

53RD CONGRESS OF THE R. S. L.

CANBERRA, A. C. T.

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Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Your Excellency, Sir Arthur Lee, Mr. Whitlam, Ministers, Members, Service Chiefs of Staff, and Ladies and Gentlemen:-

My task is merely to say a few supporting words after the Governor-General has opened this Conference. And I will keep them brief, as I know you would wish them to be kept brief.

It is for me a great distinction to be able to stand today and talk to the representatives of an organisation which has, since it was formed, had three major objectives - at least in my mind three major objectives.

The first, to see that those who were maimed by war, and the dependents of those who were maimed or did not return at all from war, were looked after by the nation. The second, to try to ensure that the defences of this country were, insofar as our resources permitted, kept at a level which would help us to retain what in the past members of this organisation have so dearly fought to retain. And the third, to see that that which was retained in two world wars is used properly in peace for the benefit of the nation.

In neither of the great wars fought did we win anything new, nor did we seek to. What we did was to retain something old and something precious, the right to live in freedom and to develop ourselves according to our people's will. We might not have retained that - in my view we would not have retained that - but for the sacrifices twice made. And it is therefore a most significant objective of this organisation to see that the foundation upon which, and upon which alone a great nation can be built, the foundation of freedom and participation in decisions. . . . to see that that foundation is used to build an enduring structure. These are three great objectives.

As to the first two, the Governor-General has already indicated the difficulties of getting a quart out of a pint pot. But, I am sure, that insofar as this organisation is concerned, they will never stop squeezing - if I can change the metaphor and regard it as a tube of toothpaste - never cease squeezing the tube to endeavour to get from it the utmost possible.

One thing of which His Excellency spoke was the number of items on your agenda. One of them will not need to take up much of your time. . . . the item concerned with the extension of tuberculosis benefits to those who have fought in special areas or in Vietnam. The legislation was amended last week in order to extend these benefits to these people.

As to defence, I know that everyone present is concerned with the changed situation which faces our nation as a result of the decision of the British to withdraw from our near north. I know that everyone here realises that meeting a changed situation and a new challenge requires decisions which cannot be lightly arrived at and ought not to be too quickly rushed into. And that is all I propose to say on that matter.

But it may be appropriate, Sir, to conclude by announcing here something which I believe has a significance for the organisation and for the nation itself. This November there is an anniversary, and that is the anniversary of the ending of that great war fought some half a century ago. We have been asked by the French Government to contribute from Australia a contingent of troops who will represent this nation, together with a contingent from New Zealand. They will march through the streets of the city of Paris and give visible evidence of the sacrifices made by this nation for a country 10,000 miles away.... but for a cause which is just as significant whether it is 10,000 or 10 miles away.

And so there will be on this 50th celebration representatives of the Australian Army and the New Zealand Army providing to the people of Europe an indication, a reminder of that continuing concern of this nation for the maintenance of freedom, which cost so dearly at that time and which will be commemorated by this march. I hope that our decision to send this contingent meets with the approval of this gathering and indeed I am sure it does.

BACKGROUND POINTS ON PARIS CONTINGENT:

This will comprise about 150 men representing the three services. A party of 84 soldiers and airmen will leave by air on 6 November. The Naval contingent of some 40 officers and men will be made up of R. A. N. personnel serving in Britain.
