



PRIME MINISTER

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Address

at

Dinner for Northern Territory Ministry

and

Legislative Assembly

This is an historic occasion for the Northern Territory and for Australia's development as a nation, for tomorrow marks the opening of the first sittings of the Legislative Assembly since the attainment of self-government.

This is therefore a most opportune and appropriate time for me, on behalf of the Commonwealth Government - and in the presence of a broad section of the people of the Northern Territory - to honour the members of the Legislative Assembly, and particularly the Ministers who form your first government: Paul Everingham, Marshall Perron, Ian Tuxworth, Jim Robertson and Roger Steele.

They are to be congratulated on the zeal, foresight and determination with which they have pursued their personal and collective vision, shared by many others, to see established the first self-governing body politic created in this country since Federation.

I can tell you from first hand experience that your Chief Minister and his colleagues are most adept at pushing the Territory's case. Paul Everingham took up the cause of self-government for the Territory, first conceived by people such as Jock Nelson and "Tiger" Brennan, and nurtured by his immediate predecessor, Goff Letts. He took it up most effectively, in that forthright no-nonsense manner of his, arguing very firmly on your behalf during the negotiations which led to self-government becoming a reality.

Your Chief Minister and his colleagues have been willing to take on the very great responsibility of leading the Territory into self-government. It is a small Ministerial team, and it is always hard to be first. But I have a feeling that they are going to prove to be a very hard act to follow.

In the past, the Northern Territory has not been without its critics. A 1937 Royal Commission reported to the Commonwealth Government of the day that the Territory was "a detriment" and a "heavy liability to Australia".

In a jocular vein the great Banjo Paterson described Darwin as a "city of booze, blow and blasphemy where the citizens...started drinking gin immediately after breakfast and kept it up till after midnight". Paterson also described the Territory as the land of "later on".

Well, Ladies and Gentlemen, the "later on" has well and truly arrived. The so-called "detriment" and "liability" is now a cosmopolitan, lively, and unique part of Australia, with a great future ahead of it. The population is now over 100,000 and growing. Mining, cattle raising, fishing and tourism in particular will all help to guarantee a solid basis for the Territory's future.

The 1st of July must have represented, for many people, a moment of considerable personal satisfaction. The demand for a greater say in the development of the Northern Territory has had a long and at times turbulent history.

I suppose it really began not long after 1911, when the Northern Territory became a Commonwealth responsibility. Since then many Territorians have bridled at their affairs being dominated by a Government and a bureaucracy many miles to the south, which they felt did not always fully understand conditions in the Territory.

The growth in status of your Legislative Assembly was painfully slow - 37 years to establish the Legislative Council and another 27 years before it became fully elected.

Your representative in the Federal Parliament did not arrive until 1922, and then without a voting power - the full vote was not awarded until 1968.

I recall that when Mr Menzies, as he then was, was Attorney-General in the Lyons Government, he was joined in the Parliament by a man who some here tonight may remember - MacAlister Blain. Blain had won the seat for the Northern Territory in the 1934 election by promising that he would get a vote for the Member for the Territory within 12 months or else resign.

Sir Robert Menzies later recalled that Blain visited him one day and said "I am in trouble; if I don't get a vote within a year I will have to resign", at which Sir Robert wished him a pleasant year in the Parliament.

In the end, Sir Robert persuaded Cabinet to pass legislation giving the Member for the Northern Territory a vote on the disallowance of any ordinances of the Northern Territory, and that was enough to let Blain remain the Member for the Northern Territory for 15 years.

My Government has always seen self-government and eventual Statehood for the Northern Territory as an important aim. Our determination to see self-government implemented here was based on a simple and fundamental proposition - we do not believe that in all matters politicians and bureaucrats in Canberra necessarily know what is best for the people of the Territory.

For over two years we have worked with the executive members of the Legislative Assembly in planning and negotiating the administrative and financial structure for the Territory's new status.

On 1st July, as the culmination of all our efforts, a wide range of functions was transferred to the new government of the Northern Territory. On 1st January next, responsibility for health will be transferred; and on 1st July 1979, education will also be transferred.

The Territory government will then have taken on most of the functions and responsibilities of a State, and the Territory's finances will also have been established along the lines of those of the States.

A totally new relationship has arisen from the aspirations of the people of this territory to have less domination from Canberra. The Commonwealth remains extremely conscious of its responsibilities to the people of the Northern Territory.

The difference is that your political representatives are now in a far stronger position to affect the future direction of the Territory. I believe that the arrangements that have been developed are both fair and sensible. We have achieved that result, I believe, only because of the genuine co-operation which has been a hallmark of all the negotiations that have taken place between my Government and your Territory's Ministers.

Crucial to the move to self-government was a mutually satisfactory and effective financial agreement. While, of course, there is far more to self-government than financial matters, both the Commonwealth and your Ministers recognised that it was absolutely imperative that the new government commence its operations on a sound financial basis.

I believe that the memorandum of understanding, which many of you will have read, provides just such a basis. The first Northern Territory Budget will include a considerable payment from the Commonwealth - a net amount of some \$287 million, with borrowings of a further \$14 million.

The size of this allocation was very carefully considered, and I believe it to be reasonable and responsible in the circumstances. Contributions by the Commonwealth to future budgets of Northern Territory governments will be the subject of negotiation at the time. But in the event of disagreement, the Territory government will have the right to apply for an inquiry to be made by the Commonwealth Grants Commission.

That Commission is an independent body whose recommendations are given enormous weight by the Commonwealth and all the States. Neither the Commonwealth nor the Northern Territory Government will be able to direct its findings, and both governments will look to the Grants Commission as an impartial body ensuring a fair deal for the Territory.

An important question for the future will be the degree of consultation and practical co-operation which is allowed to evolve between the Commonwealth Government and the government of the Northern Territory.

We have already achieved a high degree of co-operation and accord with the States, and I am sure my friend the Premier of Queensland would agree with that. Far more can be achieved within a Federal system like ours by consultation than can ever be obtained by confrontation and mutual suspicion.

My Government's wholehearted support for our Federal system is rooted in the belief that power needs to be shared. Authority has to be decentralised and brought closer to the people. We should not insist that all decisions should be made from Canberra.

It was this approach that led us to agree to share power with the States on off-shore matters, where previously there was disagreement and considerable friction. It was for the same reason that we have decided to consult with the States on the negotiation of international treaties which affect them, and on future appointments to the High Court.

These are all innovations which previous Commonwealth Governments would not have dreamt of undertaking. I am convinced that, in most instances, much more can be achieved to make our Federal system work responsibly and effectively by co-operation and consultation than by constant legal challenges and disputes.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the future of the Northern Territory is bright because its natural resources are vast, and because there are people here with a capacity for initiative, practical common sense, and plain hard work.

Your recovery from the absolute devastation of Cyclone Tracey provides tangible proof that all these qualities are alive and well in the Territory. It is not so much the material recovery that I find so stimulating, but the deeper and far more important recovery that is reflected in the vitality, the cheerfulness and the camaraderie that is so obvious in this city.

It is these characteristics which your leaders and the members of the Legislative Assembly, whom we honour tonight, will need to draw on most heavily in coping with the many problems and challenges that the future holds for you.