

SIXTEENTH COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE

LUNCHEON AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA

1 OCTOBER 1970

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Mr Vice Chairman, Parliamentary Colleagues all :

It falls to my lot to propose the toast of our distinguished guests. Sir, it is my privilege today, both as Prime Minister and as a member of the Australian Branch - I hope a financial member! - to preside at this Luncheon in honour of Delegates to the Sixteenth Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference. We are glad to have you meeting here in Australia and here in our National Capital, and we are glad that you are meeting in Australia for the second time.

I know that many of you came early to our country in order to have the chance to look around it a little before settling down to the business at the conference table. I hope you have found this time well spent, interesting and enjoyable. We indeed are glad that you took this opportunity to see us while you are here. But now you have business to do, and I see from the agenda that you will be discussing a wide variety of topics, ranging from co-operation in development to the challenge of dissent.

This Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is unique. With 7,000 members and 88 branches, it's certainly representative, and it touches at some point or other through its members, its affiliated branches and its associated groups, just about every part of the free world. And I believe it serves two broad and important purposes.

It provides continuing links between members of the Commonwealth of Nations, the greatest multi-racial association of free nations the world has known. And it seeks to preserve, for the world to see, the image of parliamentary democracy as we know it, and as we practice it in varying degrees today.

Let us look at this Commonwealth of Nations for a moment. It has emerged from an empire of dominions, of colonies under the Crown, an empire that has now passed down the corridors of history. And in place of that empire, there are free and independent nations, some owing allegiance to the Crown, some not, but all having inherited the principles of parliamentary rule, based on the Westminster model. Some have abandoned that model, others have abandoned it and returned to it, but whether it be a Westminster system or a Presidential system, the root is the same, and that is what is sought to be preserved by the members of this Association.

It would be unrealistic, Sir, to pretend that all is smooth sailing all the time amongst the members of the Commonwealth of Nations. It would be dull if that were so. No great historical development such as this can come to this point and see in front of it the future it can follow without there having been some problems, some controversy, without there being able to be seen in the future other problems and other controversy. And I think the Commonwealth has still to find a way in the future through many problems. But the fact that it will find its way through those problems with success is, I believe, attested to by the evidence of the problems which it has already overcome in its existence so far.

This Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is the Association that provides a strong and continuing link between the members of the Commonwealth. There are other links, of course, the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, other Conferences of one kind or another, but the Parliamentary Association is the most representative because all of us, as members, are directly concerned in our varying ways with the practice of parliamentary democracy - in our own Houses of Assembly, or Congresses or Senates or whatever the nomenclature may be. And that, I think, is one reason why the Association is growing in strength and that is why I hope it will have a long and a useful life, not only for its members but for the world as a whole.

Now I mentioned a second purpose for the Association, and that was to preserve the image of parliamentary democracy before the world. And this, I think, is of immense importance today, perhaps of as great importance as we have ever known in history. All around the world in, I suspect, all the countries represented here, there is a clamour for dissent. Our parliamentary systems and the rule of law they all have in trust are under test, in all our countries, and are on trial in many ways, particularly in the eyes of the younger generation.

Let none of us be dismayed by this. Dissent, of itself, is not only not a bad thing but a good thing. It can be healthy. It can be part of the cleansing process in a democracy and in the institutions of a democracy, and our institutions - I speak collectively - not only allow it, but specifically provide for it. That is why in so many of our countries here represented, we have an official Opposition, a free press, a ballot box. And that is why the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association itself puts contentious measures on its agenda and delegates can speak with heat on this and disagreement on this, and dissent with each other on this, but each point of view is thereby heard.

But in this goodness of dissent, however, and clamour for it, there can in all our countries be dangers. There are dangers that in searching for a change for the better, we may let the legitimate ways of bringing that about become illegitimate and fatally weaken our system. We should never forget that unbridled dissent on the part of Hitler's brownshirts led to the overthrow of the parliament in that country and the world into the bloodbath which followed.

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I believe there is no better system than parliamentary democracy. I think it is the only system which has validity, if we are going to speak of man's right to be free and to choose for himself the way of life he wants and who will direct those public affairs which so impinge upon the way of life he wants.

There are many drawbacks to democracy, but I repeat : It is the best method of obtaining these ends yet discovered.

The laws which govern our lives are laws we all in our parliaments make for ourselves. They are laws we can change in an orderly fashion by exactly the same process we used to bring them into existence. There are many who consider in one country or another that a law is a bad law, and that can be changed. There are in many countries good laws, in themselves, but laws which have become out of date. And they can be updated. But if we are to retain before the world, all of us, that image of parliamentary democracy of which I spoke, then changes of that kind must be made in a constitutional and parliamentary way. Dangers arise as soon as we reject this course. And, indeed, on this subject, that great parliamentarian, Edmund Burke, put it quite clearly two hundred years ago :-

"The only liberty I mean is a liberty connected with order; that not only exists along with order and virtue, but which cannot exist at all without them."

That was true then, that is true now for all who espouse parliamentary democracy.

And that, because those gathered here today are throughout the world showing a method of government different from a totalitarian government, that is why I really meant it when I said it is a privilege for me today to welcome you to our country so that you can continue this great work. This, I think, is the spirit in which the Parliamentary Association meets, and it is in that spirit that I welcome you all here and trust that your deliberations will further advance the causes of all those countries here gathered.

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