

INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

SPEECH OF WELCOME BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. HAROLD HOLT  
AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA

12TH APRIL, 1956

Mr. Chairman, Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for that very encouraging reception. It is a much more enthusiastic one than I usually receive in this Chamber. Indeed, as I look around the Chamber, I was a little discomfited at the outset to see how crowded the Opposition benches had become, but as my gaze wanders further afield, I see that quite notable members of the Opposition are scattered on the Government side, so that itself is an encouraging sign.

I am very happy to be able to add the warm welcome of the Australian Government and the Australian people to the meeting of the I.P.U. here in Canberra. We feel that not only is this most timely and opportune, having regard to circumstances unfolding around us in this area of the world. But that it is an honour to Australia which we value, I assure you.

You were speaking, Mr. Speaker of the symbolism of the Chair, and could I just round off your story because there is one chapter which I think would be of interest to our fellow Parliamentarians. As Mr. Speaker, our Chairman has told you, our Chair, a replica of that in the House of Commons, was presented to us by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Branch there. In the period of the blitz, the House of Commons was bombed, and the Speaker's Chair was destroyed, so we were able to build a replica of our Chair and send that back to the House of Commons, and so the Parliamentary tradition, despite wars and threats to peace, can continue through the centuries if men and women of good will only have the determination to see that this is so. And I believe that there is some happy symbolism in that for us.

I hope you will find in the warmth, the sunshine and the tranquillity of the Canberra scene also a suitable setting for this gathering and that there in that warmth and tranquillity there will be a symbolic atmosphere created for your discussions in the days that lie ahead.

I said that we were gratified that you had chosen Australia. This is, I believe, the most representative gathering of Parliamentarians ever to have been held in this country. There have been conferences here of various kinds in the past, some largely attended by Members of Parliament and our Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has met here more than once, but I question whether we have had so representative a gathering from all parts of the world, all the continents, and from so many differing conditions and habits of life as we find represented in this gathering. Surely it is a hopeful sign for the future of mankind that men and women from the Parliaments of the world can meet together in friendship with a determination to find a better-based understanding of each other, to become better informed

about the countries of the world and to take advantage of the conference meetings to learn something in more detail of the host country itself. And this is an aspect, of course, which is particularly prized by us.

We in Australia want to be better known and better understood because it is through that better knowledge and understanding that friendship ripens and the causes of animosity or dissension tend to disappear. And here in this area of the world, I believe it is the first time that you have met for your Spring meetings which, as Mr. Speaker pointed out comes in the Australian Autumn, but the first time that you have met outside Europe. The first time, therefore, that you will have met in this Southern Hemisphere. And we believe that here are to be found - and by "here" I mean in the total area of Asia - some of the most compelling and difficult problems that the world has to face at the present time, and I shall say a word or two on that in a moment.

But another reason why I welcome your presence here is that we become so conscious that we are living in a turbulent, troubled, restless and rapidly-changing world, and I think we become over-conscious of that fact because it is thrust upon us every day by our newspapers, by the modern media of communication, the radio and the television. Bad news travels fast and good news tends to be no news so far as the journals of public dissemination are concerned. The sensational, the challenging and the troublous, these are the things that hit the headlines, and I believe it necessary for people in public office, for their national Parliaments, to get a more realistic and balanced perspective from time to time of what is going on, certainly in their own country, and so far as the rest of the world is concerned, what is going on in the rest of the world. If you have a daily diet of trouble and strife, then you begin to think that this is the sort of world we live in, but of course it always has been a troubled and difficult world.

Ours happens to be the generation which is told of these troublous occurrences within minutes virtually of their happening in almost any part of the world, and each day as we listen to the latest bulletin of news, we are made conscious of these things. And then, of course, we can't always rely, as faithfully as we would wish to do, upon the information which reaches us. In a world which is highly competitive as to its political systems and its ideologies, there tends to be in the propaganda directed from one country to another again a distortion of fact which makes honest and objective assessment the more difficult for us. And so how valuable it is to have people coming together in a spirit of friendship, informed minds capable of assessing an argument or a situation, and in this way adding to the sum of human understanding and human knowledge about one another, and as you go back to your Parliaments, capable of faithfully and objectively reporting what it is that you have been able to learn. And so there should be a good dividend for a world that is striving for peace and social justice from the meeting of so many representative minds in the discussions of this week.

I thought, Mr. Chairman, that it might be useful if for a few minutes I tried to sketch in something of the country in which you find yourselves - not to act as a sort of travel agent or a tourist organisation but because certain things have been attempted here which may be helpful to others, just as we in turn are helped by what is achieved in other parts of the world. No country has a monopoly of achievement or expertise. Science, fortunately, is more international than politics and so we can all profit from the achievements of each other.

This is a country in which we have had to call very heavily upon science and upon skill. Most of you, unfortunately, will see comparatively little of it. As you probably know, it is the oldest continent geologically; the largest island - approximately the size of the United States in area if you exclude Alaska from the United States, but we don't enjoy the same favourable terrestrial conditions throughout the whole of the continent that the United States would. There is a coastal fringe which is reasonably well watered, but ours is largely an arid continent and we have to struggle over much of our areas with a harsh, unyielding soil which calls for the skills we can bring, the application of science, the addition of fertilisers, trace elements in deficient soils and the development of legumes that can flourish where otherwise the lack of water would destroy any herbage at all. This is the sort of problem which challenges our attention, and so water conservation, irrigation schemes, the supplementing of the soil, these are some of the tasks to which a country which has been one of the great suppliers to the rest of the world of foodstuffs and rural production must turn if our production is to continue to increase.

But we have found also that it is necessary for us also to accumulate the resources out of which development can proceed and so we have become one of the highest savers per capita in the world. Just on 27 per cent. of our gross national product represents savings and our expenditure on capital equipment is exceeded, I believe, in per capita terms by only one country in the world and that is Japan. But fortunately, in addition to our own savings resources, we have been able to create a climate favourable to enterprise and to capital and Australia has attracted investments, risk capital, from many parts of the world and this has brought with it new skills, new techniques, new industries, and as a result, a country which before the Second World War was thought of largely as a country of rural production - its wool, its wheat, its meat, butter and sugar known around the markets of the world - has so diversified and developed its secondary industries that to no doubt the surprise of many of you, we have fortunately now in secondary industry about the same section of our population that you would find in the United States of America. In percentage terms to population and work force, it is approximately the same as in the United States.

Now the most recent development which makes for a more significant and important Australia in the eyes of the rest of the world has been a series of quite fabulous mineral discoveries. It is only a few years ago that we maintained as a Government, a prohibition on the export of iron ore because we couldn't see reserves that seemed to be more than was needed for our own Australian steel industry. Then came the discovery literally of

mountains of high-grade iron ore and in Western Australia, one of the States of the Commonwealth, there it has been assessed that some 15,000 million tons of high grade iron ore, of a percentage of 65; any of you who are knowledgeable of these things will pick up the percentage and its significance but all I am told is that it is very good iron ore, and already firm contracts have been arranged between Australia and Japan for the supply of this iron ore, I think I am right in saying to a total value of \$2,360 million, and we have been told that there will be other markets, even markets in Europe for this iron ore despite the problem of distance because of its quality.

Then bauxite, a basic material for aluminium, has been found in what may prove to be the largest bauxite deposits anywhere in the world. But when you add to this Pandora's box of mineral treasures the copper, the lead, the zinc, new discoveries of nickel and manganese, you will, I think, gain some concept of the basis for our confidence that not only will the country continue to grow in strength and prosperity but that in the years ahead our export income from mineral production will probably match and exceed that which we derive from our largest export item, that well-known commodity, Australian wool.

Now, I have mentioned these things because they have been achieved in a comparatively young country, (our first settlement was in 1788) and with a comparatively small population of people making the most effective use that we could of our work force and applying as effectively as we could the modern aids which mechanical equipment, electronic and other engineering development can produce for us. And so we have been able to sustain a high rate of growth, a high rate of population growth by the standards of Europe, although, of course, not by the standards of Asia or South America. But for any of our United States or British friends who are here today, it may interest them to know that if their population rate were to be geared to the same rate of increase as that of Australia, in the United States you would need to build annually more than half a million additional homes above that which is now proceeding and in the United Kingdom about 170,000 homes. So you will see that when you add to the problem of the home construction the need for schools and hospitals and modern amenities that go with an increasing population, then you have an indication of the total problems that we face in this country. I could perhaps sum it up by saying that our broad objectives are those development, of what are still relatively undeveloped national resources, to build population for these purposes, to give full employment to our people, not only because this is a cardinal aspect of national policy for any well-managed country these days but because a country of less than 12 million people must make the most effective employment of its labour force of which it is capable.

Then, because we are a country of small population in a troubled and restless area of the world, we must apply rather more of our substance to the build-up of our defence capacity, more than we would wish but certainly no more than the hazards that we feel we must face in the years ahead would require of us. And so with development, defence, rising standards for our people and a rising programme of international aid, we are trying to behave responsibly and as a good neighbour in this area of the world.

I am able to tell you that Australia has not shirked its responsibilities in the field of international aid and that we rank per capita fourth in all the countries of the world in relation to the aid distributed through a variety of channels and organisations.

Now that, Mr. Chairman, gives a very sketchy outline of what is occurring in this country. It may interest you to know further that our system is one based principally on free enterprise but one job in every four in Australia is provided by the Government through one of its many utilities or through one of the many Government services. So in a sense we have a mixed system with the Government attending to the sort of public utilities which don't normally call for a competitive system. Where competition is desirable, we try to arrange matters so that there will be competitors in the private field, ensuring an effective and satisfactory service for the public.

You will have noticed - those of you who have had any time in the country - that we don't go in so very much for apartment dwelling in the way that you find this in Europe and in parts of Asia, and indeed in most countries of the world. The general run of Australian likes to live in his own home with his own car and a small garden to look after, able to get away to one of the pleasant places that can be visited in what is for most of Australia, a temperate and very agreeable climate. And we are glad to be able to report to you that as you fly over the cities and see the tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of homes that you will see underneath you from the aircraft in Sydney, Melbourne or one of the other capitals of the States of the Commonwealth, the homes will be occupied by home-owners. Seventysix per cent. of the houses occupied in Australia are occupied by people who either own that home or are in process of acquiring it.

Now I have said something on the economic side, and turning perhaps to something more agreeable, a lighter feature of our national life, we enjoy in this continent a remarkable range and variety of experience. I mentioned that it is a country in which much of it lies behind a coastal fringe and most of it is very arid indeed. But it is a country of contrasts and paradoxes in that in the North of Queensland, quite recently I was met by a body of people who at a time when I had taken deputations in the South of Australia wanting financial relief against some drought which was occurring in their part of the world, in the North of Queensland, I had a deputation of people wanting financial assistance because they had had so much rain that they couldn't plant their sugar crop. So we have a country, as described in one of our documentary films recently - "we run from the tropics to the snows". In the north of Australia you have the sort of rain forest which is typical of tropical countries, and rain forest so thick and lush that it is attractive to botanists from all parts of the world. Then by contrast, you come down here to the Australian Alps and we can show you more snow than is to be found in Switzerland. So you have a country in which tropical production and temperate production can be achieved making the nation very largely self-sufficient in the production of items of this character.

As to production, we have been able to make a gesture quite recently which I hope the developing countries will find helpful. We have provided a preference for the entry of their production into Australia and this was examined closely recently by the GATT and the GATT approved of this arrangement and we are hopeful that what we have provided in that direction will spread by way of example to other countries.

Now I don't want to dwell too long, Mr. Chairman, on Australia, but it is not an easy country to discover in a matter of days. Some of you may have already come in contact with our decimal currency. It is only about two months - February 14th - since we made the changeover from pounds, shillings and pence to a decimal system of dollars and cents. Those of you who have acquired a range of the coins will find that on the side of the coin opposite the effigy of Her Majesty The Queen will be reproduced an Australian animal, and each of these animals is unique to this country and will not be found anywhere else in the world; geologically the oldest country with some of the strangest and weirdest of animals. In fact so weird that somebody has written a book about us calling us "They're a Weird Mob". You may find that so in your experience of us as the week proceeds.

But here is an exciting country, and having at a period of great change in the circumstances of the nations of Asia, a role, we believe, to play of increasing importance in the years ahead, a role as a bridge of understanding between the countries of the West and the countries of Asia, a role as a great supplier of foodstuffs, of raw materials, of minerals to the growing industrialisation of Asia. Here we are situated with a handful of people in an area of the world in which there are 650 million Chinese, more than 400 million Indians, some 110 million Indonesians, 100 million Pakistanis, I think it is - altogether some 1,500 million people in Asia with a birthrate which should, if it maintains its present trend, see a doubling of that population, if this is humanly practicable and possible, (this, anyhow, is the way the curve is proceeding) by the end of this century. Well, quite obviously, if this hungry world, and so much of Asia is a hungry area of the world, is to be fed and supplied, growing industrialisation calling for the raw materials and the more sophisticated equipment of a developing economy, then quite obviously Australia has a part to play in that developing process.

But there is the darker side to the problem of Asia, and here perhaps are to be faced some of the greatest hazards which mankind has to meet in the years leading to the end of this century, and it will be the firm intention of this friendly country to do what it can to make an effective contribution towards the attainment of peace and justice, social justice, justice as between countries in our own area of the world and indeed throughout the world as a whole. To some of us when we look at the problems which confront us in government, the picture looks so dark at times as almost to encourage despair, but we must recognise that despite all these problems and difficulties, however painfully slow the process may appear to be, there is developing a more sensitive conscience around the countries of the world in relation to those less favoured, there is a growing acceptance of responsibility to do something about these things. In my own public life, I have participated in discussions in such bodies as the International Bank,

the International Development Association, the International Monetary Fund. We have contributed to the recent discussions of UNCTAD - the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. There is the United Nations show, SUNFED, which also is doing good work in its own direction. And out of these processes, some dividends occur from time to time. We join together on an Indus waters scheme or we are able to help on some constructive project of one kind or another. We in Australia have a tremendous responsibility in relation to Papua and New Guinea, trying to lead there virtually a Stone Age people to a viable independence within the earliest practicable period of time consistent with their own wishes, and if any of you have the opportunity to travel through that part of the world before you return home, I think you will find it a splendid example of what enlightened government is able to achieve with the co-operation of a people seeking better standards of literacy and of health and of economic independence.

These are some of the victories of peace which perhaps are even more glorious than those of war.

Mr. Chairman, I have no wish to detain you from your important discussions. It has been said by some wise man that it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive, but as in most statements of this kind which are superficially attractive, there are of course the exceptions. I hope that your visit to Australia proves one of them. I have no doubt you travelled hopefully, looking to the experience of discovery of a new continent and perhaps for many of you a new and somewhat strange people. You will find us a very friendly people and we would have no better wish than you would enjoy your stay with us and find it of increasing and helpful interest to you and that from the discussions of the I.P.U. here in Canberra will be a contribution to the better understanding among peoples which will be the best foundation of the peace and social justice to which we all aspire.

I hope that you enjoy your stay with us and that you return feeling that Australia is a continent which must be revisited not once but many times.

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