

FATHER OF THE YEAR - 1964

PRESENTATION AT HOTEL AUSTRALIA, SYDNEY

14th AUGUST, 1964

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

Sir and Chief Justice :

I say to the Chief Justice that on behalf of my wife I thank you for this handsome souvenir. For the first three or four days I will begin to think that it's mine. A little later my wife will be saying to me, "Where are those silver trays of ours?" (Laughter) and then in a year's time she will say, "Where is my silver tray?" (Laughter) Now I mention this fact to you because this proves that I am not only married but a father. I know what goes on.

I think I ought to tell you, Sir, that when I received the invitation to be the Father of the Year, it struck me as having a slightly hilarious undertone. (Laughter) I was in bed ill, I was in a weakened condition, I had a couple of doctors looming at me over the foot of the bed and discussing whether I ought to be allowed to go abroad. If they had left that to the electors it might have been a different result (Laughter) but they were discussing it purely on medical grounds.

It was at this stage that I received an invitation to be the Father of the Year, and at first I thought somebody was having a bit of fun with me - Father of the Year. As far as I can recall, it's thirtysix years since I last found myself a father (Laughter) and you know, that's a long time for some of you young chaps - not very long for me. So my instinct was to say, "Oh, no, no, no." Then they brought me the list of the Fathers of the Year and this really put me back in my box. There was Sir Edward Hallstrom - I'm sorry he is not here today - but he knows all about zoos and other things. And there's Harry Jensen who went uncomfortably close..... (Laughter) if you know what I mean. I can't allow Harry Jensen to be something that I'm not. (Laughter) So that was a good step.

Then there was Joe Cahill who was an old political sparring partner of mine, and a great friend of mine. Then the copper - Colin Delaney. (Laughter) I've always felt uncomfortable in the presence of the police (Laughter) except when he sits next to me at some function, and then I realise that, really, the police are friends of everybody and probably that explains why so few people get arrested but, anyhow..... There's Adrian Curlewis. I read his name with profound respect. He's a District Court Judge and, what is much more important, he is a lifesaver. (Laughter) Well, your District Court Judges here are County Court Judges in Victoria and I never knew one of them to be a lifesaver. (Laughter) On the contrary, I had great trouble with them when I was a Junior at the Bar.

And so I went on..... Norman Gregg. Well, of course, Norman is one of the great eye men in the world. He deals with people in such fashion that whenever they look at him or anybody else thereafter, they look at them in a kindly light. He does things to the optical affair, you see. And so I understood why he should be the Father of the Year.

Then as for the Chief Justice, there's nothing I can do about a Chief Justice. Chief Justices are very difficult people. Even when I was at the Bar myself, Sir, not appearing before you but appearing before a State Chief Justice and a Commonwealth Chief Justice, I found myself under enormous constraint by about three o'clock in the afternoon, so that instead of looking at His Honour, the Chief Justice, and saying, "You know, old boy, you're talking nonsense" (Laughter), I would in fact say, "With infinite submission, if the Court please" so that I know about that. So apart from that, my qualifications are very sketchy.

If I had been named the Grandfather of the Year, I would have taken this as a nice compliment because within the last twelve months ..... well, you must picture me in my bed at Canberra at half past seven on Sunday morning. This is not a time of day on Sunday that any of you care to contemplate, nor do I, but my wife was away somewhere and I was there and the telephone rang and, inadvertently, I answered and it was my elder son who said to me, "Congratulations Dad, you have five grandsons" and I said, "Oh, what did you say?" You know, the mind moves slowly at half past seven in the morning on Sunday (Laughter) and I said, "Son, what did you say?" He said, "Yes, Dad. Twins. Twin grandsons." Now that, I think, was a great thing, but I hasten to say that except by indirection, except as a very remote cause, Sir, I had nothing to do with it.

Well, why does one like to be a father? Why does one like to be a grandfather? By and large, you know, grandchildren - I say this to some of you - are rather more engaging than sons and daughters. I speak with reluctance about my own daughter who is the most marvellous creature in the world. But, anyhow, sons you know, you rebuke them, you send them to school, you try to instruct them when they get back. If you had my experience, you frequently found that your corrections were different from the corrections of their schoolmaster, which gave me a very low opinion of schoolmasters. (Laughter) But you know, you have all the to and fro, haven't you, of your own family. With grandchildren, you see them at their best. When they get a little damp, when they get a little difficult, you hand them back to their parents and say, "Aren't they absolutely sweet?" (Laughter); so, on the whole, this grandfather business appeals to me. If you could arrange for me, Sir, to live for another twenty years, I would like to be nominated as the Grandfather of the Year. But as it turns out, you will have to do it post mortem.

There is just one serious thing I would like to say to you. I hope not too serious. But we are here - we are fathers, some of us are grandfathers. In other words, we are here because we have something in common and that is the continuity of the race. This is the tremendously important thing - the continuity of the race. We don't always pay as much attention to this perhaps as we should. I very well remember, and I have more than once referred to it, the first time I read Walter Scott, read "Ivanhoe". I remember the archers' contest in "Ivanhoe" and the bowman saying, when he was asked to fire "a twinkling, willow wand," "Well," he said, "my grandsire drew a stout bow at the Battle of Hastings and I trust not to dishonour his name". Now you may say this is rather saccharine, this is a little sentimental. It stuck in my mind; it must have stuck in the minds of many people - "My grandsire drew a stout bow". I would like to think I was the kind of grandfather about whom under different circumstances, in different terms, my grandsons might speak some day because I think this would be a guarantee of continuity of what we all believe to be the right spirit.

You know, when Winston Churchill was making those speeches of his, those immortal speeches of his, those marvellous broadcasts and doing that job of his that nobody will, I hope, ever forget, at that time if somebody had taken the speeches of the Younger Pitt made in the beginning of the nineteenth century, 140 years before, if anybody had looked at the Younger Pitt's speeches at a time when it wasn't Hitler but Napoleon, at a time when invasion was thought likely, at a time when martello towers were springing up all around the invasion area as again in 1940 and 1941, and had read them, he would have found that the language was different but each great leader was pronouncing a feeling and a fervour which related to the morale of the country.

Pitt was no doubt the greatest of statesmen at the turn of the nineteenth century, just as Winston Churchill is the most significant figure in history in our time. But this was because they had a sense of continuity. Winston Churchill was not unconscious of what Pitt had said. Winston Churchill was not unconscious of what John Marlborough had done at the beginning of the eighteenth century, he wasn't unconscious of what his ancestors had done, of what all the great men in our history had done. All he had to do was to translate this to the current state of affairs. I am an immense believer in continuity. I believe that a sense of history, a sense of what has been done in the past and what may happen in the future does more to produce sanity of mind and judgment and stability of spirit than anything else that you can think about. The sense of continuity.

If we ever get to that deplorable state, Sir, in which we think we are here today and gone tomorrow and that nothing matters very much, there will be no continuity in our history and there won't be a Father of the Day in fifty years' time, a Father of the Year. And therefore I feel that what you are doing is to contribute something to the sense of continuity, the sense of history which has produced in our veins and in our minds and in our hearts, the great causes in our lifetime of our survival and of our success.

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