

JOURNALISTS' CLUB 25TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER

SYDNEY, N.S.W.

31st JULY, 1964

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

Sir,

It is a very difficult and dangerous thing for a politico to make a speech to newspapermen. (Laughter) Something you said reminded me of the fact that quite a number of years ago, but after the occasion to which Ken Slessor referred, I was given a dinner - this seems most improbable but still it's true - by some newspapermen when I was in Melbourne. It was a very, very, good dinner, and there was a certain amount of lubricant (Laughter) available and I was no doubt adequately lubricated, but others were more so, and at a certain stage in the night I remember a well-known newspaperman coming along and standing over me as I sat in an armchair and saying, "You know....." and he was rather tedious about this. He kept on. (Laughter) He kept on, he kept on. It was like a slipped disc. (Laughter) "You know, the trouble with you is that you don't suffer fools gladly." (Laughter) (Applause) Much to my credit, I found myself saying, "And what do you think I've been doing for the past fifteen minutes?" (Laughter)

Well, the Press and I have always understood each other. We've always been a bit hostile. (Laughter) We've enjoyed a certain amount of hostility. We've loved it, and every now and then I found myself reading one of my favourite columnists and I've read him and I haven't dared to say how good he was because I knew that in that field, for every friend you make, you make three enemies. (Laughter)

But I'm delighted to be here. I had forgotten that it was twentyfive years ago that as a young and promising man, but perhaps not so promising as I am now, (Laughter) (Applause) I'd gone to Pfahlert's Hotel..... Do you mind if I tell you something about Pfahlert's Hotel? (Laughter) Not that I pretend to qualify as an extremely bibulous creature, but many years ago, as it seems to me now, I was a great friend, I am happy to say, of Lionel Lindsay and I had met Norman Lindsay a few times and we had a natter about this and that and there was a dinner of some learned society - you know, the artists and architects and what-have-you, at Pfahlert's - and I was a guest. That afternoon I was around talking to Norman Lindsay. He wasn't a guest, and I having that degree of impudence that makes a man a Prime Minister (Laughter) said, "Norman, you must come tonight to Pfahlert's hotel. "Oh, no," with the well-known Lindsay voice. "But", I said, "You must come, Norman, you must. Lionel is going to be there." (Laughter) And he said, "Oh, well, yes, old man," and I dragged him along.

Whoever was presiding at this dinner, he was as kind as he could be. He just put it down to the eccentricity of a politician, and I arranged with him that I would sit here and Norman would sit there and Lionel would sit there. Well, now, truth be admitted, they hadn't spoken to each other for about five or six years, and I had an idea about this, so there they were. With a suitable interjection by me, like a fellow putting a rather stupid question at a press interview (Laughter), (you all know what I mean by that) (Laughter) they got cracking.

They were going fifty to the dozen, right through the dinner. The next day I went out to see Lionel, who was a particular friend of mine, at his house at Wahroonga and I said, "Lionel, I thought that went rather well, last night, you and Norman." "Oh yes, old man," he said, and you won't understand this unless you know the Lindsays, he said, "Quite right. Very good fellow, Norman, but the only trouble is that he talks too much." (Laughter)

Now, Sir, the second thing I want to say is that by the great kindness of my deplorable press secretary, Ray Maley (Applause) whose restoration to health pleases me beyond words (hear, hear) (Applause), I was given a copy of the journal - what was it called - "Copy", a rather restrained title, so unlike the headlines to which I am accustomed, but anyhow, I read this with loving care and therefore I am able to tell you that I share your pleasure in the fact that since 1941, Snakey Smith has not been with us. (Laughter) I didn't know Snakey Smith. I suspect he was a fellow a bit like me. (Laughter) Anyhow, Snakey Smith was turfed out. I don't remember reading in the newspapers about Snakey Smith being turfed out (Laughter); I don't remember a great cause célèbre having arisen over Snakey Smith's expulsion. I don't remember about the rules of natural justice having been violated, (Laughter) You know, really, you are terrible, except, I suppose, that you have to take orders. (Laughter) Anyhow, Snakey is not with us.

Then I began to say to myself, "Well, now, I have had a good deal of experience of this and that and I began to think about that great art of reporting now so neglected (Laughter) and my mind went back to earlier political days. Now, there are very few of you here who don't know and recognise Clive Turnbull (hear, hear) (Applause). Now would you allow me to say that I think Clive Turnbull was one of the greatest reporters. I know that he is a man of singular talent in many fields and one of the greatest reporters in my lifetime. (Hear, hear) (Applause)

The moment I began to think about it, I remembered that in 1932 there was an election in Victoria - this is before some of you were born. But anyhow, there was an election in Victoria and my crowd were about to win. It does happen occasionally. (Laughter) For the only time in my life, I was returned unopposed - a rather depressing experience - for the electorate of Nunawading in Victoria. Therefore, Sir Stanley Argyle who was the leader of my side said, "Well, would you go out and do a series of meetings around the country?" This was my first barn-storming tour.

In those days, of course, the perquisites of office were not all that good (Laughter), and so I drove my own car and I had my wife with me in the front seat, and in the back seat, a spare wheel and Clive Turnbull. (Laughter) Clive was sent out by the Melbourne "Argus" which was then in its heyday, and so there we were. We went around, we drove to Warnnambool, Hamilton, Ararat and Great Western and Stawell, and Clive was there at the back with that rather humorous chuckling sound of his. The amazing thing about this man was that although we had gone to meeting after meeting, and I had said all the usual things and the audience had either been bored or not so bored, as the case may be, Clive would send in a column for the "Argus" which not only - and I would like you boys to make a note of this - contained a fairly accurate idea of what I had said with a commendable brevity that I couldn't command (Laughter), but also by a few little brush strokes - this was brilliant - conveyed the atmosphere of the meeting. Now this seemed to me to be

the greatest exercise in reporting I'd ever known, and looking back on it, I still think it was. The few little smudgy strokes which let the reader know something of the quality and character of the meeting. So, as the time went on on this journey, I conceived quite an affection for Clive. There he was in the back seat of the car, with the spare wheel (Laughter) on the left, and my poor wife sitting there, and I am sitting here driving.

I made a powerful speech in the morning at Ararat. If you have been there, you will know Ararat - no not Jeparit - but at Ararat, the platform, the stage is the highest in the world. It's about as high as the wall, so that when you spoke to your audience - being lucky to get one (Laughter) - you peered over, like a man peering over the precipice. It was really terrible. Anyhow we got through it. I made a powerful speech. It perhaps didn't mean very much, and then we drove on.

The afternoon meeting was to be at three o'clock at Great Western. You know, Great Western champagne..... Great Western this and that, and Great Western is a lovely little hamlet on which the sun falls pleasantly, in which, so far as I have been able to observe, nothing ever happens, but on my paper it said, "Three o'clock - Great Western." So being the slave of the clock, I arrived at five to three. I pulled up my car with my wife, the spare wheel and Clive Turnbull, and we identified the local hall, which is not difficult in a place like Great Western, and at about ten past three, I said, "Well, it doesn't look like a meeting" and at twentyfive past three, a very earnest-looking man arrived. It might have been a journalist for all I knew, but anyhow, he was very serious. He walked to the place and he unlocked the door so I hopped out of the chariot and said, "Well, excuse me, but there is a meeting, isn't there?" He said, "Oh, yes, a meeting this afternoon. What is your name, sir?" I said, "My name is Menzies". He said, "Oh yes, you're speaking." I said, "You couldn't be more right, but is there a meeting?" "Oh yes," he said, "That's all right," I said, "The meeting was for three o'clock and it is now twentyfive past, what about it?" He said, "Oh, don't worry about that. Come in." So I walked in and there was this little anteroom of the Great Western hall with seats for twelve people. In those days, I was more ambitious than I am now, and I said, "Twelve people?" He said, "Yes, that's right. Twelve people. They'll be here." "But", I said, "Now, wait a moment. It's now half past three." "Oh, well," he said, "You know. The boys don't hurry along in these parts. This is a wine-growing district."

Well, now, I must tell you I was supporting a rather battered veteran of my party who didn't quite know what it was all about at this time and therefore had to be concealed and there was a Country Party candidate - I refer to this with great deference - and there was a Labour man. Well, we went in and I had a look and I said, "Well, yes, twelve people." Then at about a quarter to four, the audience began to arrive and believe it or not, by four o'clock, we had eleven people there and my poor wife was there and Clive Turnbull with a pad, you know, already to report this exciting event. Then the local man said, "Excuse me, Sir, I will go and get the chairman."

He galloped along the road a hundred yards and collected the chairman from the bar parlour (Laughter). The chairman arrived and I must say that the chairman had been rather over-trained (Laughter) because he came in between a hiccup and a hiccup and he sat there in the chair. Then he said, looking at me, "All right, lad, get going" and the lad got going, and I made

a speech. You must - it doesn't matter whether the audience is eleven or a thousand, you must speak your piece. But each time I said - this is a long time ago, you understand - "a thousand", he used to give a little hiccup and say "millions" (Laughter) and so I went along this millionaire course in this speech and then I, very courteously, as my habit is, said "Any questions" and two of the eleven had a question to put and each time my answer was amended by the chairman who increased it quantitatively by saying, "No, no. Make it millions" and so we finished. At the end, the chairman, who by this time was quite incapable of rising from his chair, (I have a feeling most of you will understand) (Laughter) said, "Ladies and gentlemen. The best young candidate I ever heard" and I gave a bit of a smirk, and so we got out and we went to the footpath where I had my car, with my wife, and Clive Turnbull and the spare wheel.

This old boy came over and said, "Excuse me, Mr. Mac, but would you like to come along and have a bit of a drink at the corner?" I said, "Well, it's very kind of you, but I am due to make a speech in Stawell tonight". "Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Mac but you know, Mr. Mac, you are the best candidate I ever stood for." You know, I'm not very accustomed to this kind of flattery (Laughter) and therefore I gave the nearest approach to a smirk that a fellow like me can make. So I said, "I'm terribly sorry" and we drove off, and a quarter of a mile along the road to Stawell I pulled up the car and said, "Gosh, I just remembered. Do you know that my candidate for this seat is old So-and-So who has held it for some reason or another for some time, and then there's a Labour man and then there's a Country Party candidate whose name is MacDonald" (Laughter) (Applause). I said to Clive Turnbull, having then more faith in you wretches than I have now (Laughter), I said, "What should I do? Go back and put it all right?" And he said, "Oh, no, leave it at that. Push on to Stawell." Do you know that when polling day came, and the results were out the next day, I had secured the record of the vote at Great Western. I looked at the previous election and the current election, and we had got exactly the same vote to a man. All I need to say to you about that is that the following election when I didn't address the electors of Great Western, Mac won. (Laughter)

Now, might I tell you one other thing, because this is really of historic importance. In Washington, there are two press groups. There is the National Press Club which is replete with quarters, bottles, glasses. It's a magnificent place, and when you go there to speak, you are received on the sidewalk and you are taken up and you are plied with various liquors and then you go in and you make a speech. Then you are asked questions. The chairman has them all put on paper and he picks out the ones that you think that he thinks you can answer. I find this very advantageous.

Well, I must tell you because this will add to your store of knowledge, that a few years ago, when Percy Spender was our Ambassador in Washington, I was made a guest of State. This is something rather important. You common herd wouldn't understand this. I once was a guest of honour in Paris and half the French guards were out on the streets and all sorts of things happened. In America I was this time the guest at Blair House, which is something. At Blair House, I must say that the provision was adequate. But I had accepted an invitation to make a speech at lunch time at what I thought in my stupidity was the Press Club, but turned out to be the Press Association - whatever it might be. Well, Percy Spender who

was much shrewder on these matters than I was, called along about twelve o'clock at Blair House and bounced upstairs and saw me and said, "Well, now, before we go to this thing, perhaps we ought to have a drink." "Oh," I said, "Percy, nonsense, you know these boys. They'll give you so much to drink before lunch that you are very lucky if you make a speech at all." He raised a query, I must say, in his favour about this, but I said, "Oh no, you can't do that." So we ultimately went down, bone dry, and we found ourselves driven to the Hilton Hotel and we were then put into that floor that exists between the ground floor and the first floor, the entresalle or something. Anyhow, we went there and we met all the most worthy creatures in the world, but nobody had anything to drink.

Then we went into the large diningroom and there they had five hundred people and we marched in and I went to my place. There was a magnificent old man in the chair from Florida. He was really a gorgeous person. Old - he was as old as I am. Therefore he was an old man, and he sat there and I sat here, and I looked down and I saw two tired pieces of cold potato and a glass of iced water (Laughter) and I thought, well, well, this is not the Press Club. (Laughter) And then this nice old man, whom I shall always recall, looked around at me. He was really a fine old Southern gentleman. He said, "I'm terribly sorry, you know, but you've been at the Press Club and they are very rich and we are very poor. We just can't afford to do these things." So I said, "Oh, forget about it."

Then all of a sudden it occurred to me, and I said, "Now, wait a moment, I'm not complaining. You must forget about me. Didn't Winston Churchill speak to you fairly recently, about a year ago?" And he said, "Yes, he did." "Well," I said, "Don't tell me that you fobbed Winston off with a little iced water" (Laughter) and he said, "Well, no, sir". From now on, if you don't mind, I will say what Winston said in Winston's own voice as nearly as I can do it. He didn't, he was a most courteous chap from Florida. He said, "Well, you know, sir, we knew that Winston Churchill liked a little alcoholic liquor, so we sent down below and we got a double scotch and we had it brought up." I said, "I know exactly what a double Scotch means in this country. You fill an enormous glass with lumps of ice and water and all this kind of thing, so that you wouldn't know what it was." "Well, now, sir," he said, "you've got something there, because when the old gentleman picked it up and he tasted it, he said, 'You know, it's very remarkable how the flavour of good Scotch whiskey dissipates itself.'" (Laughter) He said, "You know, sir, I don't know Winston Churchill as well as you do, sir, but I got the hint and so we sent down below and we got neat, without any additions, a double Scotch and it was brought up and poured into the old gentleman's glass, and he took it up and he tasted it and said, 'Mm....Yes. I can distinctly taste the flavour'" (Laughter).

I mustn't be too frivolous any longer because I am a very serious-minded fellow. Did I make a note of anything else? Now let me have a look. You know, I'm flogged on by this fellow Maley who every now and then says to me, "Have you had any bright ideas" and I very seldom have. Oh, yes. There is one other that I thought I would say something to you about. This is of great importance to you newspapermen because you know, don't you, that you are the greatest suckers in the world. (Laughter) Anybody who starts an old story afresh sells it as if it were a new story. Now this is right, isn't it?

There was a great and good man in England called Birkenhead and I have had the great pleasure to know a number of witty and distinguished lawyers in England but every bright remark that anyone of them ever made is now attributed to Birkenhead. This is the rule of life. You chaps live on your own legends.

The other day in Canberra, which is a little provincial city which you know but which now publishes a national newspaper (Laughter), a gentleman wrote a letter to the press. Now the letters to the newspapers are fascinating, aren't they? Unbelievable. I read them with immense joy. This gentleman, if I may so describe him, had a very witty movement in his mind and he wrote a letter, having discovered that there was one man in Canberra, where we now have a lake, and this man wanted to buy a gondola. Now in Melbourne, my own city, they have a thing called "Moomba". I have never quite understood it, but there it is. And somebody had a gondola brought out for Moomba and my distinguished compatriot in Canberra said, "Well, I'll buy the gondola". I wouldn't know at what price. It might have been quite cheap for all I know. Anyhow, he decided to buy a gondola, and then a witty fellow - must have been from the National University (Laughter) - wrote a letter to the "Canberra Times" which is now, of course, you understand, under very highbrow control (Laughter) and said, "I take great exception to somebody buying a gondola. Why not a pair and breed from them."

Now this was recited to me in my own household as almost a paroxysm of wit. A gondola, yes, why not two..... Until I remembered fiftyfive years ago, literally, when I was a schoolboy in Eallarat, the stock joke in Ballarat was that one of the local councillors, when told by another that they ought to put a gondola on Lake Wendouree said, "Why not have a pair and breed from them?" (Laughter) Now, really, gentlemen, this is something that you ought to pay great attention to because it shows that all humour is a folie circulairre and that wit is repetitive. I will always be indebted to this learned gentleman in the "Canberra Times" because I will quote him when in my own household circle I tell a little story so full of wit, so full of point, and the family say, "Cut it out, Dad, you told us that twenty years ago." (Laughter)

Now, could I say perhaps one other thing because so far I've been a little irresponsible. We've just had a Prime Ministers' Conference, and whatever else happens at a Prime Ministers' Conference, it does recall you to the basic problems of the modern world. It certainly does. You don't sit down in rather halcyon fashion and say to yourself, "How like we are" but you find yourself saying, "How unlike we are. How different we are" and therefore a Prime Ministers' Conference is something rather exciting, quite different, from the Conferences of the past, and if there is one thing that sticks out in my mind about this last one, it is that we are different. I wouldn't dare to give my complete impressions of all the people who were there, but there is just one aspect of this matter that I might just say something to you about and that is that we have Africa, a series of countries - Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Tanganyika, Kenya, Sierra Leone, etc. and these present their own problem in the most difficult way and they produce people of a most different kind.

Now, without making any odious comparisons, may I say

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to you this that the Prime Minister, the head of the Government of Nigeria - Nigeria with 36 million people, the largest single country in the African continent - is Sir Abubakar Balewa. I would think I was lucky to go through the rest of my life and meet another man so wise, so full of character, so understanding of the problems of the day as Abubakar Balewa. This is a great man. (Applause)

And I wouldn't say that about everybody else. But why do I say this about him and not about others? The answer is that the great problem in today's world, a problem that we must all give great thought to, is the problem of countries surging to their independence politically but economically dependent on other people. This is a tremendous problem. So much time is devoted to being able to say, "We are politically independent" whereas to be politically independent and economically and commercially dependent on the next man is almost a contradiction in terms. Abubakar Balewa understands this perfectly. He devotes much of his time to developing his own country, to strengthening his own country, to making his own country a self-surviving unit in the African continent, and when some of his more impetuous colleagues from other African countries put all their weight and emphasis on political independence and rather disregard the economic problem, he looks at them and occasionally says to them words which indicate that there are first things that have to come first.

I am a great believer in the Prime Minister of Nigeria and I fear very much the almost rabid desire on the part of some people to assert their political independence while attaching small importance to how they are to live and whether they are to live at the mercy economically of some other country, they having forgotten that if you are economically at the mercy of Country B then you are in a fair way to be the political servant of Country B.

Gentlemen, it would be a great mistake for any of us to be dogmatic about these matters. It would be a great mistake for any of us - speaking for myself as a Prime Minister - to huddle to ourselves the garment of an old Commonwealth and wash our hands of new ones. We can't do that. We are all members one of another. We must do our best, and one of the things that has to be done is to make it understood, in the most friendly and helpful way, that no young emerging nation can be a young and genuinely independent nation unless it has within itself not only the formalities of political self-government but the essences of local self-government, of economic welfare of a capacity to endure whatever anybody else does. Now, we overlook this in Australia because we are not only politically independent but we are economically independent. We stand on our own feet. This is, of course, of tremendous importance. We take for granted, no doubt, a great deal. I am not saying we can live by ourselves because any nation that today says it can live by itself is a fool of a nation, but within those limits, we are economically self-contained, we are politically self-contained and we now have, as I realised when I was in London, this or this nation, politically independent, proudly independent, politically and economically in an enormous mess of problems. One of the things we will have to do is not to be superior, not to talk down but to say to them all, "Well, now, we realise your problem, we value your independence politically, what can we do to help you with trained men, experts with techniques?" This is not all a matter of so many millions of pounds. It is a matter of human understanding and human assistance, and I came out of the London Conference feeling that whatever A or B or C might say back home, the truth was that it is in terms of human assistance and human understanding and technical encouragement and the reception of people to be trained in administration or whatever it may be that we have our great contribution to make to the new Commonwealth.