parliament and so on. How far we take advantage of that opportunity is really a matter for us and not for other people.

I want to say something to you about this question of politics, because although I am not quite as long in the tooth as a Prime Minister as you might suppose, I have still had some experience of it and I suppose I might be regarded as having some expert views in the political field. Quite true. I needed to be reminded that it is twentyfive years since I first became Prime Minister, but I think that in justice to the people of Australia, it should be pointed out that two years and four months later I was relieved of the burden of office. (Laughter) And that it

took another eight years for me to purge my offences and be once more admitted to this office. If you want to see a genuine quarter-century head of government, you want to go to South Australia and insist on them showing you Sir Thomas Playford who has been Premier of that State - well, I think he was Premier before I first became Prime Minister of Australia and he has been Premier ever since and, so far as I can judge, only the Grim Reaper will remove him from office. (Laughter)

However, even in my limited experience, something is learned, and I thought I would like to say this to you that you are an international body, as we have been reminded, that you have come here from a variety of countries - some of them old in government and some of them new in independence and self-government; it is just as well, I think, for us to ask the question: What is involved in taking a hand in politics? And in particular, for a woman to take a hand in politics.

I hope you will not think me offensive when I say that it is not sufficient for any woman just to stand up and say, "I am a woman. Parliament ought to have the women's point of view and therefore elect me to Parliament", because I would be most astonished to discover that there is any more unanimity of view among ten women than there is among ten men. (Laughter) I don't undertake to say at any time what the man's point of view is but I know what my own is, mostly, but I don't undertake to generalise and I think it is a mistake to generalise.

The first thing to do about politics is to understand quite soon that this is a business of the utmost seriousness. It lends itself to fun occasionally, to a little genial abuse occasionally, but it is a matter of the utmost seriousness. It is the business of the nation and if the business of the nation is to be conducted with skill, with understanding, with humanity, then there are some things that must be learned about it. Not at all sufficient for any one of us to go into Parliament and say, "I don't need to know any of the basic elements of politics. I come here to argue for so-and-so and this I will continue to argue for until I achieve it. It may be right; it may be wrong, but that's my theme."

Now I believe, in my own old-fashioned way, that you can't begin to understand the politics of a country and therefore to participate in politics of that country unless you know the true structure of government in that country, until you really know what is the machinery by which that particular nation has chosen to get itself a government and to get itself laws. This is where all the variety is met.

Here we are in Australia. We are a Federation. We have six States who were, until 1901, self-governing colonies completely attending to their own affairs and then we had a Federal Parliament and a Federal Government which has some specific powers of a national kind entrusted to it, all the other powers remaining with the States. Now this is a complex system of government. Highly complex. It is a highly legalistic system of government because as somebody says that the Commonwealth Parliament has part of the law which it had no power to pass, it is liable to find itself in the High Court of Australia, corresponding to the Supreme Court of the United States of America, and having its law declared invalid. You can't separate a good deal of legalism from federalism, but you can't begin to understand the political problems of Australia without first understanding that it is a country with a federal system and that powers are divided between the national Parliament and the State Parliaments. You don't solve problems as people very

frequently try to in Australia by taking them all to Canberra, (Laughter) because most of the problems that people want to take to Canberra ought never to come here at all; they belong to the State Parliament or the State Government or the municipal council or municipal government. Even in our own country where we have now sixty-odd years of experience, there are far too many people who undertake to talk about politics who just don't understand the structure of government, the division of power, the division of authority and therefore the division of responsibility in a federal system. Those who come from the United States know a great deal more about this because the United States has a federal system. I will say something more about that in a moment because there again, there are plenty of opportunities for error and misunderstanding.

Now, our great neighbour, New Zealand, intimately associated with Australia, has two advantages, if I might put it that way, and I think they would put it that way from their point of view. One is that they have none of this problem of legalism because they do not have a federal system. They have a unitary government. Rightly or wrongly, they have one government over one people. That is a very great advantage to them from the point of view of simplicity, of understanding the political scene. I am not saying that the same system would apply to Australia because I don't think it would. And of course there are other great advantages that we, being fairly near and somewhat larger, they are able to tell us their opinion of us with complete friendliness and with great effect. (Laughter)

Now I said that if you take the United States, you have another federal system of government with a division of powers between Washington and the various American States. If you go further afield into other countries, other countries in the British Commonwealth, you will find an almost infinite variety of systems of government, some of them with a high centralisation of power in the executive, some of them not, but I defy anybody to identify the system of government in almost any one of them with the system of government in any other and that of course is right. That is as it should be, because you don't make people independent in order to compel them to adopt your system of government; that is a denial of independence and when people become independent, they have a perfect right to choose their own system of managing their affairs and they may choose to do it by a concentration of power in the central executive that would be intolerable to us in Australia or they may find some middle course, but whatever it is, it is theirs.

There is a good deal of false optimism in the world about this matter. People are very tempted to think - particularly in some of the great Western countries - that all you have to do with a former colony now to become an independent nation is to endow it with a parliament, or whatever it might be called and all is well - you have established a new system of government. Of course you haven't because all systems of government proceed from the ground up. They grow; they are not built from the roof down; they are not imposed on people. They have to be, in the long run, the choice of the people themselves. Therefore there is an infinite variety of ways and means of a country governing itself.

Having said that, I just want to turn back very briefly to what I was saying about the United States of America, a country held in great respect and affection in Australia, a country to whom we are bound by many magnificent ties, but we are quite capable of misunderstanding Americans and American

administration, just in the same way as in London there is always a danger that there will be a grave misunderstanding of American policy and in Washington a grave misunderstanding of British policy. This used to trouble me a great deal wondering how this came about, how could there be any instinctive opposition between people so close, so identified in their ultimate ideals and in a great deal of their history. How could there be this, as an instinctive matter; why did this irritation arise; why was it that every few years you would find such an uproar going on in London and in Washington that you would think the two countries were going to become inveterate enemies. We have all seen this happen, haven't we. And I have a theory about it.

My theory is that people have neglected the first lesson to be learned in politics and that is to understand the structure of government, to understand how policies are evolved and how they are put into operation, because if you do that, you will at once realise that the American procedure and the British procedure are utterly unlike and until people on my side understand the differences, they will tend to misunderstand the results and misunderstand the circumstances. Just let me explain what I mean and in this respect, what I say about the United Kingdom is equally true about my own country because we derive our governmental system from the Old Country. All right.

How does a policy become evolved, a public policy on some informational matter particularly? How does that become evolved in London? By a Cabinet, they have a Cabinet meeting. The Foreign Minister circulates papers about his particular problems, about nation X, Y or Z. They all have an opportunity of reading them. The red boxes go round and they have their keys and they read them. Then they arrive at the Cabinet meeting, and then they discuss what the policy ought to be, and at the end of the Cabinet meeting, that has been determined. It is no longer the policy of an individual, it is the policy of the Government of the United Kingdom, deliberately, carefully worked out, and therefore when it is announced, people may accept it, subject to the infirmity of politicians who do occasionally change their minds, I know, but people will accept that as the policy on this problem of Great Britain.

If some private Member of Parliament makes an extravagant speech, either on the extreme right wing or the extreme left wing, and, you know, these wings are projected in all parliaments, nobody need assume that what he says is the policy of Great Britain - indeed, on the contrary, everybody in Great Britain knows that it isn't the policy of the Government because if it were the policy of the Government, he wouldn't bother to make the speech. He has made his speech to exhibit his difference not his agreement, and the result is nobody really assumes that because this type of extravaganza is engaged in, one way or the other, that that has anything to do with the policy of Great Britain. That is true in Australia.

Now, in the United States, their system of evolving policy is quite different. They evolve policy far more through the process of public debate than we do in British countries. Take an example. The Secretary of State, the Foreign Minister of the United States, a great functionary, he is, in the eye of the world, the man who expresses and is responsible for the foreign policy of the United States, but very frequently before he has time or opportunity to come to a conclusion, the matter is taken up before a Committee of Congress - Foreign Affairs Committee, Foreign Relations Committee - and he is there cross-examined, very frequently publicly, about how his mind is running, how it works. Then somebody else comes along who is the majority leader in the Senate or who is a very prominent Member of the House

of Representatives, and he is called before the Committee and all this is thrashed out, you see, day after day, day after day, in public, so that the policy on this matter perhaps begins to emerge as a result of public discussion, because this is public discussion if the press people are there and not uncommonly the television people.

Now in Great Britain, where they are accustomed to the habit of pronouncement, they read this. They say, "Oh, well, did you see what so-and-so said? He is the majority leader in the Senate and this is what they are going to do." And when the following day it turns out that somebody equally authoritative has said to the same Committee that exactly the opposite is what they want to do, a feeling arises - I have seen this happen - that there is too much fluctuation in policy. "All this variation, why don't they make up their minds," whereas the truth is, of course, that this is part of the process of making up the mind and nobody ought ever to get excited about it until the end result.

The late John Foster Dulles was a friend of mine and he was a man of great character; very controversial, I agree, but a man of great character and of high patriotism. I knew him well, but Foster Dulles liked to have public conferences and public discussion. Well, each man to his choice; he liked this, but he used to think aloud at these conferences. I have twitted him at this in the past. He used to think aloud. He used to say, "Well, now, ask a question. Look, one thing we could do about this would be so-and-so" and he would explain that with great clarity, and the gentleman from the Indianapolis Gazette or whatever it might be, if that line suited his papers, would rush out and put it on to the wires. Perhaps before two minutes had gone, Foster Dulles, still thinking aloud, would say, "Well, on the other hand....." and he would give the benefit of his views to the conference, discussing three or four alternative possibilities.

Well, now, this I concede at once, was very good, if all reported, from a public educational point of view. It would help people to understand what the possibilities were on this matter, but of course in the result, view No. 1 would be in the afternoon newspapers somewhere and view No. 2 in the morning papers somewhere and view No. 3 in the following afternoon's papers because these are the rules of life. And the result was, a lot of people used to say, "Why doesn't he stick to one policy? Why doesn't he keep his mind clear? Why all this wavering around?" And I would frequently have to explain to people that it wasn't that at all, that when he reached his conclusions, he reached a firm conclusion and his technique, though well understood in the United States, wasn't understood at all in Great Britain or in Australia.

Now, I don't want to convert this into a series of historical reminiscences but I just want to establish the one point that I wanted to make to you that if you want to lead up to a more complete approach to politics and political activity for women, then to begin with, you must understand something about the system of government in your own country and, if possible, something of the comparative systems of government in the world, because if we all understood them, clearly, we would be saved a great deal of misunderstanding and occasionally a certain amount of ill temper. In short, this business of politics is not just a matter of making speeches about some current or casual problem. The business of politics is the business of government and it can't be conducted with skill or with safety unless the people who are engaged in it understand the foundations of their science

and their art as well as its particular applications at any given moment.

Now that all may seem very dull but I remember many years ago reading a book by, I think, Stephen Leacock. It might well be because it was a very wise and amusing book. He pointed out that in one part of the United States of America where he lived once, he encountered a judge who, whenever there was any family occasion - a wedding, a funeral, a christening, a jolly get-together - always arranged to have himself called on to speak and always gave a short but powerful talk on the American Constitution. (Laughter) There is a lot to be said for that old judge. I hope not to be so tedious as that but I thought the opportunity should not pass without my suggesting that there are basic elements in all these things which should not be neglected.

And having said that at undue length, I now - I was going to say have great pleasure in declaring the conference open, but I have great pleasure in declaring the Board open.
