

TENTH F. A. O. REGIONAL CONFERENCE  
FOR ASIA AND THE FAR EAST  
Canberra, ACT

27 AUGUST 1970

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Mr. Wells, Mr. Anthony, Ministerial Colleagues, Federal and State,  
Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is not my function today to open this Conference, because that is the role of my colleague, the Minister for Primary Industry. But it is my function to welcome you all here. It is my function and my pleasure to do so in the name of the Australian Government and the Australian nation.

I think we are privileged to have you here in our national capital for this Tenth Regional Conference which is the first such Regional Conference to be held in Australia but not - I hope, and I am sure - the last. And from wherever you have travelled to be here today, you and we have one objective in common, one thing in mind which we hope we may advance towards as a result of this Conference, and that is the eventual elimination of hunger amongst mankind, and therefore the improvement of the health and the wellbeing of mankind throughout the world.

My own country is proud to be associated with the work of the Food and Agriculture Organisation and it gives me today an opportunity to pay tribute to the contribution made by the FAO over the past quarter of a century. I know you already have a planned programme covering the next fifteen years and we wish you well in this vital and humane task.

It is a matter of some pride with us, if you will forgive a little national sentiment on an international occasion, that one of our earlier Prime Ministers, the late Lord Bruce, in other capacities, was closely associated with the foundation days of FAO. Way back in the "Hungry Thirties", at the old League of Nations in Geneva, in 1935, Lord Bruce made the plea: "Let the nations of the world collaborate to provide sufficient food to avoid hunger". That was the challenge which, at a later date, and in another forum, was taken up, and so FAO was born with Lord Bruce as the first Chairman of its Advisory Committee - the World Food Council.

That same continuing challenge brings us all here today and my nation today has that same approach as Lord Bruce had when he was our Prime Minister so long ago.

I believe that communication, partnership and participation amongst nations are the key factors in trying to meet this very great challenge. We have got to communicate across the distances that separate us. There is no room for isolationism of thinking in this field in the world today or, indeed, in any field.

2.

And so we must share our knowledge and learn from each other's experiences, and learn from each other's advances and learn from each other's mistakes. And how better can we do it than by constant contact between officials of our Governments and by meetings such as this today.

For our part, partnership is a first principle in many fields - bilaterally, within regional and special bodies like ECAFE and FAO, and globally through the United Nations community and many trading, commodity and other arrangements of one kind or another.

And in the Asian region which is still predominantly agricultural, we in Australia see ourselves as joined with you in a partnership which will be directly involved with the rest of the world in the forthcoming Second Development Decade promoted by the United Nations. What we have already tried to do in this region, what we are now trying to do despite the difficulties which hamper us and you - and they are considerable - may, I hope, offer lessons for other regions and for the world at large, for co-operation as the decade unfolds, to attack the great problems which face mankind.

But we have to remember that in this region we have the most diverse assembly of peoples, cultures, resources and standards of living in the world, the most diverse. And the world itself is caught up with a population explosion of gigantic proportions. There is much to be done. There is a daunting task facing this conference and those of us who are interested. The gap between the hungry and the satisfied is still very wide and that, Mr. President, brings me to participation.

This, of course, is what gives meaning to a partnership. In simple terms, it means - to use an Australian colloquialism - "let's be in it", and the fact that we are all here today is evidence enough, I think, that we are all "in it".

Perhaps, I might mention - indeed most of you would know - that just before this conference we had here in Canberra the Third Far East Regional Conference of the Freedom From Hunger Campaign. This campaign gets enormous support in Australia because everybody can be in it. Australians as individuals give generously in this extra effort to tackle the world's food problems.

And I like to feel that we here have some direct understanding of the problems of the developing countries in our region because of our own responsibilities not only in the region, not specifically to developing countries in the region who are away from us, but particularly because of our close partnership with the Territories of Papua and New Guinea.

I like to feel that here, too, in that area we are communicating with the people, under difficulties - there are always difficulties when peoples seek to communicate - but we are communicating, we are trying to be in partnership and participating in the development of their nationhood and of their capacity to help in this great task of providing food for the hungry millions of the world.

Now, Sir, I feel that the time has come for me to finish, but in doing so, I would just like to add this. There is taking place in Asia now what we all know as a "green revolution". The earth is yielding more for its people in response to planned programmes and applied skills but success has also brought its problems. The world prices of basic foods are falling. Export markets are shrinking. There are new exportable surpluses in some countries and there is an unsatisfied demand for fertilisers and for other assistance to growing food - and this while millions still go hungry. And so we have surpluses of rice stored in Japan - enough for perhaps two years' consumption for its people; surpluses of wheat being raised in Australia, surpluses in other countries, while so many still go hungry.

So the task is to secure a proper balance for our agricultural economies in the region. I think we should perhaps place more emphasis on industrial crops, on the development of forest products, for example, and to encourage industries linked to agriculture to provide work for the people and new products to export. This, I think, would go hand in hand, perhaps, with the correction of the imbalance between export surpluses of food and the lack of capacity of so many people to have food.

And side by side with this, there must be that participation, that partnership, that sharing of knowledge of which I have already spoken.

If this can come about - and I believe it can - not without effort, not without thought, not without time, not without difficulty, but if it can come about, then the world will be a happier and a richer place for us all. And those who give their time and effort to this task and to discussions with their colleagues - such as take place here today, will have played a real part in making the world a happier and richer place for us all.

So I repeat my welcome : A very warm welcome to you all, and I wish you - in which I include us - every success in our deliberations.

---