

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt,  
at the Higgins Electorate Dinner

25th July, 1966.

Alan and my friends from Higgins:

This is a very memorable night for Zara and myself. Indeed it is made the more memorable for us because Alan, with that genius for organisation which you possess, you've selected for this celebration the room hallowed by the fact that we held our wedding celebration here nearly twenty years ago. And, as I have very happy recollections of that occasion, obviously happily consolidated as you look at the beaming spectacle of my dear wife here, then this will be another memory to add to that rich store of the past.

But wherever we held this gathering it would have been a notable occasion for the stalwarts who have been, as I look around this room, what I might call my thick-and-thinner; those who have stuck with me through good times and through bad. You've mentioned the troubles of the early 1960's. Well, be it everlastingly to the credit of Higgins that they were with their Member all the way. (Laughter and applause). And I'm glad you feel we succeeded in laying - I believe we did - the base of a sound economy, one of the soundest economies to be found anywhere in the world today.

Now I thought, Alan, that up to this point you'd proved yourself a very good and staunch friend. But when you labelled me to deliver an address I wasn't so sure about that. I thought that this was one of these pleasant, relaxed, convivial evenings in which we manifested our friendship with one another by consuming a quite inordinate amount of delightful food and even more titillating beverage. But you've thrown on me at this late hour of the night this responsibility, and where do I begin?

I begin, I suppose, at the 26th of January this year, because, by a happy combination of circumstances, it was on Australia's National Day that I assumed the responsibility of office. So I can't forget my anniversary, next Tuesday I think I complete my first six months of office. It seems more like six years frankly, when you look back on what has been compressed into that period of six months. Surely, putting the personalities on one side, it must be accounted one of the most remarkable periods in the history of the Australian nation.

I asked my very able Press Secretary, Tony Eggleton, to select the highlights for me of the things we'd done in those six months. I thought I might have been able to give you the highlights on an occasion such as this. I took one look at the list and I felt completely exhausted. I couldn't credit that we'd done so much in so short a space of time. But there have been some quite remarkable developments in that period. Now, this perhaps is one of the most conspicuous features of the changeover which has occurred. We have not merely had a transition from a very distinguished leadership which carried Australia through the most notable period of progress in its history, but from that leadership we have moved into what can be seen as a new era of Australian historic progress. It's not a change of personalities that brings this about, it is the result of historical forces, the circumstances of events around the world which has been producing these changes here in Australia.

Whether Sir Robert Menzies had been here or not would not have altered the fact that the British Minister for Defence was with us in the first months of the year to discuss with Australia the pattern of British defence in this area of the world in the 1970's and indeed, into the 1990's. That itself was a quite historic development because for understandable reasons with which we can all sympathise, the United Kingdom had found it necessary to reduce its commitments around the world and one of the places in which it had to review its commitments was in various military bases established in this theatre of the world in South East Asia and East of Suez generally. And we discussed this very earnestly because it clearly had an important bearing on our own planning. It was made clear to us at that time that if it was found untenable to hold British forces in Singapore, for example, then unless they had some other base to go to in this area of the world - and that meant Australia - then they would have to go home.

We urged that Great Britain should maintain a presence in that part of the world for as long as it found it possible to do so for the very good reason that British character and British influence do exert a moderating, stabilising influence in this area of the world. You have comparatively weak countries, as to their military strength and, indeed, in the case of some of them, their economic strength, and the British influence and presence - not a colonial imposition or anything of that sort - has this moderating, stabilising influence. This was what we were wanting to preserve. And they saw the force of that argument. They felt that we were a little more optimistic than they were about their capacity to hold on in these places with regard to a certain amount of restlessness that occurs there. But we believe from our contacts in the area that the people there would welcome a continued British participation, and I believe that still to be so.

I merely mention this as an illustration of the sort of change in circumstance with which we have had to cope, and we have had quite dramatic confirmation in the last few hours literally that Great Britain has felt the pressure of these burdens and responsibilities and has been forced into drastic economic action in order to meet them. Now, we for our part, have given our support to Great Britain and the sterling area generally in that most of Australia's overseas earnings are held in the reserves of the United Kingdom, in sterling reserves. And this is a considerable support to the strength of sterling and their own economic viability in their external accounts. We've been able to discuss quite realistically together the need for Australia to go on earning overseas as much as we can; we've been helped to do this in the years since the war by a great influx of British capital and a considerable body of British migrants.

Now we know that the migrants will continue to come, perhaps they will even increase as a result of the difficulties in the United Kingdom. But as to the influx of capital, we would hope that the British Government and people would see that in the growth of Australia, in the build-up of its own export income, is a further strengthening of the British position in the world. We can do more in this area of the world, we can do more in the way of international aid, we can provide a larger defence establishment for the security of the area as our own economy grows, as our national development progresses. And these are matters of the character that I've been discussing recently with Mr. Wilson in London.

You've made some very charming references to Zara, Alan. She, of course, is my secret weapon and I think it's not so secret now, it's emerged publicly. Indeed, for some years when I was Deputy Leader to Sir Robert Menzies I used to say in all frankness that I was deputy leader also in my own household. And this fact is gradually seeping around the world to the knowledge of other people. However, it doesn't seem to do me any harm. It builds a certain amount of respect and indeed, warmth with others to know that I must have qualities, perhaps undiscernible to them, which have attracted this very notable lady. And my credit enhances accordingly. (Applause).

She only caused me one serious passage of embarrassment while we were away, and that, of course, was over the regrettable incident of the white mice. (Laughter). I don't know how many of you read about the white mice, but in London, when the press were asking her what she'd been doing, of course they pressed her as to whether she'd been doing some shopping. And my wife, being a very wise woman, knows that there is nothing in election year more damaging to a politician's standing than to have his wife doing a lot of expensive shopping abroad. You remember there was that lady in Africa who bought the gold bed and got into it ... (Laughter). Anyhow, my wife settled for a couple of white mice and I was able later to point out to the press how important it is to avoid international misunderstandings; that there should be full and adequate reporting of these matters because the press here merely carried a reference to the white mice and this set in train some involved departmental cabling. Whoever administers the quarantine arrangements sent a rather frenzied cable to London to the effect that the importation of white mice was prohibited. It would be very embarrassing if the wife of the Prime Minister brought them in, and they had to be publicly destroyed, or something to that effect. You see the really critical reference that had been omitted from the report was that these were china white mice for our grandchildren!'

We seem to have featured with the mice because while I was spending the night at Chequers - it was a wonderful experience for us to be invited to spend the Sunday night in this historic residence of the British Prime Ministers - we were shown around by Mr. and Mrs. Wilson. He pointed out to us the picture of Rembrandt of the Aesop Fable of the Lion and the Mouse, and it was a magnificent piece of painting. But he went on to tell us that when Winston Churchill was the occupant of Chequers, he used to study this picture and finally he could stand it no longer and he said "I cannot see the mouse". So he painted in the mouse and the Rembrandt at Chequers is now Rembrandt plus Churchill. (Laughter).

This was the story I employed at the White House in Washington because the moral of the Aesop Fable, of course, is that little friends can prove great friends and, in this sense, Australia I believe can prove a great friend both to the United States and to the United Kingdom. It's through the collaboration of these two great democracies that a great deal of the strength of the world, its prospect for peace, hopes for progress, still rest even in these times. Despite the relative weaknesses today of the British economic position, British character, British influence, British leadership, still account heavily around the world, free or communist world, and we don't underestimate that. Nor, I assure you, is it under-estimated by the President of the United States. And I was glad to have the opportunity of my second visit with him. Harold Wilson knew, of course, that I was going to see him again; we'd discussed

this together in some detail in three hours of talks at Chequers. I hope that what I was able to say both in London and in America proved helpful to that association.

There are ways, and particularly out in this area of the world, in which Australia can be of help, quite important help. Let me just give you an illustration of how the mouse as a great friend at times can work out. You've all heard of the Colombo Plan, but it's not so widely known that the Colombo Plan which has brought aid and technical assistance to the countries of Asia and South East Asia in particular, was pioneered by Australia and by a particular Australian prominently associated with the work in its early days. And it's one of the ironies of life's circumstances that the man who is being abused in some quarters around the world at this time, because in the exercise of an honest judgment he gave his decision in a particular way, our own Sir Percy Spender was the man who gave the drive, the impetus and the inspiration to what later became the Colombo Plan.

Now Australia has provided under that plan what is for our size of population a respectable total of 130 million Australian dollars. The United States has provided 15 thousand million dollars under the Colombo Plan. And here is an illustration of the way in which an initiative we were able to take and get something moving, had the effect of being of benefit on this scale to the people of this area. I mention that because, for me, one of the highlights - perhaps the highlight - of my recent journey overseas was to find that, having put vigorously in the United States the view that the press cover being given there didn't reveal to the American public how much was being achieved by the people of South East Asia, under the protection of the American shield they have been able to go forward with their own progress and able to co-operate more closely together for peaceful purposes, for trade purposes and for mutual strengthening of each other's security position. Now this wasn't being told, I felt, fairly and adequately in the American press, and I kept on saying so until we did get some notice taken of it. And what is more, we got from the President himself a quite historic declaration of American attitude. This has now been recognised in American as a significant development in their foreign policy, the attitude of the President to American responsibilities and possibilities in this area of the world. They were encouraged by the evidence which has been accumulating of co-operation between those countries which have been protected by an American presence in South Viet Nam from communist aggression. Those of us who have enjoyed this protection have now been co-operating more closely together. There were ten countries which met recently at Seoul in South Korea, not one of the major powers amongst them, except in the sense that Japan can be classified as a major power - it certainly is in an industrial sense but not a military sense - but it was one of the significant developments of recent times I would think, looking back over the six months, the point at which I would say perhaps the most significant development had occurred for me, external to the events inside this country, was the moment when I was invited by the Prime Minister of Thailand to go and sit - the first foreigner in history - in the Cabinet of the Government of Thailand. This was to me a symptom of the new spirit that is emerging around these countries of Asia, a setting aside of the past prejudices, past failures in co-operation. And this is one of the real dividends that has been secured for us by American resolution and determination in South Viet Nam, assisted by what the United Kingdom has been doing with other Commonwealth forces in Malaysia and in resisting Indonesian confrontation policies in Borneo.

Now these are just illustrations which I give you of the sort of thing that has been cropping up through the year. It's been a year crowded with incidents and developments of this sort and these are to touch on some of the external matters.

Internally we've had the changeover - quite an historic changeover - to a decimal currency system. And lest anybody think us freakish in this matter, New Zealand will be moving into decimals next year, the United Kingdom will be following in due course, and most, therefore, of the countries and peoples around the world will be operating under a decimal system of currency.

Inside Australia, the sort of change we have to contend with these days is that the electorate no longer respects the division of power between the Commonwealth and the States. I am sure it would suit John Bloomfield, it would certainly suit us and our respective colleagues in our governments, if the electorate would allow us to go ahead as the constitution intended us to go. He is, of course, an authority these days in the field of education. But this doesn't prevent the electorate from demanding that the Commonwealth also come into the field of education and the provision which we, through our Budget, and the State Governments, through their Budgets, need to make in order to meet what has been described as an education explosion, is almost capable of wrecking the stable assembly of a Budget for all the other purposes of government at this time. These things are occurring while we're coping in the Federal sphere with a record provision for defence, and increasing provision for international aid, which the electorate also is pressing for these days. And, taking them together, the Commonwealth and State Governments are almost at their wits end literally to find how, without so imposing burdens upon the community that incentive becomes damaged, they can make ends meet and sustain a stable economic situation in respect of their own administrations. We've just been grappling with this problem in Canberra. I came back from overseas over the weekend to run into a gathering of the representatives of industry on Monday, and on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday had the full Ministry meeting on the problems of our own Budget in Canberra.

And so, Alan, you will see that the fruits of office, while they look alright on the plate, sometimes prove both costly and difficult of attainment. I've been greatly stimulated by this six months of office, but I never thought I'd have to work so hard in my life. I felt that the Treasurer of the Commonwealth was the hardest working man; I've been maintaining that theory not for 8 years, heaven forbid, but for 7 years as the former incumbent of that high office. I know that Sir Robert Menzies used to work very hard. I'm quite convinced that he wasn't worked as hard in his life as I have been in these last 6 months. However, he might argue that. But I think I can claim that because it is a changing world; it is a turbulent, restless world.

How many of us of my generation when we were boys used to know much about what went on north of this country. Most of us if we got as far as getting a collection of the postage stamps of the countries concerned would have become about as well-informed as the average Australian statesman of those days on what went on in our north. Our eyes were turned to the British Isles and Europe. We hardly had an awareness of their existence - there was a funny little country called Indo China we didn't know much about. The relations between Singapore and Malaya were also mysteries to us. But over recent years these have become facts of life for us.

Now I don't want to imply - and some of the things I've been saying lately might lead to that impression - that we don't have a future in relation to the rest of the world, that our future is all in Asia. That would be quite silly because, apart from questions of international policy, two thirds of our trade is still outside the Asian area. The significant thing is that, even while we've been in office, and I go back now to the beginning of Sir Robert's long period of leadership, the percentage of Australian trade in this area of the world has moved up from 15% to 33%, and the trend is steadily in that direction. We're dealing now with a billion and a half people and this is more than half the human race, and as the years go on their proportion of the total population of the human race will tend to increase more than that of the rest of the world because not are they no less fertile than the rest of the world, but improving public health measures are keeping more of them alive beyond the point of low life expectancy which was their lot in earlier years.

Now these are some of the factors which lie ahead for the policy-maker of this country; they help to contribute to the judgment which Lord Slim recently expressed to me when he wrote saying what a fascinating time to be Prime Minister of Australia. Well, it is a fascinating time, because, not only are there challenges and opportunities outside Australia but inside we are embarked on one of the most exciting phases of national development which measure up in excitement and promise to the rich days of the gold finds in Australia of earlier years. Here in a year in which we've had to contend with the most serious drought in the last 20 years, the economy has moved on steadily for most people almost without fluctuation. We've got a much broader base to the whole economy; we have been able to continue in strength through all these difficulties.

Now, we meet here tonight as supporters of a Liberal candidate in a Liberal electorate, and, indeed, I have the honour to be the Leader of the Federal Parliamentary Liberal Party. And I think we can claim that Australia's strength inside Australia and around the world is in no small degree attributable to the basic principles that we stand by in our Liberal faith and the brilliant exposition of those principles by the man who was Prime Minister of this country for 16 consecutive years. It is my honour to succeed him and I can tell you - and I think this ought to be mentioned seeing that I'm laying emphasis on the Liberal element inside the policy formation - that through those years we have operated with a coalition; it's been a friendly coalition and has worked effectively and happily; and what I'm sure will interest all in this room tonight to know is that the relations which existed with Sir Robert's leadership of cordial collaboration have continued with no lessening of warmth or effectiveness of co-operation in the coalition which I have the honour to lead. (Applause). And this means strength for Australia. We can present to the world the picture of a strong government; our opponents are in disarray; it's hard to find these days a serious political discussion as between the Government Parties and those of the Opposition. You pick up odd items about the rightwing asking the D.L.P. to give them some sort of protection or the left wing saying if there is a big enough loss of seats at the next election then the left wing will be able to take control. Well, if this is the way they want to argue it, or discuss it, let them do so. We carry the responsibility of national leadership and in these days, with the sombre tasks still ahead of us in South Viet Nam and elsewhere, those are weighty enough responsibilities indeed. We have no lack of advisers from a variety of sections of the community. But, finally, here

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as in the united States and in the United Kingdom, a responsibility for leadership has to be taken by the democratically elected government of the day. And in that weighty task and responsibility its a great encouragement to me personally to know that my own base is so strong and that herearound me I find those who are helping to keep the fortess of Higgins staunch, firm and strong.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, Alan spoke of an address. It's been a lengthier one perhaps than even he might have bargained for. But these are just a selection of the matters which have been actively engaging the attention of the busiest Government in the history of the Commonwealth of Australia. I hope that in the period which lies ahead and the rest of this year, we'll prove it one of the most effective years in the history of the nation and that, given the support which we at least feel to be our just due, we'll go on from strength to strength in the year's ahead. And may you be with me all that way. Thank you.

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