

FIRST CONVENTION OF THE YOUNG AUSTRALIAN  
FOUNDATION

WILSON HALL, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE,  
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Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt

Good Evening to you all, and that includes our dissident group outside.

This actually makes me feel very much at home because the first campaign I ever took part in was in the electorate of Yarra against the then Labor Prime Minister, or former Prime Minister, Mr. Scullin, and I remember that night, which was in the middle of the depression, coming to the hall and finding that nobody there was prepared to hear what I had to say. And thinking about tonight as I came along here, I marvelled at the contrast in circumstances which this generation faces compared with the generation of which I was a part in my own university days at this institution. Now I don't know whether our friends outside are students of the university. I hope not because they have not yet learnt that noise is no effective answer to argument - not logical argument, in any event. And I would hope that as time goes on - because my stamina for these matters, assisted by these mechanical devices is very much greater than theirs - they will learn a few things which will be of interest to them.

Now ladies and gentlemen, I suggest that you ignore the people outside and just concentrate on what I have to put to you because you can hear me and, thanks to this instrument, I can get over to you, and I came here tonight to speak to you, or those who are willing to hear what I might have to say. And I thought quite hard about accepting this invitation because it came in the first week of the Parliament. It was a particularly heavy week and normally I'd have been disposed to say, "Sorry, there's rather too much to do this week. Perhaps we could try another time". Then I remembered back to my own days, of which you are the corresponding generation, and I recall how hard it was to get young people interested in the community and political affairs of their country. The only reason, I think, why I came into politics when I did was that this country was in such a state of economic disaster, a condition which nobody of this generation, I think, could even visualise. There has been only one month in the last sixteen years when the registrants for employment exceeded 3 per cent., and that was in the normal low seasonal demand month of January some years ago - 3 per cent. In the year of which I speak, the registrations were 30 per cent. Thirty out of every 100 trade unionists registered with the various unions were unable to get any regular paid employment at that time. And every generation has to face up to its own set of problems and challenges and we in my day had to face up to the problem of economic organisation. We had just come out of a war, and the dislocation of war was still upon us and the clouds of the next world war were gathering ominously above us, but we learn through our experiences how to master, very considerably, the economic problems.

It's true we have fluctuations. People get concerned about recessions as they see them appearing or disappearing in the economic field, but here we have had a remarkable experience going on now for the best part of twenty years in which Australia has known this full employment situation, this condition of what is termed in modern times, the affluent society. That doesn't mean that your generation doesn't have the same set of tough problems which you have to face. And it is a heartening thing to somebody who has given more than half his own life in the service of the National Parliament to find that a new generation of young Australians is prepared to come together as you are in this organisation and face up to the possibilities of service which lie open to you, face up to the task of analysing as calmly and sensibly as you can, the national problems, those affecting you directly, those in which you can play some part in helping your country along. And because I believe that is the essence of the objectives that you have outlined for this organisation, I felt that here was something to be encouraged and here was an organisation which could at least feel from its foundation that it enjoyed the warm approval and commendation of the government of its own country. And so I am here to demonstrate that.

I am also here to tell you something which I found of interest to myself, and that is that there are so many of you. I don't know whether you realise it but more than 50 per cent. of the Australian population is 30 years of age or under, and so the young Australian represents the majority of Australians, and it is about time, I thought, you saw another Prime Minister. Most of you have only seen one in your lifetime. I suppose I am now the second. I can assure you that you will have an opportunity to see a third. I have no intention of establishing any endurance records despite the encouragement of Herb Elliott's presence with us here tonight. In fact, I had looked rather enviously at Herb because he combines in himself, speed, stamina and lightness on his feet. Now what better combination could a politician hope for than that set of qualities, but while I can't guarantee that I shall remain for any length of time corresponding to that of Sir Robert, nor would you probably be wishing that, I find it difficult to predict at the moment whom my successor will be.

Here we are concerned with the great problem of which we have had an echo from the attendance of our friends outside. I have no desire to convert this gathering into a political occasion but I think that you are entitled, having regard to the obligations that the Government imposes upon you, to hear an explanation at first hand as to why these things have been believed to be necessary, and so while there are a few other matters I would like to mention to you tonight, perhaps it would be useful if before we get the whole issue clouded with emotion and political propaganda, I could just give a few facts about this issue - first of Australia's participation in the campaign in South Viet Nam, and secondly to tell you the reasons why we found it necessary to adopt a particular method of service in relation to the army and the incidence of this, how it works out. I say I believe this to be necessary because I have little doubt in my own mind that given the facts, the Australian community is quite capable of coming to a sound and sensible decision, but if people refuse to study the facts, then who can foretell the kind of decision that they in their public judgments will find themselves coming to.

I don't think that anybody who has made a study of contemporary history could really be in much doubt or remain there for a long time about the issue in South Viet Nam. I know that there are some people who profess that this is a civil war and that the rest of us should keep out of it and let the citizens decide this issue for themselves. But anybody who speaks in those terms has either completely ignored or forgotten contemporary history in relation/Malaya, Korea, Taiwan and various other parts of Asia which even at this moment are currently feeling the pressures and probes of the Communist expansion. Even India, peace-loving India, is finding itself at this moment confronted on its boundaries with thrusting Communist pressures. Even in Thailand, which offers no threat to China or any interest of China's, I learned from the mouth of the Prime Minister of that country only a week or so ago that they are at the present time under pressure in their north, in their east, and in their west from Chinese communist expansion. And when one knows these things and has all the evidence of what occurred in Korea, the fact that but for the strength of American resistance, Taiwan would have been overrun by the Chinese communists also. And now here in this critical area of South East Asia, a great struggle, a struggle involving your freedom and my freedom and the freedom of free peoples everywhere throughout the world is occurring.

Now, I would have thought that this was plain enough; whatever one might decide as to what ought to be done about it, the broad facts surely are plain enough and the evidence surely has accumulated sufficiently to convince the most doubting that whether you like it or not or approve of it or not, the thrust is the thrust of the communist movement inspired and directed from Peking and carrying through its campaigning the ideological challenge of Peking, the challenge of its philosophy of world domination for a world that is given to communism.

Now we can understand people differing from our own ideas. We happen to believe in the virtues of a free society and of people having the maximum freedom available to them under laws of their own making. You and I enjoy that kind of democracy. Our friends outside here enjoy that kind of democracy. Otherwise they wouldn't be here tonight. And a robust democracy doesn't discard or repress its minorities. It gives them the opportunity for expression and so I, ladies and gentlemen, believe that as the facts unfold, the Australian people will realise as I am sure they do now, the essential character of the struggle that is going on in South Viet Nam. Have we all forgotten quite as quickly as would seem to be the case with some that this country and the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries had to maintain a campaign for, I think it was, 15 years in Malaya in order to suppress Communist guerrilla activity in that country. If you go to Malaya, or Malaysia as it is called at the present time, you will find a well-ordered community, a people functioning under a Parliamentary democracy, steadily improving their own economic and social standards. Now this country was saved, as South Korea was saved, as Taiwan has been saved from communist domination because there were people who were prepared to join with those who were under threat, who were facing aggression, people who were prepared to join with them in resisting that aggression.

And you know, there are people even in this country who have plenty of cause to be grateful to the United States for the defence given to freedom throughout the world but who either refuse to see that it was the critical United States aid in Korea when the United States stood alone which saved Korea; but for the United States' willingness to resist aggression, if it came to Taiwan, there would be no Taiwan, or Formosa as we used to name it, and there would be, had America not stood firm in its resolution, no South Viet Nam.

Australia has a proud tradition of service beyond its own shores in the cause of freedom. In two world wars, this country sustained nearly half a million casualties, fighting for the issue of freedom in those great contests. We lost more men in casualties, killed from war action, in the First World War, than did the whole of the United States. So we don't take an isolationist view of life. Where the threat exists, there the threat must be resisted and we have joined freely and willingly those of like mind to ourselves in resisting that kind of threat. And this is why we are in South Viet Nam. We believe that if South Viet Nam were to fall, it would only be a matter of time before the whole of South-East Asia fell and Australia came directly under physical threat itself. These are not fanciful beliefs but they are the views of the most experienced men in the public life of your country, acting on the most expert advice that they can secure from their diplomatic sources, from their military sources and from the senior administrative personalities who conduct the government of this country through the Departments of State of this country. And I ask you to bear that in mind as you gather in some newspaper editorial and are asked to accept the judgment of that particular paper. The judgment we ask you to accept is the judgment of your freely-elected representatives, many of them with many years of experience of government, acting, I repeat, on the best advice they can secure and the best information they can obtain, and they being in a better position than anybody else in this country to secure that advice and to obtain that information.

Now we in Australia have remained secure. Secure far more so than most other countries of the world because of the alliances to which we are a party. We entered, some years ago, into an alliance - we and New Zealand - with the United States of America. It is a mutual pact against aggression on any one of us, and so long as that pact endures, Australia enjoys the guarantee of its security against attack by the forces and strength of the mightiest power in the history of mankind.

And when we know this, and we know that the issue which the Americans are facing in South Viet Nam is an issue which involves Australia even more immediately and directly than the United States of America itself which isn't under the same physical threat that we would be, then I wonder what our critics have in mind as an alternative policy for this country. I have yet to hear it. I have yet to hear a clear, coherent alternative put to the policy being pursued by the government of this country. And who do our noisy friends outside expect to do the fighting for Australia? Do they want to fight to the last drop of American blood or do they expect Australia to carry its own share of obligation in resisting these challenges which

involve us as they involve our Allies in this great cause. And I would have very much mistaken the generation of young Australians to which you belong if I concluded that this generation had no wish to play its own part in the defence of its own country and for the common cause of freedom throughout the world. But it was so unlike the generations of earlier Australians who gave their service in meeting these challenges that it wasn't prepared to face up to the obligations which came to it in its own day and age. Well, I don't believe that for a moment. I believe that this generation of young Australians - and I don't say this because I am at such a gathering tonight; I have said it publicly on more than one occasion - I say that this generation, I believe, is the finest generation this country has produced. You are a better educated lot, you are a better trained lot, and in many respects, despite current evidence to the contrary, I think you are a better mannered lot than my own generation at the university.

But now, having just said something in outline of the issue there, let me take up this matter for a few minutes, of the National Service obligation. This country has fortunately not found it necessary in the past to call on people conscripted into service in time of war except, of course, for the limited operation in the Second World War to a defined area around Australia, and in both the other Services, in the Air Force and the Navy, we have secured all the volunteers necessary. This is rather contradictory to those who say that there can't be very much interest in the issue facing the Government at this time. Both these services are up to their complement, working on a voluntary basis of enlistment.

Now With the Army, although the conditions of service in the Army and the pay are by no means unattractive - indeed in the lower paid ranks of the Army I believe I am correct in saying that the rates are the highest of any army in the world, not excluding the United States of America - and it is of interest to know, and I report this to you, that our Army personnel have been displaying a very high rate of re-engagement. They enlist for six years and they have an option of re-engagement at the end of that time, and 70 per cent. of those who have come to the end of their period of service have offered to remain on on a re-engagement. So there is not a picture there of a people dissatisfied with their lot or finding conditions outside so much more attractive that they hasten to leave the Service. On the contrary. But the Army - I think very properly - has insisted on a very high standard of physical condition and mental capacity on the part of those offering to join the Army, and you will have heard of the very high rate of rejection, so that I think only about one in five of those volunteering has actually been enlisted and trained in the Army.

Now in order to maintain the strength in what is not an expeditionary force in time of war in the sense we knew it in World War I and II when people enlisted for the duration and had no idea of how long they would be away for, and in the result were away for four or five years at a time, many of them, the obligation of National Service is clear and precise and its termination is clearly known by the National Service trainee when he is taken into the Army. On the expert advice of our Chief

of Staff of the Army, we were told at the time that this was the only effective way in which we could get the numbers of men of the right quality for our own regular army service. And the Government took its decision very responsibly. We made its implications quite clear.

When Mr. Calwell says now he wants a referendum on this issue, he overlooks the fact that at the time the bill was introduced into the Parliament, the conditions of service were made amply clear, and so he said at the Senate election which followed, "We'll make that the issue of the election" and the election was largely fought around that particular issue. So the Australian public has been well aware of what is involved in this. But propaganda can create a quite misleading picture. I heard over the news tonight for example that some 81,000 registrants were involved this year in the scheme. Nobody went on to say that the total to be taken in to the Army from this 80,000-odd would be just over 8,000. In other words, one in ten approximately of those of that particular age group, would be finally taken into the ranks of the Army. Nobody went on to say that so far as the obligation to serve in South Viet Nam is involved, the total force to be sent is under 4,500. The National Service component would be of the order of 30 per cent. In other words, out of more than 80,000 young men of twenty at this time, not more than about 1,350 would be in service in South Viet Nam at any one time, and the period of service being in total two years and the period of training occupying from six to nine months, the tour of duty in South Viet Nam being limited to one year, the National Servicemen there at any one time would be of the order that I have mentioned, just about 1/60th or 1/70th part of the total of young men of that age group and a period of service limited in the result to one year in that particular theatre.

Now, nobody likes a policy of this kind, of course, but having regard to the issues for one's own country, can it be said that an Australian Government is placing an unduly heavy burden for the security of the nation upon any particular section of its citizens. However, that is our view of the fairness of it and of the limitations of numbers and of period of service imposed under the scheme and I hope that these facts will remain clear in the minds at least of people like yourselves when the propaganda and the emotion which will be such a feature of the coming months has served to obscure in the minds of most people just what is involved.

Now I really feel I should apologise to you for spending so much time on these particular matters but they are of great concern to your own generation and they are of tremendous public interest to Australians as a whole, but that wasn't what I expected I would be talking about to you when I first accepted your invitation because I felt that here was an opportunity to explore together for a few minutes the other directions in which a young generation of Australians can these days make an effective contribution to the national welfare and to the national security because while we have been talking about the grimmer side, the military side of facing the threats we see around us, there is a positive side to the opportunities which lie ahead in which an Australian nation can serve the area of which we are a part, an area in which Australia is finding itself increasingly

of growing prestige and stature and of growing interest to the countries around us. And this interest proceeds partly from the fact that we have had to face up to a tough job of development and most of the countries to our north are themselves going through periods of development of their own resources and struggling with the fundamentals of economic organisation. Now they see here a country of less than 12 million people who have built up one of the highest standards of living in the world, a country in which less than 12 million people are developing a continent the size of the United States, and they are turning to us for guidance in various ways. We get a request for technicians and professional people in all manner of fields. At one time we were asked to supply, for example, the Governor of the Reserve Bank of Malaysia. We get medical teams in the field, technicians going up to help with agricultural services .....

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.....increasingly services by intelligent young Australian men and women who are going into the public service of Papua and New Guinea, helping to build the country up with standards of education, help that will enable the people to lead civilised lives in a modern well-organised community.

And so there are these fields of service open for the young Australian. We are, as I have stressed, and is so evident to you from your own studies, increasingly involved these days in the affairs of Asia and we have to learn to live sensibly in a friendly and helpful way with people who have different habits of life from ourselves, different attitudes, different religious faiths, people who in some ways are very unlike us but in other ways share with us the great objectives in terms of human principle that we have established here in our own country, and so here in our own day and generation, we face our own particular challenge.

In my day, we looked to the United Kingdom and the strength of the British Navy. People thought in terms of the British Isles as home. Here, while our affection remains from the lands of our kith and our kin - for most of us that has been the situation - we have now realised that Australia has a national independent entity of its own and that Australia faces problems and has obligations which are quite unlike anything the earlier generations of Australians had to meet. And so we can't offer you a tremendous amount by way of guidance because a precedent hasn't been able to serve us for the kind of situations we now face. But what we - and I speak now for the older generation of Australians - do offer to you is a comradeship together as we face the difficulties and at the same time the fantastic possibilities that we see ahead of a growing nation.

Over the next ten years, there will be vast mineral projects opened up on this continent that will focus the attention of the world on what is going on in Australia. We have a vast treasure store of basic minerals in quantity excelling that certainly of most other countries and in some instances ranking among the highest sources of supply in the world - our bauxite, our iron ore, which up to a few years ago were not even known to us for their existence. And as these things open up, as our own great resources expand, we in Australia will be

sharing in the growth of a nation assuming an increasingly important part in the affairs of the world. Even today we have an influence out of all relationship to our numbers and our material strength. We can take pride in that. It is an inheritance that the service of Australians who have gone before us have built for our enjoyment and for our strength and you in turn must accept the obligations as you accept the opportunities of this wonderful country in which we live.

I would hope from time to time to be able to follow the development of the work of this organisation but at least your objectives commend themselves so highly to us that you have the warmest good wishes of the members of my own Government for your future success, and we hope from this Foundation there will be a growing body of responsible Australian men and women able to play an increasing part in the various fields of national leadership, in the politics of the nation, in the professions, in the public service and in the economic and community life of Australia. It is to the people that you represent here tonight that we look to carry on the tasks and the opportunities which open up such a great and promising vista for all of us to enjoy together the privilege of Australian nationhood.

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