



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

THURSDAY, 22 JULY 1982

FAREWELL DINNER FOR SIR ZELMAN COWEN

It is a great pleasure for all of us to be with you and Lady Cowen this evening. I know that Australians everywhere join with us in congratulating you on the successful way in which you have carried out the duties of Governor-General and in thanking you for the contribution you have made to the public life of our country during your term of office. Your Excellency, you came to the office of Governor-General with a distinguished record as an academic, a Vice-Chancellor of two universities, and as a lawyer, and with an unusual breadth of experience.

By looking through a list of your publications it is easy to see what a broad range of interests you have. You have written a number of notable biographies including a biography of the first Australian born Governor-General, Sir Isaac Isaacs, and papers on issues as wide-ranging as the law, education, Commonwealth and international affairs. And I note you have written one paper with the rather unusual title of "From the Trial of Lady Chatterly to the Trial of Oz".

Your broad interests and your background as a notable constitutional lawyer have enabled you to serve as Governor-General not only with distinction, but with a knowledge and true understanding of the importance of the office of Governor-General. It is an office which is of great significance to Australians. As the Queen's representative, the Governor-General must perform the duties of the Crown with impartiality, and with dedication to the community. The Queen has set an example to all her representatives in that respect. I think you, Your Excellency, have followed her example in a way which has helped ensure that Australians will retain their faith and support for our constitution and for the continuation of the role of the Crown in our constitution.

It should also be said that your determination to remain above national debates has won you the respect and admiration of people from both sides of politics. You yourself, Sir, said only yesterday that to describe the Office of Governor-General as a rubber stamp was an "uninformed and foolish statement". I agree wholeheartedly with you. The constitution provides the ultimate protection of the liberties and rights of individual Australians. There are many ways in which the Governor-General by deliberate decision of our forefathers is the custodian of those rights. Furthermore, as President of the Executive Council he can have an influence on the thinking of Ministers and play a part in making sure they discharge their responsibilities in the best interests of the community.

But the role of Governor-General extends beyond the constitutional and ceremonial duties of the office. It is the mark of a notable Governor-General that he has been able to influence the community intellectually as a catalyst of ideas and thought.

Your Excellency, your many speeches on a wide number of subjects have done just that. They have been stimulating, thought provoking and widely appreciated by the community. You have shown intellectual leadership and an ability to generate new ideas, and that has always been done with a national perspective, thereby drawing Australians together as a nation.

I would also like to mention the very arduous programme of public engagements you have undertaken. You have travelled very widely around Australia, and have had a great deal of contact with a large number of Australians. You have brought the office of Governor-General to people in every corner of the continent, and even to the Cocos and Christmas Islands. I am sure that the community has been grateful for the way you have involved yourself in its day to day life and that the Office of Governor-General has benefited as a result.

All these things have added up to one very important achievement. That is you have helped to bring together Australians as a nation, to help them look on themselves as part of a nation, not as separate, parochial communities and to help people of different ideologies or opinions realise that they have, in the end, one great cause, and that is Australia. You said in your Australia Day Message in 1978 that the Governor-General had the task of serving the Queen and the nation "as a symbol of unity of all the people". In achieving that, you have served the nation well.

I would also like to say what a great contribution Lady Cowen has made to the Office of Governor-General and Australia by her active involvement in a number of areas, in particular in welfare, and she has made a significant personal contribution to public life in Australia.

Your Excellency, earlier this year you said that Australians must "concentrate our minds powerfully on what it is that keeps us together". You, Sir, have done a great deal to help us do that. On behalf of all Australians I wish you well in your new position as provost of Oriel College, Oxford. It is a position I know you will find challenging and stimulating.