



## PRIME MINISTER

FOR PRESS

28 AUGUST 1978

### ADDRESS TO FIFTH CONFERENCE OF COMMONWEALTH SPEAKERS AND PRESIDING OFFICERS - CANBERRA

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Australia is particularly pleased to host this Conference, the second Commonwealth meeting to be held in this country this year.

The great success and personal warmth of the first Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting last February, augurs well for this and future Commonwealth meetings.

Amicable, open and candid discussions at these Conferences consolidate and extend the ties which bind us together. Through times of success and times of adversity the Commonwealth has endured - showing a remarkable ability to adapt to change - until, today, it comprises a diverse but cohesive grouping of nations, encompassing the aligned and the non-aligned, the developing and the industrialised. To a degree it is because of our very diversity that the Commonwealth is highly valued by its members. The themes of cooperation and consultation in the face of escalating world problems form the basis of the enduring Commonwealth relationship.

Each of us confronts our own national difficulties, as well as facing problems of world magnitude. Talking together enables us to place in perspective our own problems, while gaining strength and knowledge to cooperate in facing global issues. Tolerance, a quality we all value, grows with understanding. It is by exposing our ideas in discussion with each other that we can test their real worth, and in the process enhance our own capacity to adjust to world events and the opinions of others.

Parliament is also a forum in which much exposing of opinions occurs although I am not sure how much adjustment of opinions takes place as a result. The role of the Presiding Officer of each House is of course a vital one. It is his task to maintain the pre-eminence and good name of Parliament, while protecting the rights and privileges of individual members. The Presiding Officer must encourage unstinting observance of the democratic tradition within the Parliament, supported by the belief that if the highest standards are maintained in a nation's governing body, they shall, in turn, be encouraged in all areas of national life.

It is also the Presiding Officer's task to promote reforms of the procedures of Parliament which enhance its effectiveness, provided they do not unnecessarily lose touch with the centuries of tradition against which these procedures have evolved.

Tradition rightly plays a most important part in the procedures which our Parliaments follow. Adherence to traditional forms of debate and passage of legislation provides stability and a greater consciousness of our past.

We should always be looking for ways to improve the way in which Parliament functions, but there is no merit at all in changing traditional procedures unless some clear and desirable benefit can be seen to flow from such a change being made. It is only natural that this Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers should include in its agenda a discussion of reforms of Parliamentary procedure which serve to strengthen our democratic institutions.

Conferences such as this enable a better appreciation of the ways of others, so that, when reviewing our own procedures we are able to draw on the experience and practices of other nations.

In Australia, we have drawn on the British experience in establishing this year Legislation Committees of the House of Representatives. The Committees, which will comprise between 13 and 19 Members, are a microcosm of the Committee of the whole and are intended to be an alternative to that Committee. I believe that, with experience, we shall find that the Legislation Committees - with their small membership and without being confined by strict rules of debate - will be able to give closer attention to proposed laws than at present occurs.

This year we have also blazed a small trail of our own with regard to the reports of Parliamentary Committees. Procedures have been established which are designed to see that the valuable work of these Committees receives prompt and proper government consideration. The Government has undertaken that a Minister will make a statement to Parliament within six months of the presentation of each report, outlining the action, if any, which the Government proposes to take on the recommendations of the report.

Through sharing the knowledge gained from such innovations we can strengthen the sinews of Parliamentary government. Parliamentary procedures do vary significantly throughout the Commonwealth, in large part reflecting our differing cultural heritage and customs. It is the task of each of us to strive to preserve the best of our heritage, while retaining a keen interest in new ideas and in better means of achieving the common ends we share.

I am particularly pleased to welcome the Clerks of the Parliament to this Conference, for they can bring to bear on these issues their experience and broad knowledge which we see in evidence on every Parliamentary sitting day. Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you well in your deliberations.

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