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RESIGNATION OF PRIME MINISTER

Statement by Sir Robert Menzies

I have given careful thought to my future in the light of what seems best for the Government and the country. In the result, I have decided to resign from the Prime Ministership forthwith.

It is my duty to my colleagues and to the Australian people, whose acceptance of me as leader for so many years has been a great source of strength to me to state as plainly as possible my reasons for this decision. It is also my duty to the electors of Kooyong, whose generous loyalty to me, in spite of my rare appearances in my own constituency, has enabled me to perform my public duties without personal electoral anxiety. I shall always be grateful to them.

I have been Prime Minister for a total of over 18 years. Two of these years were in the war period. Sixteen have been consecutive since 1949. Prior to 1949, I led the Opposition for six years, during a period in which we were heavily outnumbered, and my own responsibilities and labours were both intense and sustained.

During the last 16 years I have never taken a real holiday; on a few occasions a fortnight or more, mostly only a few days.

Since I became Leader of the Opposition at the end of 1943, I have been responsible for the conduct of no less than eight general elections, in addition to two separate Senate Elections. The strain of election campaigns is something that the onlooker cannot be expected fully to understand.

Meanwhile the complexities of government, both domestic and international, have grown enormously.

It would be idle for me to pretend that all these years and tasks have not affected me. There is an accumulating wear and tear of which I have been increasingly conscious for some years. The thought of going through another election campaign would depress me. Speech-making has become a burden, since every speech presents its own problems. Though I still work long hours, I can no longer sustain the very long hours of work which once delighted me.

In short, I am tired; my pace has slowed down; I could not properly continue in office for very much longer and at the same time do justice to the growing problems of the nation.

By the normal date of the next election, in December of this year, I would be 72 years old. Feeling as I do, I would not be justified in asking the people to re-elect me for a further term. It would not be fair to them, or, for that matter, to myself. For I would not be willing to contest such an election without having decided that, if successful, I would remain for about two years at least after the election. To do otherwise would be unthinkable and electorally deceptive.

So my choice has narrowed down to this. Should I continue to make myself available for the next three years or thereabouts, or go now, at a time when my successor will have the better part of a year in which to establish his own leadership, Cabinet, and policy. Our people have become accustomed to me, for better or worse, for so many years that it would be grossly unfair to my successor to give him insufficient time to make his own mark in his own way. I am sure that the right thing for me to do is to make way now. There are extremely able people in and supporting the Government. They will continue to have my confidence and, I hope and believe, that of the electors.

As for my own future, in such years as I may hope to have, I would like to say this. Thirty-seven years of Parliamentary life, both State and Federal, twenty-six of them as a Minister or Prime Minister, have given me little if any private life as most people know it. I would like a period of freedom, without strain; not, of course, abandoning my interest in world and Australian affairs, but without the constant pressures which public political office inevitably entails.

I am more grateful than I can ever say for the generous support which I have enjoyed so long, both inside and outside Parliament. Even in defeat there was much to learn, and many personal encouragements to appreciate.

I hope that the people, not only in the Government parties but all over Australia, will accept my announcement as one of a decision taken after deep and anxious thought, weighing my duties properly, and with the interests of our country, in a period of rapid changes and acute problems, much in my heart and mind. Beyond doubt, the affairs of the world at large, and of Australia in a period of dramatic development, are increasing in weight and complexity. They demand the services of men and women of full vigour and flexibility of mind, feeling at their best and able to do their best.

Before I "sign off", I would wish to say how much I have owed, over the years, to my wife, who has made great sacrifices of family life in what both she and I have believed to be the public interest. You have our thanks and our good wishes.

CANBERRA,
20th January, 1966.