



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

SATURDAY, 23 OCTOBER 1982

LAUNCHING OF THE BOOK, "6 PRIME MINISTERS"

It is a very nice thing that the whole family is here, it is nice for that to be so on this occasion. There are many old friends of Sir Alexander here and it is good to renew acquaintances of people who are in the Parliament when I was first there and when Alex was first there. It does not hurt to remind ourselves just for a moment that Alex had an enormous tradition of service to South Australia and to Australia as his father had before him, and as I suspect his son has after him. Australia is certainly very much the richer for individuals and for families who have that commitment to the service of Australia in a way which enables them, or in a sense commands them to devote all their time and all their energies to trying to do something for this country.

Many of you would know Alex's own history. It is maybe a commentary on the passage of the years that Alex was one of a significant number of prisoners of war of the Japanese, and he was in the Federal Parliament when I first joined it and that must have been an experience that none would or could ever forget.

Alex was Member for Angas and was re-elected five times. I can remember electioneering with him, not on his account, but on one occasion when the Liberal Party very nearly won electorate of Grey, and the very obvious respect with which he was held by everyone who met him, wherever he went and it was good to see.

I was speaking with Clyde Cameron here this morning and he said Sir Alexander was one of those who had friends on all sides of the House and he was able to express his views and his arguments in a way that was forceful and clear-cut but in a way which did not arouse enmity, in a way which deserts friendship. That is very much a hallmark of this particular book. There have been many books written I suppose about politicians and contemporary figures. I do not think you have published any of these and if so, that is to your credit. I don't think any of these contemporary works would be worth publishing. There was one very brilliant one written about me of about 100 pages of totally blank paper. That might have been the best of them.

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Alexander's book is something of a very different character and of very different quality. His own character shines through the book. He describes the six Prime Ministers and other ministers also of Australia and the United Kingdom in a way which is kindly and perspicacious in a way which makes it perfectly clear that he does not necessarily agree with anything that they have done, or every aspect of their character, but in a way which at the same time could not possibly give offence to anyone, to any friend or relative who might want to read this particular book. That says a very great deal about Alexander, that was his character - he had the capacity to disagree, but to do it in a pleasant and in a friendly way.

It does give us an insight into the six Prime Ministers. I have read, not every word of the book, but I have certainly read all of that part of the book which I think is most relevant to my own experience in relation to three Prime Ministers. I think he covers the ground very well and gives an insight into a number of issues of consequence in which Alex himself played a very significant part.

From what we know of biographies if somebody got up and said he was going to write about certain people, I suppose they would have felt nervous about it and what was going to be said because so often people always seem to want to write the wounds, the hurts, to try and find out what was wrong and to try and demonstrate that there was no good whatsoever. I think that is the reverse, the very opposite of the kind of book that this in fact is.

There are many things that could be said. Alex gave a number of insights into the people concerned, but also in the book there is an insight of Alexander in the words of some of the Prime Ministers. Sir Robert Menzies said he was a man of high education, of wide information, of great purposes with an uncommon capacity for getting on with people, for presenting his views strongly but without forfeiting friendship. That suggests a great deal of what this particular book is all about. Courtesy is one of the things which just seems to have gone out of the window so far as Federal Parliament is concerned.

About Menzies' dinners at The Lodge, he said, These dinners never lasted long enough. He was an incessant worker and usually returned to the House soon after 8, but those interludes enabled members to discover the warmer side of a man who was the opposite to what some of his critics alleged him to be. The judgements of Menzies, of Holt, to Gorton and I suspect also of Wilson, Heath and Brookeborough but those last three were obviously ones I knew not so well were good and sensible judgements.

The book also reveals Alex Downer's own concerns, a commitment to public service, to the highest standard in public service. He was a believer, a leader in the Parliament in the Parliamentary institution. In the Commonwealth itself he epitomised much of what this State and much of what the Liberal Party stood and stands for.

The courage with which Alex finished his book is also very much a part of the man. It must have been difficult. I hope Mary that it is something that you have been looking forward to, and I am sure it is, that fact that this book is published and published now in a way which I believe, will get wide acclaim.

There were a number of issues which were important during Alexander's time. I was in the Federal Parliament during his long period of service as High Commissioner in the United Kingdom, there was the great issue of the Common Market and as I would believe, and it has come through the book, that Alex did not much like the desertion of the Commonwealth for some new relationship with the European community. I think later history might make that judgement to be an accurate one. He subscribed to a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting which was not necessarily called that at the time, but at a difficult time when the Commonwealth was going through a period of transition and moving to a new time and to a new form.

He also describes the battle that Harold Holt put up to try and prevent British withdrawal from east of Suez at a time which was obviously difficult through South East Asia and difficult in relation to Australia as an ally of Britain and also difficult in relation to the United States as an ally of Britain. In spite of the arguments put forward by Australia, by New Zealand and by the United States, the British decision to withdraw was irrevocable on financial, resource and economic grounds alone.

The book is an insight into the inner workings and relationships between leaders of government, between governments of a kind which we have not had up to this point. Many of us also remember Alex very much for the speeches he often gave in the United Kingdom which were saying things that needed to be said, but perhaps they were not always heeded as much as they should have been. This is a valuable book, a thoughtful one and it says as much about Alexander himself as it does about the six Prime Ministers. I have very great pleasure in launching the book. I wish it well and if there are any other contemporary historians around, they would particularly do well to read it.