

QUEENSLAND YOUNG LIBERALS
YOUTH DINNER

Brisbane, Qld

6 AUGUST 1970

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Mr. President, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Mention has been made of a generation gap, and that is a subject to which I have been devoting some thought because we hear so much about it. And I find that I have come to the conclusion that it doesn't exist. You would know better than I, whether it does or not. I can only say that I don't feel that it exists.

Of course there are occasionally difficulties in communication between an older man and a younger one, but there are equally difficulties in communication between an older man and another older one and a young man and a young one. It is not a matter, I suggest, of age, but a matter of whether one talks the same language, thinks the same way and can carry on a dialogue. And I think that in Australia today, as far as I have experienced it, I have been able to carry on dialogues, discussions with young people, including my own sons, who disagree with almost everything I do. But that doesn't prevent a reasonable exchange of ideas which sometimes ends in agreement to differ, and sometimes in agreement to concur.

I have some doubt as to whether the generation gap of which we hear so much really does exist, but as I say, you would know better than I.

We hear of a generation of dissent, and I doubt whether that is true. Of course, now as always in the past, young people question the values that have been handed on to them, question the customs which have been handed on to them. They always have. I can remember, and I am sure that I am the same as everybody else, at one stage thinking that my own father just simply didn't understand anything about what was going on at all. But as I got a little older, I realised he had learnt a lot in the last few years!

But this is natural questioning, proper questioning of young people when they find themselves inheriting a world and responsibility for trying to see that it becomes a better one. So I doubt whether what we hear about so much is as widespread as it is claimed to be.

What was said about the effect of the media in spreading these views again is, I think, true, and true because news is news. A dog bites a man, that's natural. If a man bites a dog, it's news because it is unusual and abnormal. And if that is so, then the concentration of media and television on people invading university rooms, of people sitting down in roadways..... the very fact that that is concentrated on indicates that it is unusual and that it is abnormal, and I believe that it is.

I believe that at any university, for example, to which you may go, 90-95 percent of the students there are interested in their work, in their studies, in their sport, in parties, in the normal things that make up the life of young people.

And, of course, what goes on and what is not recorded are the contributions that youth makes to the community, the positive contribution. and I have taken out some facts showing what the young people in Queensland have done, which have never made headlines, which have never been reported and which I think are more typical of the young people of Australia than the things that do get before you.

Students of the Queensland University raised \$3,000 for charity during their commemoration week earlier this year. Students of the Queensland University raised \$6,000 for the aid of earthquake victims during World University Service week. Law students at the university are providing a free legal aid scheme in co-operation with a church's "life-line" activities. Students at this school, the Church of England Grammar have raised \$500 from their pocket-money this year to aid charity projects, and have taken part in such activities as cleaning up the beaches in Queensland. All these things, I believe, are more typical of the approach of the youth of Australia than are the things to which greater attention tends to be given by the media.

But it is right and proper that questioning by youth should occur, questioning of the world which has been handed on to them. And what sort of a world is it? How does youth see it? I, naturally, do not know the answer to this, but I do know that the world that is handed on to you is a much better one to live in than it used to be a generation ago.

It is not so very long in Australia since there was immense industrial injustice, so that people if they wished to earn their living on the wharves, would have to go and stand in a bull ring and be picked out and hired for a day; perhaps chosen by favouritism or chosen by a foreman if they were prepared to pay part of the wages they earned to that foreman. It is not so very long ago since that happened.

It is not so very long ago since people feared unemployment and depression and when a man would never know whether he could maintain his family from one year to the next because unemployment and the fear of it hung over his head. And that, too, led to industrial and economic injustice. It is not so very long ago since the poverty in this country was so widespread that it is almost impossible for you, I think, to envisage what it was like. And so there has been improvement in the world compared with what it used to be.

There have been great advances in combating poverty. There have been great advances in giving economic security to mankind. There have been great advances in the elimination of injustice. And so, however this present world may appear today through the eyes of youth, it is much better than it was. And my generation can take some credit, I think, for having built it into what it is today.

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But now - or very soon - the results of your present questioning have got to come to fruition. Your thoughts and aspirations will have to be put into practice. How then would you want to improve the world as it is today?

This is the first question youth should ask itself, I think. How they wish to improve the world, because until they know how and where they want to go, until they know the kind of improvements they want to make, they have very little chance indeed of affecting any improvements because they don't know the paths they wish to follow.

Perhaps you would say, "We would like to build a world where there is no poverty at all as there is undoubtedly too much now. We would like to build a world where we had more feeling of involvement and of fulfilment in our lives. Where sheer material benefits were not held in as great esteem as they are now, but rather a community, to which we could contribute and from which and in which we could develop our own personality and feel a satisfaction in living". Perhaps these are the things that you would seek as improvements. I hope they are because they are the kind of improvements that I feel we can make and should make in the years ahead.

There will be difficulties in the way. Firstly, it will be necessary, essential, to maintain that political freedom under which we operate at present. There has been no threat to it in the lifetime of most of you, but there have been threats of that political freedom being overthrown in the past and there may be dangers of it being attached from outside in the future.

But perhaps more significantly that freedom could be lost inside without invasion. We see now tolerance carried to too great a length because although tolerance is one of the essentials for a proper community, yet there are some things which cannot be tolerated. For example, you cannot safely tolerate intolerance, and we see examples of intolerance in the name of dissent and in the name of civic rights. And it will be necessary for young people to make their minds up as to where the line is drawn when tolerance cannot be extended any further, and at what point it is necessary to defend the civic rights of the vast majority against attack in the name of civic rights of a minority. These will, I think, be difficulties, not great difficulties, not great but nevertheless ones which will exist and do exist in this country.

But it will not be enough merely to maintain political freedom. It is essential that it be properly used. I mean by that that it is essential that if people are to contribute to a country, then the contrasting and conflicting ideas which are advanced by political parties ought to be critically examined by each individual, ought to be analysed by each individual. And if faith is to be kept with those who have fought for political freedom, then not by slogans, but by applied intelligence, should each individual decide what ideas they wish to accept.

Side by side with that political freedom, I hope that you will be able to advance still further towards the economic freedom which some time ago we did not have at all, which now we have in large measure, but which we can have in even greater measure if we take the opportunity that this Australia gives us today.

This won't be easy. It won't be easy to abolish poverty unless enough wealth is produced to enable that to happen. There is no easy way to run a country or to live in it. It is essential in every sphere of life that there should be hard work, that there should be the application of intelligence, that there should be a training of the mind, that there should be a willingness to contribute to the community.

I think the youth of Australia today have those qualities in greater measure than did we. I have the utmost hope for the future of this country because of that belief. At any rate, the whole thing shortly will be in your hands. The fact that you are here tonight indicates a willingness to participate, a desire to participate, and if that is true, then you have another weapon we did not have - you have greater opportunities for education to enable that contribution to be the better applied.

There are some eternal values, and those I think are these. We must have in a proper community, kindness the one towards the other; tolerance within the limits of which I have spoken; sacrifice and work. Because I think you have these qualities and because I know the opportunities for their use are in Australia more than they are in any other country in the world, then I feel that you will meet the challenges before you. I hope that at some time in twenty, or thirty years, one of you perhaps will stand where I am standing today and talk to those who then will be young - and you won't be because youth is the stuff that does not endure - and that you will be able to say to the young to whom you talk - "I, and my generation inherited a world that was not bad but by our efforts we have made it so much better." (And the young to whom you are talking will probably look at you and think, "Well you haven't done much about it, really, and it is up to us to make it better still in the future.") But if you can stand here and say that and know that you are speaking the truth, then I think you will have contributed to the building of a great nation, to the building of a great society and to the development of your own individual capacity which is quite possibly the most important thing of all.

And that I think is all I have to say to you. I did not want to talk on politics tonight. I did not want to talk on issues of the hour, for they are ephemeral, they go, but the results of applying one's mind and heart and spirit to trying to better the society in which one is living are not ephemeral. . . . and this is an objective I hope will remain with you for the whole of your lives. Indeed, I think it will because I finish as I began by saying I do not think this is a generation of dissent or disenchantment. I believe that for the vast majority of youth it is a generation which offers opportunities unknown before and that the vast majority of youth are prepared to accept and use those opportunities, and I hope I am right in that. But I am putting before you things as an older man sees them. You will make up your own mind whether what I have said is true or not.
