

WANDERING AROUND AUSTRALIA'S DEMOCRATIC HISTORY

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Mr. Chairman, members, honoured guests. That was the most generous welcome you gave to me. I do appreciate it.

You mentioned the book I have just written, called '*Before I Forget*'. People are becoming very cheeky. A few minutes ago, somebody I do not know came up to me and said: 'you've written it just in time.'

But you are very gracious, Ian Callinan. Thank you for your words.

I am reminded of the day I was in a country town and, with time on my hands, I went into a junk shop; and to my surprise found on the floor a book I had written. I thought it was probably worth ten dollars. When the owner of the shop came to me and enquired, I thought slightly aggressively, whether I had 'found anything amongst that junk?' I did not let on that the author was in her shop. I simply said that I would like to buy the book. She turned over the inside cover and found in her own pencil-writing the sign: \$2. She sternly said: 'two dollars for a book by Blainey, you can have it for one.'

I did appreciate the tribute paid to John and Nancy Stone. They have been great servants of your society as well as founding it, or virtually founding it. I know how much Nancy has done. She and John lived in the same Melbourne suburb as we did, and the secretarial and post-office work that Nancy performed for the society was on a huge scale. I remember, one day, Ann my wife saying: 'see if you can pass on a message to Nancy.' She added: 'go up to the post office, she is always

there.’ Nancy and John have accomplished so much. Those of you who occasionally consult earlier volumes know how well they are edited and proof-read. That long shelf of volumes is really a tribute to John and Nancy Stone, as well as to numerous conference-speakers.

When I was young, I already had a slight connection with constitutional matters and the High Court. I remember a sad event when I was a little boy in Leongatha. A girl we used to play with, aged about 6, was rather a tomboy and very likeable. She used to play with me and my older brother, and we all got on well. And then one day the news passed through the town that she had been murdered. It was only a small dairying town in South Gippsland, but the city detectives and police soon arrived and there was great questioning. Eventually a man living close to us was arrested on the charge of murder, and he also confessed to other murders that he had committed.

I was in my first year at the Leongatha state school and the children from the school were lined up on the side of the main street for the funeral to pass through on the way to the cemetery. And I was standing there — I suppose not sure why we were waiting — when the hearse came up and the mourning car and the big procession of followers. I looked up and to my surprise there was my dad sitting in the front of the hearse or the mourning coach. Being very young I did not realise that as a Methodist minister one of his duties was to conduct funerals. I waved to him, but he could not wave back.

It was quite a famous legal case. Sodeman, the murderer, was sentenced to death in the days when hanging still took place. There arose a question of whether he was insane, and it led to an important disagreement in the High Court between two of Australia’s most famous lawyers — Sir John Latham and

Sir Owen Dixon — both taking different sides on the question of whether he was insane. Eventually he was hanged.

In 1947, in the school vacation, I agreed to drive a powerful tractor for an uncle who was a farm contractor in the potato country and its rich volcanic soil near Colac. I rode my bike down there from Melbourne, which was a very long way in the face of a headwind and arrived long after sunset. I was underage but I could drive in the paddocks and along the side roads without any policeman interfering.

One evening my uncle announced that there was a big political meeting in town, and I went with him in his small truck to join the huge crowd in the Colac hall. Mr. Ben Chifley, as Prime Minister, had announced that he and his Labor Party were going to nationalize the private banks. And here were these hard-working people, nearly all farming very small holdings and wondering what would happen to them if there were only government-owned banks in Australia. What would their creditworthiness be? What if they offended the manager?

The air of tension and indignation in the hall affected me, though I was slightly left-wing. I suddenly realized what it was like to be a small rural producer and to have one's future clouded by political decisions that had taken place quite suddenly without a foretaste of them in the previous federal election. The right to choose one own's bank became one of our nation's greatest constitutional contests, did it not? A long series of legal arguments went all the way to the Privy Council in London. And so I chanced to acquire a keen awareness though not a deep knowledge of a constitutional crisis when I was only 17.

In the following summer I had a great desire to see Sydney, the birthplace of modern Australia, and a very good friend of mine, later a judge, Alan Dixon, came with me. We did not have much sense of geography because we went to the Commonwealth Employment Service in Melbourne and said we would like a well-paid job; and the man at the desk confidently advised us to find our way to Red Cliffs for the grape picking. So, we hitchhiked up to Red Cliffs and earned big money because we worked ten or twelve hours a day on every day except Sunday. And then we set out to hitch-hike to Sydney and back to Melbourne. What a journey that was! There was virtually no traffic on the roads, for the cars were almost banished by petrol rationing, and the long-distance trucks were a rarity, because a crucial section of the *Constitution* was really in abeyance and the railways were allowed to dominate interstate traffic and all but a few of the few long-distance motor lorries were expelled from the Hume Highway. So, from the truck drivers whom we occasionally met, we learned about section 92 of the *Constitution* and the High Court's temporary blindness to the vital role of free trade between the states. So here I am amongst so many lawyers with only a few constitutional trinkets in my pocket.

May I say something about democracy? We are one of the oldest continuous democracies in the modern world. This is an incredible thing to say about a nation that really is so young.

We know that some of the Greek cities before the time of Christ had their relatively short-lived democracies. They were brave and adventurous, but of course they were far different to the modern democracies. You could only take part in the debating, you could only vote, if you lived within travelling distance of the capital city where citizens met in person and listened to the arguments. But it was a brave attempt in a society

which was still slave-owning. Women did not have the vote either. The democracy in ancient Greece was relatively short-lived, but it proved to be a shining example when the modern world invented a more democratic form of democracy in the United States, France, Britain and elsewhere.

Eventually, Victoria and South Australia became leaders in the new emerging brand of democracy. The secret ballot was introduced in Victoria and South Australia in 1856, within a fortnight of each other. When the secret ballot arrived in many parts of Europe and the United States it was called the Victorian or Australian Ballot. It was a sensational step in the growth of democracy.

So many other adventurous steps took place in those early parliaments in what was then called Australasia. While New Zealand was the first country in the world to give votes to women, it did not then grant women the right to sit in Parliament. It was the South Australians who pioneered, in this continent, votes for women. And there it was a campaign led in crucial periods by women: they mostly belonged to the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Nowadays we often look back on temperance and prohibition as a harsh curtailing of civil liberties especially for men, but you can see there was a powerful case for attacking the liquor industry in the 1880s and the 1890s. The typical man was on low wages, and if the man spent even seven percent or ten percent of the weekly wage on alcohol the economic sacrifices that had to be made by the rest of the family were substantial. So in the days before the welfare state, the giving of the vote to women in the hope — often fulfilled — that they would use the vote to cut down the number of hotels and the number of hours they were open, was really one of the great pieces of welfare legislation in Australian history. With the coming of widespread prosperity of course, this reform became

less important. The votes for women, however, was a far-reaching change, and at the federal election in 1903 Australia became the world's first nation where women had both the right to vote and the right to stand for Parliament.

The federation movement itself was in many ways a triumph, and people now award — especially in New South Wales — Sir Henry Parkes the credit, and they hail him as the Father of Federation. I do not see him as the Father of Federation. He really curtailed it in the 1880s, until he had the bright idea of making his famous rallying speech at Tenterfield in northern New South Wales. Federation was far from accomplished when he died in 1896.

I think we do not honour sufficiently Sir John Quick, a native of Cornwall who landed in gold-rush Victoria as a two-year old migrant. His parents were poor and in Bendigo he did humble work in a noisy foundry, a gold-treatment plant and a printery. Belatedly he gained an education and became a leading journalist and lawyer and politician.

It was Sir John Quick who, when the federation movement was almost frozen or dormant in the early 1890s, wisely proposed: 'let's bring in the people'. His idea, originating at a citizens' conference in the small Murray River town of Corowa, was that people in each colony (or state as we now say), should elect representatives, and the representatives should meet in order to devise the constitution, and the constitution should be taken back to the people for their endorsement. Likewise, the constitution could not be changed unless a similar peoples' referendum took place. Quick is really a distinctive and influential pathfinder in Australian history but not sufficiently honoured.

We have to give praise to those people in the capital cities and in the country towns all around Australia who believed that we should come together politically, and that we should have a federal system rather than a central system. Sometimes the voting in favour of federation was by a very narrow margin. I know that in Queensland, if two train loads of voters had changed their minds, Queensland would not have entered the federation. Sydney, at first, was lukewarm to the idea of a federation, and even in the first referendum held in 1898 that city, as a whole, voted against it. At first Western Australia was wary of joining the proposed federation. And yet finally, on the first day of 1901, the Commonwealth of Australia was formed, after the majority of voters in every colony had decided to belong.

Even one year after Australia became a Commonwealth, some of the leading politicians who had done so much to create it thought, looking back, that its creation was a miracle. They even had the strong impression that if the Australian people, after one year of living under a federation, had been asked whether this change in the political system was worthwhile, they might have voted 'no'. But the Federation persisted and has enjoyed many successes.

We do not realize how fortunate we are to be a democracy. Democracy is not the typical form of government in the world, far from it. The London journal *The Economist* set up a team to work out periodically which nations in the world were democratic. Outlining a short list of criteria defining what is democratic, the team recently decided that there are only 19 fully democratic nations in the world.

In that list of democratic nations, the Scandinavian countries occupied most of the top places and New Zealand and Australia were alongside them, New Zealand ahead of Australia.

Most of the countries were in the northern hemisphere and were people of European stock. The oddity in the list was Mauritius. In this category it is strange to see a country which is not rich.

No Muslim countries have, so far, found a place amongst the real democracies. I think the last time I saw the list of all the nations, the top Muslim country was at number 58 which was Malaysia, and then coming in at about 69 were Indonesia and Tunis. These Muslim countries and many others belonged to the second category, namely democracies displaying serious flaws. Then — headed by Albania at number 77 — stood a third group of countries which mixed democracy and authoritarianism, and then came another long sequence of countries that were simply authoritarian. Standing at the bottom of the list of 167 countries was North Korea.

It seems that one of the hallmarks of a true democracy is that it tends to hold a smallish population and to display social cohesion. Not many nations in *The Economist's* top nineteen democracies hold a very large population. Another hallmark is that a real democracy tends to be prosperous: nearly all the really democratic countries have a high standard of living.

China occupies a fairly humble place on the global ladder of democracy. It used to be argued five or ten years ago that China might soon become more democratic and tolerant, but the present indications are that it will remain an authoritarian system during the lifetime of the present powerful leader. Who can confidently predict, however, what will happen? Given the fact that the United States has often been a kind of global umbrella for democracy in the last three quarters of a century and given the fact that China almost certainly will become as important as the United States militarily, as well as in economic strength, the protective umbrella for the non-democracies in much of Asia

and Africa will often be held by China. That situation will not be so favourable for the world we know.

I think at the moment we are often taking for granted our democracy in Australia. We do an injustice to our political pioneers if we fail to praise them for conducting as early as the 1850s what, by world standards, was a difficult but impressive democratic experiment.

By so many criteria, Australia is a success story; but we allow pessimistic stories to mount the stage and to win wide acceptance. I read the statement made in 2017 by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups who assembled at the mighty rock Uluru. It is called 'Uluru Statement from the Heart'. The final paragraph of what is an eloquent statement makes the simple affirmation about the celebrated referendum held in 1967 on the status of Indigenous people: 'In 1967 we were counted for the first time, in 2017 we seek to be heard.' Counted for the first time? It seems to me incomprehensible that such a falsehood or myth could gain such wide currency in our nation.

If I were a young Aboriginal and politically inclined, and I was told that traditionally the sheep were regularly counted in Australia, but the Aboriginals were not, I would feel indignant. But that assertion is far from the truth. The Indigenous people were counted in the census of 1961, some years before the '67 referendum took place. They also were counted in the preceding censuses extending back and back in time. On 30 June 1934 there was even a census in which only the Aborigines were counted. Accordingly, I feel sure in stating that slightly more attempts have been made to count Aborigines than to count mainstream Australians — if that is the right phrase — in the period since 1901. And if we look back before 1901, we discover further attempts to count the Aborigines in the official and regular censuses. But with so many living in remote places, and

with so many living a semi-nomadic existence, it was impossible to count them thoroughly.

We are the targets today of what can almost be called a hoax. Children should not be taught that Aboriginals were not worthy of being counted in a census. They should not be taught that a refusal to count them was the law of the land until the successful nation-wide referendum was conducted under the John Quick formula in 1967. This is not an easy question to discuss because the official definition of an Aboriginal has been changed and, in the last half century, has been revolutionised

Another myth is that Aborigines were universally deprived of the right to vote. This myth was challenged by that excellent historian, the late John Hirst. He pointed out — not many listened to him — that in the second half of the 19th century, in Victoria and South Australia for example, the Aborigines could vote if they wished. I do not suppose many of them voted but in a typical general election in Australia before 1900 neither did most of the white people bother to vote: compulsory voting lay in the future. We forget that all kinds of influential Europeans in Australia were for long denied the vote. For decades women could not vote. Even in the 1920s the Canberra citizens had no vote.

May I offer a thought about international wars? I say this is not in reference to the recent comments about the military might of China by the distinguished young politician Captain Andrew Hastie: he is not only an able historian but also a soldier who served in the war in Afghanistan. Most of my views on war have been held for a long time. It was in 1973 that I wrote the first edition of a well-known book *The Causes of War*.

My view is that a democracy tends to be not quite so alert, not quite so effective, as a dictatorship or a semi-dictatorship on the threshold of a war. Usually, and there are exceptions, a democracy is slower to prepare for war. One of Hitler's profound advantages in the 1930s was that the powerful democracies such as Britain, France and the United States were slow to prepare for the coming war. But once a war is underway, and the democracy manages to survive the first onslaught, it is likely to be more effective than its authoritarian enemy in harnessing ingenuity, resources and patriotism.

Today it is widely said by large groups of Australians, especially in certain intellectual circles and in the ranks of the Green, that Australia should be neutral in the event of war. But we can only be neutral if the potential enemy gives consent. There is no point in a country declaring that it is neutral now, only to observe, a year or two later, the enemy arriving outside its main harbours or sinking its ships on the coastal sea lanes. Some of the smaller European nations in the two world wars resolved to be neutral and paid a high penalty when their neutrality was ignored by a powerful enemy. It is puzzling that there should be, in a well-informed democracy, a popular strand of thinking which says that neutrality is normally a sound option.

We sometimes hear a section of Australians say that since war requires sacrifices from all the people, the people themselves must decide whether to go to war. In theory that is a fine and ultra-democratic idea, but parliament or the people cannot be sensibly asked to make a decision when war seems just about to break out. By then it could be too late. You cannot expect Parliament at that late hour to debate the question: 'will we defend ourselves, will we go to war, or will we not?' Such a debate, so late, is really a half-invitation to be invaded or a concession that the nation is ill-prepared.

I suspect that a democracy tends, with plenty of exceptions, to be more interested in internal affairs than in external affairs. Defence issues are not usually a priority. Traditionally we relied on a powerful ally, hoping that would mainly solve our defence problems. It has not always solved them. Sometimes we read our history strangely. Australia late in 1941 was in extreme danger; France had fallen, the Soviet Union was invaded by Germany, the vital Suez Canal might be captured by German and Italian forces, and Japan was about to attack a cluster of nations and European colonies in Southeast Asia. Britain was our ally, a great ally for a very long period, but Britain was now almost overwhelmed by the sheer variety of warfronts on which it was fighting on sea and land and air. We could no longer depend on Britain and yet the naval base in Singapore — the outer defence line for Australia — relied heavily on last minute naval and air reinforcements arriving from Britain. And in the ensuing crisis most of the promised reinforcements failed to arrive.

On 27 January 1941, John Curtin as Prime Minister published an appeal in the Melbourne *Herald*, the biggest-circulation afternoon paper in the nation, calling on the United States — not yet formally our ally — for urgent military aid. ‘Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.’ The news was cabled to the United States and also Britain, where it was seen by some critics as mealy-mouthed or tactless. In many quarters in Australia, however, the appeal was hailed as statesman-like and eventually viewed as one of the turning points in our role in Pacific War. We forget that it was the United States that really made the decision, and naturally made it in order primarily to serve its own strategic interests rather than Australia’s.

At that time, the United States was fully absorbed in defending the Philippines from a Japanese invasion, and its forces seemed almost certain to be defeated there. Japan, remarkably, having won control of the air, was now capturing the land. A convoy carrying aircraft and other war equipment was on its way from the west coast of the United States to Manila, and now it had little hope of arriving safely. The swift decision was made in Washington for the convoy to change course and steer for Australia. It reached Brisbane, to the great gratitude of the Australians who heard the news, just before Christmas 1941. In fact, the convoy quietly arrived before Mr. Curtin publicly made his newspaper appeal for military help. The persistence of this myth — that Australia had taken the initiative in this crucial moment in our history — seems a reflection of a certain over-confidence in the way we view our defence dilemmas, past and maybe present.

I think one problem of a democracy such as Australia is that it must have an ally, but it cannot depend completely on the ally. The ally has its own security interests; sometimes it must put its own interests first. That was one lesson taught by the dramatic military events of 1941–42. I remain a democrat but am concerned that we are inclined as a democratic nation not to debate important defence issues with the urgency that we would debate other issues such as superannuation and taxation and so forth.

In the last three or so years, there has been concern in most sections of the public that democracy in Australia is failing. I accept that there is a case for this point of view, though not a convincing case. The main statistical argument used by those who are disillusioned with democracy is that in the last dozen years there have been seven prime ministers. But this is not such an unusual or unique period. In the first decade of the

Commonwealth, from 1901 to 1910, the average term of office of the prime minister was even shorter. Our era is not unique in our political history. Interestingly, the frequent changes of government come after a period of remarkable stability. Between the ascent of Mr. Hawke in 1983 and the defeat of Mr. Howard in 2007 — a period of 24 years — we were led by only three prime ministers; and that was one of the most stable periods of government in our history.

In our federal history there have been many political crises. They include the First World War when the planned conscription of young Australians for service overseas was the burning topic. It divided the Labor movement, and, in many ways, it divided Australia. Another political crisis was the Great Depression of the early 1930s when the Labor Party under James Scullin could not govern effectively because it was far outnumbered in the Senate. I think that Labor had seven senators and the opposition had 29. That was one of the results of the unusual electoral system operating in the early Senate. Likewise, the infant Reserve Bank, the Commonwealth Bank, was not very sympathetic to the policies of the ruling Labor government. Likewise, the state governments were more powerful in the economy than they are today. New South Wales, under Mr. J T Lang was fiercely radical. Therefore, this was a crisis for democracy in Australia.

That crisis was followed by the WA secession movement, a kind of national foretaste of Brexit. I call it 'Wexit'. In the West Australian state elections in 1933 the voters in 44 of the 50 Lower House seats voted to secede. Several of the numerous West Australians present here tonight can tell you that the only electorates in the lower house that voted not to secede were in Kalgoorlie and other goldfields. The arrival of federal ministers as peacemakers after that momentous decision to secede — just

imagine the three wise men coming from the eastern states — only increased the indignation. If Western Australia had actually seceded, we can feel pretty sure that, soon after Japan's devastating attacks on south east Asia in the summer of 1941-42, and especially after the bombing of Darwin and Broome, the premier in Perth would have eagerly petitioned to rejoin the Commonwealth of Australia.

Meanwhile an acute deadlock gripped the Federal Parliament in mid-1941, while the nation was in some peril. Two Victorian independents held the balance of power. They crossed the floor of the house to give firm support to Labor, and so the crisis was resolved without an election, exactly two months before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Incidentally, the three national leaders central to this crisis were Robert Menzies, Arthur Fadden and John Curtin, and they retained relatively harmonious personal relations for the remainder of the war: a political harmony not so visible in Canberra in recent memory.

Most of us remember the constitutional crisis in 1975 when Gough Whitlam was set aside by the Governor-General and then by the Australian electorate. All serious crises, they were resolved. Though igniting bitterness, they were solved peacefully and democratically. That is a tribute to a vigorous democracy; we should be proud of it.

There are predictions that the amending of the *Constitution* in favour of Aborigines could become thorny. Even the ABC's gardening writer, on television yesterday, turned aside from his garden to say that Uluru will be a key topic of our time. Then he went back to the nasturtiums.

Next year is the 250th anniversary of Captain Cook's remarkable voyage along the east coast of Australia. It is a voyage worth celebrating. Aborigines say quite rightly that their

ancestors really discovered Australia. I think it would be sensible if the federal government erected, not on behalf of Aborigines but on behalf of all Australians, a simple monument which honours that first discovery which happened some 60 thousand years ago. We do not know whether that ancient event took place on the present Australian territory or the present Papua New Guinea territory: at the time those two territories were united by land. The probabilities are that the first coming ashore took place in what is now PNG territory but that does not matter. A significant discovery in world history, it occurred when the sea levels were much lower, and south east Asia was not so far away. The place of discovery is now under the sea, but it should be honoured.

I hold the belief that most Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are far better off today than if they were living in 1788. I hold that belief, contrary to some of the tenets of the Uluru Statement, but will abandon that belief if sufficient evidence is forthcoming. On the other hand it is vital, in hand with Aboriginal leaders, to face the unique difficulties of that minority of Aboriginal people who live mainly in remote places and still straddle and struggle with two different values and ways of life.

It is also sensible to be reminded that the world as a whole has gained greatly from all those millions of migrants — and their descendants — who have increasingly inhabited this country since 1788. They have made this land infinitely more productive and fruitful than it could ever have been in Aboriginal history. In some years Australia produces enough food to sustain probably a hundred million people in the world and the minerals with which to build ships, aircraft, railways, bridges, pipelines and city apartments for even more. Likewise, here in this continent flourishes a democratic society which, for

all its imperfections, offers freedom in a world where freedom is scarce for most of its inhabitants.

The very idea that Australia should never have been taken over by outsiders who in the long term were capable of making the land more productive and life-giving, and the very idea that Aboriginal people should have remained The First Nation and the only nation in this huge expanse of land, seems absurd and fanciful.

Long live Australia!

