

NATIONAL CAPITAL PLANNING COMMISSION  
LUNCHEON, CANBERRA. A.C.T.

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt

10th March, 1967.

On the 10th March, 1967, the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr. Holt, attended a luncheon in the honour of the National Capital Planning Committee on the occasion of the final meeting of their three year term.

Mr. Holt first expressed thanks and appreciation to the Committee and to the Chairman, Mr. J. W. Overall the National Capital Development Commissioner.

The Prime Minister then continued :-

I am here as a resident a good part of the time - as an observer now for very many years and 'by their works ye shall know them'. I think if that text is applied to you and the members of your Committee, Chairman, you would get a unanimous vote of approval from all around Australia.

We have seen building here, before our eyes with the passage of time, a truly beautiful city and a setting which gives it an individuality and marks it out as one of the really lovely Capital cities of the world.

I go back thirty-one years plus, and the transformation which has occurred, more particularly over the recent years, is to me truly remarkable. I can remember when I set off on one occasion with Geoff Street and Jim Fairbairn - later to be killed in that tragic accident which helped to give the airport its name - and we walked from Parliament House to the National War Memorial.

No, of course, I would have to take the flippers and the mask, and snorkel, if I were to attempt that journey again and this is one of the major transformations which have occurred in the spectacular growth of the city - its layout, the actual pulling together of the outlying parts which could not be so clearly perceived until the lake was there to give a sort of focal centre to them.

But this is not an easy job which we have set you. It would be difficult enough, I think, to plan a lovely city if you could take your time about the development of it and if you had unlimited funds available to you for your purposes.

Here you don't merely have the sort of restraints which a responsible Government feels necessary to impose on any one section of national growth in the interests of others, and although I think we have treated the National Capital by no means unreasonably, I know that you have felt at times that the limitations we have placed on you have held down the rate of growth rather more than you would have desired. Yet the performance itself indicates that we haven't been too niggardly in that regard. But the thing which really complicates your task enormously, I imagine, is that you have not merely the problem of building a beautiful

Capital City, but of coping with a city population growing more rapidly than in any other city of size around Australia.

You have got to satisfy the customers who are there who feel the need for the engineering services that you've put in; who want to see trees grow where they've selected a fairly bare site, as a building site; who want to feel they're part of a fine city and you've got to do all that for them and at the same time build a capital which will be a source of national pride in itself. And, I think, you have succeeded admirably in both these directions.

The resident of Canberra must feel that his standard of service and of accommodation compares very favourably with that of other parts of the Commonwealth and right through the period that accompanies this normal urban growth. You've got the building of impressive official buildings, of building up the commercial centres of the national city and all the rest of it that goes with what is now, I gather, just on a city of 100,000 souls, and rising, what? 10% or thereabouts?

Commissioner :-

About seven or eight.

Mr. Holt :-

Yes, we have steadied it down a bit I gather. Anyhow, that is still a very rapid rate of growth for any city to have to cope with. You have mentioned one or two things which haven't altogether pleased your Committee Members. The critic, I suppose, can always find room for improvement.

I, myself, have puzzled for many years - and Sir Robert disclaimed any responsibility himself - but I could not find anybody who would claim any responsibility for the King George Statue; and I know it is one of Doug's ambitions either to bomb it or to remove it. Even during the earlier periods where there were threats to Australian security, I could only hope that if we were so unfortunate as to have an enemy attack, they would choose their targets skilfully.

And so he will have my moral, parliamentary and ministerial support in action he takes to restore that sweep, and that sense of proportion which did previously exist in the vista between Parliament House and the War Memorial by the removal of this particular excrescence.

I am glad to know that you are so amenable to practical, sensible suggestion that both you and the Minister have responded so readily to my urgings that we convert the cowtrack from the Airport into Canberra into something a little more respectable; and the edging which is now going on again has excited my warm approval.

But to do these things in a practical way, coping with the growing population, providing standards which will at the one time be a model to the rest of Australia, but won't be so far in advance of the rest of Australia as to create resentment and acrimony around the other Capital Cities, is a task which calls for judgment and discrimination, good sense and again I repeat, I believe you have achieved these things remarkably well.

It is not so many years ago that the diplomats appointed to this country found that the amenities in Canberra were so lacking that they had to base themselves rather uneasily either in Sydney or occasionally in Melbourne.

I think that appointment to the Australian scene was regarded almost in the sense of a period of solitary confinement. However, I am sure the doyen of the Corps would concede that now there is quite a degree of competition to secure appointment to Australia and in particular to Canberra as the national centre and undoubtedly not only has the improvement in Canberra itself helped to attract the Diplomatic Corps to Canberra but the presence in Canberra of the Diplomatic Corps with their own distinguished buildings has added to the attraction of the capital city itself.

I am told that we are now attracting just on 600,000 tourists a year. It seems an extraordinary figure to me but I am in no position to challenge it and, if it is a fact, then I think it demonstrates not only that Canberra itself has developed great attractiveness but there is a growing pride around Australia in the National Capital.

I can recall as even some of my more recently-acquired colleagues the sort of controversy that used to go on even at the time when we were building the lake - people resentful of Canberra's expenditures and contrasting this with our failure to provide so much for the things they needed in their centre. But that's been a diminishing factor almost to vanishing point.

And today one senses a very different spirit around the country. People are proud of Canberra, they flock to Canberra and in that process, I think, they have learned to take a growing interest in the national Parliament in Canberra and in all these directions your activities have helped.

May I say to those you have mentioned who served on the Committee for the period of nine years how grateful we are to them for the contribution they have made and indeed to thank you all for what you have done in this honorary way, eating into your spare time and drawing on your professional talents, the skills and the experience which you so ably possess. All this is deserving of the appreciation of your Government of the Australian people.

So thank you very much for all that you have done and all that you will be doing for the growth and beauty of this Capital of ours and my thanks to you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to be with you to say thank you and enjoy your company.

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