

PLEASANT SUNDAY AFTERNOON AT
WESLEY CHURCH, MELBOURNE



10th September, 1967

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt

Your Excellency, Sir Irving Benson; My dear wife who has rightly been credited for doing so much to keep me in a proper state of body and soul; Ladies and gentlemen; and a special greeting if I may to Squadron-Leader Hicks and his men who met with me in Montreal and performed so notably for Australia on that occasion:

And while you, Sir Irving, were not able to single out all those faces you would like to shake hands with, may I be permitted to single out one very old and dear friend whom I am delighted to see in the audience here this afternoon in the person of Mrs. Tottie Embling, because before I had a wife Mrs. Embling used to do what she could to keep me on the path of rectitude and when I mentioned this to Sir Irving he said that she looked after him when he had his first charge in Toorak when he started in his service.

Now this is a very happy occasion for a variety of reasons, it's a birthday festival in several senses. It is, as I gather from the records, the 109th anniversary of Wesley Church in this present building; it's the 74th anniversary of the Central Mission and we all join in wishing many happy returns on this auspicious occasion.

Sometimes happiness is alloyed with a little sadness and one could bring a note of sadness to this occasion if one were to think of Sir Irving's impending retirement as marking an end to that wonderful life of service and all that he has meant not only to this community of Melbourne and of Victoria, but to Australia as a nation. It is a remarkable record. He has, I understand, had 40 years of association with Wesley, with the Mission, 37 years as its Superintendent. In other words his own life of service has extended over more than one-third of the life of the Wesley Mission here in Victoria. I say there would be a touch of sadness if I were not convinced in my own mind, and looking at him today has confirmed this, that his active mind will go on through voice and through pen for many, many years, enriching our own thoughts by what he contributes to them. But I say on behalf of all of you here and indeed of the Australian people whom I am honoured to lead at this time, thank you to Sir Irving Benson for this wonderful life of service that he has given to our community.

He mentioned that at times he felt that it was his task to listen to everybody in trouble. I have sometimes felt, Sir Irving, that that was my prerogative in my own post as Head of Government, but in our own way we each have a task to perform in relation to those who have a proper claim upon the services and goodwill of the community. It is a triteness to say that we live in a restless age, an age in which the winds of change are blowing strongly about us as they are about the peoples in every other part of the world. In some countries we see this expressed in degrees of turbulence that lead to riot and revolution, a challenge to established concepts, and even we in this favoured island continent of Australia are not immune altogether from those influences although, fortunately for us, they do not take usually any violent forms. But around the world there has been the cry for improved conditions for a defeat of those age-old enemies of mankind - illness, illiteracy, poverty, lack of nourishment, lack of adequate housing, and people who have suffered these things through the centuries

have now decided that the world can give a better order for mankind.

And this in Australia which, of course, is much more favourably placed, represents a demand on the part of the electorate for more and better things in just about every imaginable direction. The electorate demands more by way of education, more by way of development, more adequate provision for the defence of the nation, more in the form of social welfare and a better deal for people of the aborigine race just to mention one other item. And they are impatient that these things shall be done and governments who must try to give expression to the will of the electorate go about as best they can this task of providing more of these things in the directions that are sought.

But we cannot ever afford to overlook the fact that it is you, the people, who provide these things. Governments cannot conjure them up out of nothing. They provide them by producing if they can a greater output from the nation as a whole what we call our gross national product and out of that increased provision make more adequate provision for these things that people want. But in the final analysis it is the body of citizens who provide these things and even governments who are determined to do their best to supply them have to carry in their minds the fact that if they load on to the productive mechanism too many burdens then they will not in the long run be able to supply at the same level of advance that they would hope to make.

We, in Australia, have been singularly successful in encouraging greater productivity in our nation, an enlargement of our gross national product and out of that averaging $5\frac{1}{2}\%$ of growth a year over the last five years which included one dreadful drought year, we rank second only among the nations, the industrialised nations of the world, we rank second only to Japan. No other country exceeds the rate of improvement in the gross national product of Australia. Now I mention these things because naturally each time that a government comes to the people with its Budget or with some other piece of legislation, there is a disposition to look at that against what is felt to be the need of the time. And we sometimes, I think, tend to overlook the tremendous advances that we have made as a people over this last generation and it is more comfort perhaps to those who feel the pressure of need immediately and whose need relatively to others more favoured than they seems a very great one to them. But we progress, - Sir Irving says we have not got to the point yet where despite his earnest pleadings to me we have completely abolished the means test, but what we have done has been to make spectacular advance over the years since I have seen the achievements of a period of office which we have enjoyed. Could I just put a figure to that to illustrate it?

I have seen the total provision grow in our Budget for the aged and invalid on the pension payment from \$88m. to \$509m. this year. I have seen the proportion of people eligible for benefit grow from about 39% of those within the age group to 53%, I think the figure is at this time. I have seen innovations which were unheard of when we first had to face up to these responsibilities and I think I will be credited, Sir Irving, with having launched at least one of these major reforms as far back in 1941 with the introduction for the first time into the National Parliament of a child endowment programme. But in those days we had no scheme of pharmaceutical benefits worth mentioning - actually there was a total expenditure of \$0.6m. This year we budgeted \$75m. There was no scheme at all of medical benefits; this year we

provided \$46m. There was no scheme of pharmaceutical benefits for pensioners; this year that will cost us \$31.8m. There was no scheme of medical services to pensioners and this, of course, is quite apart from the figure I mentioned earlier of total pension provision, but this year the medical services to pensioners are estimated to cost \$16m. There was no such thing as an aged persons home scheme and you may be interested to know that the genesis of this is attributed by Sir Robert Menzies - he brought it in in 1954 - to Dame Pattie Menzies who told him what a wonderful thing it would be if the Government would work out a scheme whereby through its contribution, doubling those of others, we could steadily go ahead with the process of erecting homes for our aged people.

And I had myself a hand in arranging for two very senior, former members of the Public Service, Sir Giles Chippindall and Mr. Norman Watt - Sir Giles had been Head of Postmaster-General's Department and Mr. Norman Watt Head of the Treasury - to bring their good offices behind the work of the National Old People's Welfare Council because if we are to concern ourselves with the problem of the aged - and we all know what a problem that can be - then this is not a matter to be left simply to governments, simply to some cash payment by a government to the person concerned. They have a life to live as a human being and they want to feel that they are needed, that they are cared for, that people want to have company with them and there is much more to this than the main provision of a money payment. And through this National Old People's Welfare Council working in association with similar bodies around the rest of the Commonwealth and in various States, we felt that we could make a contribution not purely of a material kind but a psychological contribution, a social contribution to this need that is felt.

Now, in mentioning the provision that is now made some people might imagine that because we have found it necessary over recent years to engage on a very large programme of defence that the proportion of the Budget available for social welfare has been significantly reduced - but on the contrary. When we came to office the defence provision was, of course, a very much smaller one both in money terms and as a percentage of the Budget. It was actually 8.3% of the Budget of those days whereas in this last Budget it has occupied - and is a very much bigger Budget of course than was the case in those earlier times - it occupied 17% of the Budget. Social welfare which in those days occupied 18.7% of the Budget was 20.5% of the Budget on this last occasion. And so we have sustained, and indeed improved upon, the proportion of our total revenue allocations into social welfare compared with that which existed in these earlier years and I could sum up the social welfare provision by saying that I have seen it grow from \$185m. to \$1,071m. in this last Budget. Now, so much for social welfare but that, of course, is only part of the story of the actual financial provision which governments find themselves able to make.

I mention the demand the electorate makes upon us for education and this year, although when I first had to face these matters as a Minister in the Government in the period after 1949 there was virtually no provision, a very small provision for education in the Commonwealth Budget. This year it is \$194m. and that itself is an increase of 35% over what was provided in the previous year. When we look at the general state of the community, we can take, I think, some comfort from other stages we have reached.

We have maintained through all this period a fully employed society. No country in the world can point to a

longer better-sustained level of employment than has been the case in Australia and that means quite apart from the well-being of those directly employed that they, too, are in a better position to make their contribution to the family needs, particularly the family needs of older members or disabled members of the family. As to the social problem of the future, I think we are going to see that quite transformed by the developments which have been occurring.

And when I say that, I have in mind that no country in the world had a higher percentage of home ownership than has Australia and that percentage of home ownership is rising year by year. As I think most of you know when we come to assess the limitations for pension we do not include the home as part of the means of the person concerned, and now the percentage of those who occupy homes, in process of acquiring them or actually owning them is in the neighbourhood of 70% and it is a rising percentage year by year. We do not take into account the car, and Australia, you will be perhaps rather surprised to learn, in terms of motor vehicles now rank second only to the United States of America. There is one motor vehicle to every 3.3 persons in the community as most of you who travel around our roads on the weekends no doubt will confirm.

Insurances.....people have been making much more provision for their old age and for their family needs than they ever did in the past. I have seen the sum, the total sum, for which people in Australia are insured rise from \$280m. to \$2,700m. as the last figure which I have been able to check on.

Now I do not say these things in any spirit of complacency because the electorate rightly demands of us and good friends like Sir Irving keep prodding us that we have got to do more, and of course we want to do more. I only wanted to put this broad picture before you because so often it is assumed that little is being done or that we hard-headed old politicians in Canberra are also a hard-hearted lot who do not have much regard for the welfare of our fellow men. Well, I hope that what I have said will indicate that the spirit of this Church in a changing world, the old values of the good neighbour and of that good neighbour spirit which has made of our immigration programme the most successful constructive achievement of the Australian people, the spirit of the good neighbour, the spirit of fellowship which is such an essential mark of the Wesley Mission has been carried through, I hope you will agree, in the processes of national government over this last 20 years or more.

Now, Sir, when we speak of need we do not think only of the need that exists inside our own community, and indeed for others what we would think of as poverty in our own community is to them a very relative term. If I mention India, for example, which has 42 times our population, it has only double our gross national product. Pakistan and Indonesia have 9 times our population but they have only half, about half the gross national product of this small country of Australia. And so there is a deeper need in many other parts of the world than anything that we experience here and while our good work should very properly begin at home we have not been blind to the needs which are felt by others. And over these years I have seen our total contribution to external aid grow from \$33m. to \$142m. in this last Budget. And it may interest you to know that that figure I have just given - \$142m. - represents .75% of the gross national product of the country and at that percentage it ranks second in the world. Although Australia is a developing country and a capital-importing country we have still found ourselves able to make a provision which ranks second only in terms of percentage of gross national

product to France. So in many ways we are demonstrating that the good neighbour spirit still inspires us.

Now I would hope that as we in our larger national sphere have found ourselves able to do these things that we have merely been reflecting a spirit which has been kept shining brightly through the 109 years in which this Mission has existed. And because the spirit of Wesley and the Wesley Mission has radiated out through the community.....I hope Sir Irving you feel it has had some influence on one of your own friends your old friend who stands before you here today. May the good work that Sir Irving has exemplified through so many years be carried on by this Mission and in congratulating you on this notable birthday and in paying this public tribute to the work of the man who has presided over its destinies for so many years, I wish you many more happy birthdays, and I wish Sir Irving in the retirement that comes to him a long, healthy, active membership of this Australian community which he has done so much to serve.
