

CIVIC RECEPTION, ALBANY, W.A.

11TH OCTOBER, 1964

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

Mr. Mayor, Your Excellency, Parliamentary Colleagues and Ladies and Gentlemen :

You have just been reminded that this afternoon in another place I have to make a speech about the Memorial, so I won't make it now. I will only hope to make it then properly.

But I do want to thank you, Sir. This is, I think, the second occasion on which I have given tongue in this hall. The first time I was on a political errand - you are quite right, in 1948. I must have had a very rich supporter or two in West Australia at that time because he chartered a plane and this was a humble means of getting me to make about ten times as many speeches as I otherwise would have made, and one of them was here, and I always remember that as we flew in, we seemed to just dodge over the hump of the hill and come down on the runway. It looked frightfully close, and my Press Secretary at that time said, holding a piece of paper out to me, "Any famous last words that I can throw out?" (Laughter) No doubt, a lot has happened since then and I am still here.

Sir, the one thing I would like to say in your Town Hall and in the presence of yourself as Mayor is that I always get a certain amount of "kick", in the homely phrase, out of visiting a centre of municipal government. I'm not just saying that. I say this for the most, I think, profoundly important reasons.

In Australia we are accustomed to local government, to voluntary associations of various kinds, to State Parliaments and Governments, to a Commonwealth Parliament and Government, and this distribution of the activities of government is really one of the reasons why we have never run any serious risk in Australia of coming under the grip of a dictatorship. Government has grown properly from the grass roots and this, I think, is tremendously important.

I have thought it more and more important in recent years when I have observed, as you have, how many new countries have been brought into existence - masses of them in Africa, a number of them in Asia - new countries with newly-won independence, and too many people in the western world have been under the impression that all you have to do is to give them a constitution, give them the means of electing a parliament and then kiss them goodbye and say, "Now, you are a democracy." This, of course, is all nonsense.

Democracy can't be built from the top down. Democracy has to be built from the bottom up, and the reason why so many of these new countries have become, in reality, dictatorships with no parliamentary oppositions with no opponents worth talking about to the powers-that-be, the reason is that these countries started at the wrong end. If they had begun by having local councils just as the Parliament in Great Britain began with the hundreds, the moots, under the spreading oak tree and gradually developed into some form of national representational body, so in Australia we have had, with all the benefit of history behind it, the same kind of experience.

We are trying to do this with countries for which we are responsible. I am interested to see my valued colleague, Mr. Hasluck here today, because for many years he was the Minister for Territories, and he seeing this with his usual clarity, decided that the place to start in was the village, to establish what you might call a sort of shire or local council, in which the indigenous people could take a hand, and in which they could learn some of the arts of government. Therefore, I come back to where I began by saying that I like to be, every now and then, associated with a municipal body because I know that this is, foundationally, the beginning of the structure of self-government and therefore a very precious heritage that we have.

I suppose I ought to think like this because the first time I ever heard about politics was in a little village in the bush in Victoria where my father happened to be a shire councillor, and the shire councillor from the North Riding used to come down twenty miles and then my father would hop into a buggy with him and go another twenty miles to attend the meeting of the Council of the Shire of Dimboola. I must confess that in those early days I rather thought that a Riding was something that people had to ride to. It seemed like it in those days before motor cars.

And so I began to hear about self-government and then about state government because I was in there myself, and now about Commonwealth Government. Every bit of this experience accumulates, do you see. It accumulates so that we can finally look around our own country and say we have a solid structure and no crazy fool can destroy it. This is firmly based on representative government all the way through. This is something to be thankful for, something to be proud of. My only regret is that so many of the new countries will have to learn by painful experience what we have been able to acquire by long practice and by some inherited talent for this kind of thing.

Now, Sir, I know there is a little matter of food and drink, I know then I am whisked off like my wife who, like me, is delighted to be here because it is her first visit. I have been interested in a variety of things. She has been looking at wildflowers all the time. Anybody who has a view to put on any of these wildflowers, please come up and give her the right drill, and after that we will go up on to the hill where I have been solemnly warned the wind is so strong that it will be a physical impossibility to unveil anything. (Laughter) But we will do our best. Thank you very much.

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