

PLEASANT SUNDAY AFTERNOON SERVICE AT
WESLEY CHURCH, MELBOURNE

13TH SEPTEMBER, 1964

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

Sir, Your Excellency and Ladies and Gentlemen :

I think I might be permitted, as usual, to engage in a few vagrant thoughts at the beginning of my talk. One is that I was delighted to hear from the distinguished Chairman that Governors in the State of Victoria keep on improving. (Laughter) Now Sir Irving is such a master of English that I was surprised to find myself left in doubt. Did he mean that each Governor was better than the previous one? Or did he mean that each individual Governor, himself, keeps on improving? And by interjection he tells me that he meant both. All I want to say, Your Excellency, is that I shall watch you with loving care (laughter).

The second preliminary remark I want to make is that I think it is a very agreeable compliment that a fellow who was at school in Ballarat should have the privilege of listening to singers from Ballarat. This was not always a pleasure. It has been this afternoon a most undiluted pleasure. I thought they sang beautifully. But when I was a schoolboy in Ballarat and was living in the house of my Scottish grandmother, somebody had in some way produced a ticket for a Saturday afternoon at the South Street competitions. Now some of you may know about the South Street competitions. They were then in their heyday - perhaps for all I know they still are. But I went as a matter of duty because the tickets cost nothing (Laughter) and I found myself sitting in a row of women. They terrified me. There were four or five to one side and four or five to the other, I had no hope of escaping, and that afternoon they had what they called Set Piece Competitions.

Fifteen young men came out, stood on the same little chalk marks on the platform and recited that most marvellous jury speech in the world, which none of them understood, the speech of Mark Antony over the dead body of Caesar. (Laughter) And each of them did it exactly the same way. In those days they didn't wear double-breasted coats like old-fashioned fellows like me (Laughter), and they dropped the thumb and forefinger into the left waistcoat pocket and raised the right hand and said, "Friends, Romans, countrymen.....". You know. Well, I have lived long enough to have reread that speech and indeed all of Shakespeare many times with immense joy, but I want to confess to you that at the ripe intellectual age of fourteen, I found it pure horror. (Laughter)

And then the next item was the Set Piece - Song - and the song was "Who Is Sylvia?" (Laughter) They don't remember it because it is before their time..... but "Who Is Sylvia?" and I heard thirteen or fourteen people sing "Who Is Sylvia?" until I don't mind telling you that at the end of that time I didn't care a hoot who Sylvia was. (Laughter) All I do know is that the South Street Competitions made Ballarat over the years a centre of singing, and I've been as delighted as you have been to hear the YWCA choir from Ballarat singing so beautifully.

Now since I saw you last, indeed since last year, (when I wasn't here) I've been in London - that won't surprise

you because that happens - and we had a Prime Ministers' Conference. Many of you have observed the results of the Conference and have seen - I hope with great satisfaction - that after many difficulties in the course of discussion we arrived at conclusions which I believe will lead to increasing co-operation between Commonwealth countries. But I have thought more than once that perhaps many people still think of the Commonwealth in rather old terms. It is only a few years ago that I could hear eminent politicians say, "Well, of course, I refer to the Commonwealth but I like the expression 'the Empire'. I'm an old-fashioned man." I might have said that myself many years ago, for all I know. But what I want to put to you this afternoon, what I want to tell you about this afternoon is that we must accommodate our thinking about the Commonwealth.

We must accommodate our thinking about our relations with other countries to the realities and changes of life, because in 1964, at the last meeting that I have attended, the ninth consecutive meeting that I have attended, the state of affairs was fundamentally different from the state of affairs thirty years ago because, believe it or not, I attended my first meeting of what was then called the Imperial Conference in 1935 - not then, I hasten to say, being a Prime Minister, but being Deputy to the late Mr. Lyons, and he being ill, I attended. 1935, and here we are in 1964.

Now, Sir, perhaps it might be useful for me to recall what our imperial/Dominions/Commonwealth relations were at that time, just under thirty years ago. Well, for a start, there were five people present. There was the Prime Minister of Great Britain, the Prime Minister of Canada, Prime Minister of Australia, Prime Minister of South Africa and the Prime Minister of New Zealand. And we were all, in a sense, much of a kind. We spoke the same language, we had the same sort of background, we understood each other, we found it not very difficult to arrive at common conclusions and we were all the subjects, the loyal subjects of the Crown, at that time, of King George V, and so a conference didn't take very long and we usually came out of it with a few joint ideas which we thought might be useful to the world.

Now at that time, Sir, and indeed until just after the last war, we had all sorts of things in common. I hope you won't mind if I point out some of these because this is a time in history when if we are to be tolerant and understanding, we must know what the facts are. Now at that time and, indeed, until 1948, we were all bound together by a common allegiance to the Throne. This indeed was the whole essence of the famous Balfour Declaration - independent countries, equal in all things, governing themselves in all things and united by a common allegiance to the Crown. And, of course, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Great Britain are all still united by a common allegiance to the Crown, but that doesn't apply any longer in a general sense in the Commonwealth because in point of fact, beginning in 1949 - 1948/49 - when India became a Republic, and it was agreed India could remain in the Commonwealth, the great majority of the new nations who have been created out of the old colonial system have elected to be republics, and indeed, this led to a new formula for how could a republican be united to another country by a common allegiance to the Crown. It was impossible. And so they invented a formula, rightly or wrongly, of referring to The Queen as the Head of the Commonwealth but eliminating the requirement of the common allegiance to the Throne.

Now we were five in those days. At the last Conference in London, there were eighteen Prime Ministers. You, of course, may frequently think, God bless you, that one is too many (Laughter) but there were eighteen of us, and the great bulk of those present, republics, and therefore not within the allegiance to the Throne. Now it's worth remembering that because there is something about being a subject of The Queen which really does give you something, doesn't it? This distinguishes you in a material way from other people.

And at that time, and afterwards, it was permissible, indeed it seemed occasionally almost compulsory for people in after-dinner speeches, particularly - and I warn you there is nothing more devastating than the habit of after-dinner speaking - it was the habit of people to say, "Well, look at all the great elements we have in common," and indeed we had them then. The sovereignty of Parliament.

Now, Parliamentary self-government is commonplace to us, isn't it? Parliamentary self-government is the whole essence of political life, and people may grumble at it, growl at it, and have great and partisan feelings about this candidate or that candidate, but without Parliamentary self-government, we would not be a democracy and, as we believe, and as I believe, half our freedoms would disappear. And so it was said with great truth one time that we were bound together by our common belief in the sovereignty of Parliament.

I just want to tell you that's no longer true. We practise the sovereignty of Parliament in Australia and they do in Canada and they do in New Zealand and they do in Great Britain and they do in two or three or four or perhaps five of the new Commonwealth countries but not in all, not in all. We have lived long enough to be able to recognise a species of dictatorship in one country and a one-party system - which is a kind of dictatorship - in this country or that country. There is no longer that common belief that unites, the common belief in the sovereignty of Parliament. That's not to say that we must give up our faith in it, but it does mean to say that we are to understand that we are now thinking about a Commonwealth which has lost one of its old unities - indeed, more than one - and that we must struggle to understand the point of view of those who have entirely different ideas.

We have responsible government. Well, I know, ladies and gentlemen, that every now and then you are a little tempted to believe that governments are irresponsible. Even my Government, I believe, they tell me, puzzles you occasionally, but we have responsible government, because the people you send into Parliament can throw a government out if they feel that it has fallen into some cardinal blunder. And every time we have an election and you elect Members of Parliament, a Cabinet emerges and Cabinet is responsible to the Parliament and therefore to you. This is the whole essence of our system of government. And ever since responsible government was created by the resignation of Walpole in 1742 - because he was defeated on a vote in the House of Commons - ever since then, this has been one of our glories and one of the guarantees of human freedom - responsible government.

You are not to assume that there is any such thing as responsible government in five or six or seven of the new Commonwealth countries, and I am not saying that critically. All I mean is that these are new countries, newly-won to their independence and that we will err very grievously if we expect

that their standards of government, their institutions of government, their basic thinking about government will be the same as our own, because after all, ladies and gentlemen, you and I are the inheritors of the richest tradition of Parliamentary and responsible government the world has yet produced.

Some of these countries, as I say, don't have the party system, except in a highly-simplified form, that is to say, one party; there is only one party you can belong to and therefore only one party you can vote for. This is quite true in two or three of the new African countries, and we have had distinguished spokesmen for these countries, explaining why they think this is a good thing and I won't argue with them. All I know is that I hope we will never have a one-party system of government in this country, though at a reception at Canberra to Mr. Mboya from Kenya, two or three of my friends of the Opposition in Canberra tapped me on the shoulder when he was talking about a one-party Government and said, "Don't worry, old boy, you've had it for fifteen years." (Laughter) Well, I hope I will not have it when it becomes necessary to destroy it.

But two parties - a government and an opposition, the hammer and the anvil - this is the way in which the truth emerges. We have lived, fortunately for ourselves, for many years under the rule of law, under a system in which, however much we may wrangle, if we go before the judge, we all believe we are going to have a fair hearing and an equal deal, and we have had a wonderful judiciary, and so they have in Great Britain, and so they have in many other countries, but the rule of law, as we understand it, with all people equal before the Bar of Justice is not a commonplace thing in some of the new countries.

We, of course, have a common historical background. Indeed, it is our common historical background that makes it so easy for us to be on terms with the Americans, but never let it be forgotten, that if you are going to talk about the history of a people, with ours going right back to the ancient Britons and to the Romans and to the Angles and the Saxons and the Jutes and the Norman invaders and so on until the Scots took charge. (Laughter) If we are going to think about that, then we must remember that up to the late eighteenth century, this was a history we had in common with the people of America. This is frequently forgotten - our historic paths diverged at the Declaration of Independence. That's only a few days ago - that's towards the end of the eighteenth century. And therefore in all the Parliamentary countries, as I will call them, we have a tremendous body of common historic tradition.

This is not true, necessarily, of countries in Asia or in Africa. It is very difficult for people who have reached my age and who have lived and moved and had their being in this historic tradition and have taken all these inherited things for granted - very difficult for us to understand that there are other people who are just as good as we are who don't have this tradition or background at all but who have their own and we must struggle not to be superior about ours but to understand theirs and the right way to begin to understand anybody is to discover what your differences are so that you may perceive them, think about them and try to reconcile them.

We've had many traditions indeed for a long, long time. We've had our language and our literature. We take all these things for granted, don't we. I think so, I know I find myself constantly taking them for granted. We regard language as a sort of instrument of communication as indeed it is and as for literature, we read either by compulsion or choice, and we may take it for granted that all this is the kind of thing that happens to other people. But you know, my friends, it isn't. It isn't. We just happen to be British people, Australian citizens, British subjects, and we have a literary tradition, the tradition of language which we share with hundreds of millions of people in the world, two hundred millions of them being in the United States of America, and we have great fun with each other because there are about twenty-seven different accents in the United States of America and at least twenty-seven in Great Britain, and so it goes on and everybody is prepared to say, "Oh, yes. He has an Australian accent" - as no doubt he has - "and he has an American accent," although that might be one of many (Laughter) but allowing for all that, we do know, don't we, that in our rough and ready fashion, we are speaking the same language and that we can communicate with each other on terms and can, so far as communication will bring it about, understand each other. This is one of the great things in the world, in the New Commonwealth, which is in a sense the new world, that we have to become more tolerant, more understanding, a little less dogmatic about these things, a little more inclined to believe that the fact that a man speaks in a language not ours is no evidence that he doesn't have high intelligence and great understanding and great capacity.

And therefore these Prime Ministers' Conferences are becoming nowadays a liberal exercise in patience and understanding - in debates, yes, sometimes quite fiery - but at the end with a desire to arrive at an accommodation with the other man for an overall cause that you both think is worthwhile and has significance in the world.

Therefore, Sir, we have come to a new Commonwealth in which there are new people, new methods, new problems, new thinking. The only time I have ever wanted to be younger than I am - because I am happy to tell you that I have no grievances about my age - the only time that I've ever wished that I were younger than I am is when I have occasionally thought - not that I would like to see what is going to happen in the world, in the world of science, though of course I should be interested, what is going to happen in the development of armaments, what is going to happen when people go to the moon and find it is a rather dusty spot (Laughter) - these things really don't induce me to want to be an old, old tiresome man of one hundred; but I would occasionally like to take twenty years off my life, just conditionally, able to put it on again later on - but just for a while take twenty years off my life in order to see how this tremendous task of reconciliation is going on, how the new Commonwealth is going to work out, how far we will be able to submerge the occasional irritations in the interests of kindness and understanding and a mutual strength, because, believe me, I have lived long enough to know that the fact that a man is different is no evidence against him. On the contrary, it may be the greatest evidence in his favour.

Here we are, at the end of an old empire which.....there it is..... at the end of the older Commonwealth and at the beginning of a new one. If the new one succeeds by producing understanding and tolerance and charity of mind and anxiety to succeed, then it will turn out to be one of the great new experiments in human life, but if we allow ourselves to be impatient, to look unduly at the past, to yearn for the old state of affairs, to talk about the good old times, then perhaps the new Commonwealth will not last long, and perhaps - indeed I would have thought certainly - the world will be poorer for it.
