

CONFERENCE OF THE PRESIDING OFFICERS AND CLERKS  
OF THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENTS

23RD JANUARY, 1968



Speech by the Prime Minister, Senator John Gorton

Mr Speaker, Mr President - I'm not quite sure which is the correct form of address at this moment in this Chamber.

This is, as has been pointed out, quite like old times to have a chance to stand in this place and to talk to a distinguished gathering, but it has one difference. Those on my left are not Opposition; those on my right are not Government, rather all are independents gathered together to discuss how better to make a Parliament work, and if this is the last speech that I make in this place, as it may well be, I can think of no better audience to which to make such a speech, nor any better subject on which to address you.

This is, as the President has pointed out, as the Speaker has pointed out, the first occasion in Australia when you have all come together to discuss the duties you have to your various Parliaments, and through the Parliaments, to the Australian people. That in itself, I suggest, is pregnant with value for the future of Parliaments throughout Australia. Presidents and Speakers are most important people. Indeed, to ordinary Members of Parliament, as you will have noticed, they have some of the attributes of Ben Bolt. Do you remember that old poem about Ben Bolt, in which sweet Alice trembled with fear at his frown? That is what we - at any rate in this Chamber - do with respect to our President, and I am sure that Presiding Officers in other Chambers find the same reaction from Members sitting in those Chambers. If they don't they ought to, and I am sure that after this Conference they will.

Because one of the important jobs of Presiding Officers is to keep in order Members of Parliament who occasionally get a little unruly, not infrequently get off the point and sometimes get a little difficult to understand, Presiding Officers have to keep them in order and keep them talking about the subject before the House. This is a great necessity for the conduct of parliamentary business.

But over and above that is a duty not laid down anywhere, not to be found in any manual, but nevertheless something which is the oil which helps the wheels of Parliament to turn, and that is to sit in the Chair, no matter from what party the man sitting in the chair may come, and inside the House act with complete impartiality, and outside the House to take every opportunity to make the Members of both sides of the House mingle together in a social sort of a way, and so get to know each other as men and as human beings, so that when battle is joined inside the Chamber, it is joined with the knowledge of the personality and the honesty of the person towards whom that argument is directed. This is a very significant part of the duties of a President and a Speaker.

Of course they do have other matters which are sprung upon them suddenly and upon which, too, they must be judged. When something boils up in Parliament and points of order are taken, it is suggested that somebody is out of order and ought to be thrown out or at least subdued - when this turbulence suddenly comes to the surface, this too has to be quelled by the President or the Speaker. How often have we

seen them sitting in their Chairs, and seen the officials with whom I haven't yet spoken, wandering up with perhaps an occasional word of advice because, of course, every President and every Speaker knows his Standing Orders completely and utterly and doesn't really need any advice. Nevertheless, one sees them going up and perhaps suggesting a nuance here or a nuance there before, *ex cathedra*, comes the final decision. I am sure, from my own observation, and I think you would all agree with me, that this little suggestion, this little reinforcement of what a President and Speaker was going to do anyway, by an official, is also of immense importance to the running of a Parliament.

I think there is only one other thing I wish to say. Presiding Officers still, particularly in the House of Representatives, but I suppose in all Parliaments, when they are appointed to their position, by tradition are taken by the arms by two of their supporters and dragged, struggling and unwilling to the Chair. Since in most cases they have taken a certain amount of pains to make sure that they do get elected to the Chair, this occasionally surprises some people. But it has a very valid historical reason, as of course you all know, and it is a reason which needs to be remembered and needs to be applied, because you will recall initially that the Speaker was the man who spoke. Now, of course, he doesn't. He never says anything except "Don't say that" or "That's out of order," but initially he was the man who spoke for the House of Commons to the King, and said "You can't do this". "You can't impose that tax." "You are overstepping the law there". The position of Speaker in those days was a very dangerous occupation for a commoner to have. More than one Speaker suffered seriously as a consequence of speaking for the House over which he presided. That is why, originally, there was some real regret, there was some real opposition to being taken to a seat which in modern parlance, we would call a hot seat.

Well, that doesn't apply now, but what does apply now is still a necessity to speak for the House in the House, rather than speak for the Government in the House, or speak for the Opposition in the House, to speak for the institution of Parliament as opposed to the parties that make it up or the executive which depends upon its support. These are the reasons why you all are so honoured in the occupancy of these positions, and these are the reasons why we are so honoured that you have gathered here in Canberra to discuss how better, if it is possible to be better, to carry on the functions of Houses over which you preside and the business which comes before them.

As I make what I hope will be my last address in this Chamber, particularly if the electors of Higgins support me, I am mindful that I will be changing from a President I know to a Speaker I do not know. Without stating the exact quotation because it might not sound proper or appropriate, let me say that I hope that the Speaker I do not know will be better than the President I know but he will have to be pretty good to fill that niche.

It is with some regret that I leave this place. It is with pleasure that I see you sitting here to make it, and all your Parliaments, a better place than it was before you came here.

And that is why I have pleasure in declaring this Conference open. Thank you.

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