



PRIME MINISTER

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OPENING OF NORTHERN TERRITORY

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Your Excellency, Your Honour, Mr Speaker, Honourable Members, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. This is an exciting day for the Northern Territory. Just three months ago, the Commonwealth Parliament passed the historic Northern Territory (Self-Government) Act 1978.

That Act established this Territory as a distinct body politic within the Australian federation. It vested, in the new Government of the Northern Territory, executive authority over a wide range of matters.

The powers of this Government will be further enlarged next year, when on 1 January health, and on 1 July education, also become its responsibility.

You are embarking on one of the noblest adventures open to any people -- democratic self-government. It is one of the hardest systems in the world to run, but it is also certainly the best.

Democratic self-government involves the building of a consensus on policies and actions; on maintaining mutual trust and confidence; on protecting the rights of minorities; on enhancing individual freedom and tolerance for alternative lifestyles; on recognizing that there is a public interest in which we all share. This is a complex and challenging task. The fact that you are embracing it with such enthusiasm -- determined to surmount the problems which will inevitably confront you -- is to be applauded.

You are choosing the only form of government that truly represents the people and that is truly responsible to the people. The only system that provides the ultimate guarantee of freedom and good government -- the right of the people to change a government merely by casting a vote. But democratic self-government is much more than just a method of exacting responsibility from Government. It is of the most fundamental importance to peoples' development. To allowing people to realise their potential through political participation; to enhancing their initiative, enterprise and responsibility.

John Stuart Mill wrote: "The most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves. The first question in respect to any political institution is how far they tend to foster in the members of the community the various desirable qualities.....moral, intellectual and active."

Democratic representative government is an institution which does foster these qualities -- and there lies its ultimate justification -- the freedom and responsibility that it makes possible and that it requires.

For decades ultimate authority for the administration of the laws governing the Territory's day to day affairs was held by people thousands of miles away. People who did not always comprehend the Territory's special needs.

Mr Speaker and Honourable Members, the remedy now lies in your hands. I do not wish to speak today in any detail of financial matters and no doubt Honourable Members are already well acquainted with the memorandum of understanding signed by your Chief Minister and myself. But there is one observation about the new financial arrangements that I wish to make.

In negotiating these arrangements, we are determined that there should be a direct relationship between the expenditure determined by the citizens of the Territory and the taxes and charges levied in the Territory. By so doing, we were seeking to put responsibility where it should be. In the absence of such procedures, self-government would have fallen short of responsible self-government, and power without responsibility is the very antithesis of our democratic system.

The new arrangements still provide for considerable financial assistance from the Commonwealth, and leave wide scope for your Treasurer to put into effect your Government's policies in accordance with its own priorities.

To all Honourable Members of this House, I wish you well in the great tasks and opportunities that await you. Inevitably you will attract criticism -- and that in itself is healthy. But you will also attract, whichever party is in power, something else to which you should not succumb -- the great Australian disease of "knocking". Too often Australians have concentrated on purely destructive criticism -- on trying to pull things down without thought to the consequences and without seeking to put anything in its place. The only criticism really worth listening to is that which presents a constructive alternative.

We all have an obligation to work together and to build on those great values we all share as Australians. The things that unite us are far more important than any differences we may have.

By breaking down the Australian tradition of knocking and by working together to create a stronger sense of national purpose and co-operation, there is nothing we cannot achieve.

The Commonwealth will give every assistance it can in the years ahead, working to maintain the close consultation and co-operation between our two governments, which has been established during the two years of planning and negotiation that were needed to bring self-government to reality.

I have every confidence that, with concerted effort and the support of the people, the future for the Northern Territory is secure and I look forward to the day when the Northern territory finally becomes the seventh state of Australia.

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