



Annual Dinner 2003

Peter Morris After Dinner Speech

Mr President : Thank you for the welcome—albeit as a student of 1944 it has taken me 59 years to get to this rostrum. When President Peter invited me to speak this evening, I thought this will be an excellent opportunity to influence several hundred of the best minds in our nation. I could awaken them to our nation's major policy issues, and hopefully persuade them to act to right the wrongs being inflicted upon many of the less fortunate in our society.

Then as I prepared these notes today, I realised that, by the time I came to the rostrum, most former fellow students would have been eating and drinking for almost 2 hours. Hence, they would most likely be relaxed, jovial, maybe even a little tired and emotional, and certainly totally disinterested in serious policy issues.

So I discarded my notes, and decided instead to tell you something about the experiences of a bush kid arriving at a huge school of 860 students, whom the Headmaster was prone to address as the managers and decision makers of tomorrow. I want to tell you some of the events that occurred at that huge school between 1944 and 1948. Then something of the impressions of that bush kid's arrival and experiences during almost 26 years of service in the greatest school of hardheads in the nation—the National Parliament. The most notable event being the unprecedented sacking of the Whitlam Government on 11th November 1975. Then a little of his career change after Parliamentary service ended on 31st August 1998.

For me, in January 1944, the choice of High Schools was Gosford or Newcastle. I was sent to Newcastle Boys' High School. I brought a great scholastic record to NBHS: Dux of Lake Munmorah Public School—a one teacher, one room school with 15 pupils stretched across 1st to 6th Class [some nil students], which resulted in me being placed in 1D. An elder brother had brought me out to the school on the double tram to help me find the school. He introduced me to the Headmaster, Mr Norman Mearns, who promptly decided that I should go straight to 1D. There were 44 kids there. I had never seen so many kids at once before in my life.

It did not take long for the questions to come: What's your name? Where do you come from? —Lake Munmorah—write it down—where's that? How many kids in your family? Eight—EIGHT!!! It was not long before I decided that I was not going to tell anyone where I came from, or how many kids there were in our family.

My first recess was even more daunting, for it was then I discovered there were 860 kids at the school and many teachers. I had never seen so many people in the one place.

My brother had given me 2 bob for my lunch and tram fare. I was told where the Tuck Shop was—I did not know what it was. I saw the shop counter—all these kids were standing back from the counter—I did not know why—I went to the counter only to be grabbed by the shoulder by a prefect and hauled back for jumping the queue. I pleaded ignorance, at which he said that, seeing I was so small, I might as well stay there.

But being small had its disadvantages, for I soon learnt, with my later best friend Brian Griffiths [slightly smaller than me], that certain bigger kids liked to hang around the toilets and beat up on little kids. That was until some time later on, when a lanky kid befriended me and became a lifelong friend who is here tonight, Jim Tresidder of Merewether.

A major event in 1944 was the Parade that was conducted past the School with Mr Mearns taking the salute from the patio above the front door. Adolph Hitler was there in Dippy Denham's brown tourer car with the roof folded down to make it jeep like—very impressive. To jump ahead—life in the Signal Corps of the school cadets was a little difficult, drilling with a 303 rifle that was almost as big as me.

My one and only stage performance was in the chorus singing Champagne Charlie is his name [beloved Charlie Goffett]. Did I get a sixer ---yes in 1946—from Headmaster Pillans.

I was always envious of the top athletes like Kevan Gosper, Albert Paul and footballers like Butch Long and Reg True. It was strange how life was to bring our families and us together.

I thought we gave some of our teachers a very hard time on occasions eg Bert Bailey, and Charlie Goffett.

Life has its unpredictable twists and turns—after the Leaving Certificate, I declined a teacher's scholarship and a position as an Articled Clerk with Braye Cragg and Cohen. I felt that, after 11 years of school, nothing could be as boring as studying law. Yet later I was to spend most of my working life involved with lawmakers where training in law is a substantial advantage.

Let me leap across my brief experiences at sea and in the Commonwealth public service, before working in industry, then 15 years of self-employment in business, to my entry into Federal Parliament.

Parliament 1972 to 1998

After a tortuous preselection struggle [the dark side of politics], I was elected to the House of Representatives, representing the electorate of Shortland on December 2nd 1972. I was a Whitlam child—full of expectation about the Institution of Parliament. Great excitement at the change in government after 23 years of conservative rule. Yes, I was nervous at being a member of the National Parliament, and most nervous making my maiden speech in February 1973.

Face to face with national identities and characters—Whitlam—Killen---Daly--Anthony--Sinclair--Cameron—later Mick Young and Andrew Peacock. Some ruthless and tough speakers—but there was respect for the Institution of Parliament. There was a respect for the rights of backbenchers.

I was surprised at the number of members of the Newcastle Mafia I discovered working in departments, Parliament House and the Library. All Novocastrians are automatically members of the Newcastle Mafia.

The old building had character and atmosphere--a great debating chamber. Sensed the camaraderie across the Chamber. Witnessed use of those powerful political weapons—humour and ridicule. That discussion is for another evening.

The events of the 11th November 1975 are written large in our history. The events of the lead up to that day are burnt into me. As a new backbencher, I had believed in the Conventions and practices of the parliament, and was angered by the actions of the Fraser led Opposition in blocking the passage of the 1975/6 Budget over the weeks leading to November 11. I used to worry about what would and could happen—often could not sleep more than a few hours, so the events of the 11th November came as a surprise.

The federal parliamentary Labor Party had met that morning, where Prime Minister Whitlam had reported to the Caucus that he would be going out to the Governor General a little later, to advise him to call the normal half Senate election. He had been relaxed, appeared happy, and was obviously totally unprepared for what was to follow.

The House then met at 11.45am, when a motion of Censure was moved against the Government by the Leader of the Opposition, Malcolm Fraser, that was seconded by Doug Anthony, Leader of the National Country Party. Whitlam responded, then the House broke for lunch at 12.55 pm, and resumed at 2.00pm with Frank Crean, Minister for Overseas Trade, speaking.

As Crean was nearing the end of his speech, John Coates, MP for Denison in Hobart, poked me in the back. I turned, and he said, "Well, what do you think of the news." I asked what news, and he said, "We have been sacked." I said- don't be stupid, and went back to reading a report on Manufacturing Industry that had been tabled that morning. A little later he poked me again – I turned—"Well what do you think of the news"—again I asked—"What news"—. We have been sacked, he said. Again I said don't be stupid—they can't do that [so I thought].

Well, what do you think they are doing he said, pointing across the Chamber. I looked up and saw that several opposition members had clustered at the back of the chamber, and Malcolm Fraser was actually sitting on a desktop. At that moment, Speaker Gordon Scholes took the Chair, and then I began to realise that something serious was occurring.

The amended Censure Motion, now censuring Malcolm Fraser, was put and carried. Scholes then called the Hon Member for Wannan, i.e. Fraser, who began "Mr Speaker, this afternoon the Governor General commissioned me to form a government until elections can be held"---interjections followed – he completed his speech with a reference to the House being dissolved as soon as possible.

Resolution carried expressing want of confidence in the newly appointed Prime Minister.

Resolution carried for the Speaker to convey the Resolution to the Governor General.

The Budget Bills were returned from the Senate, having been passed.

The House then adjourned [3.15pm] to enable the Speaker to call on the Governor General at Government House. He was given an appointment at 5.00pm at which time the GG's Secretary affixed the Notice of Dissolution to the doors of the Chamber, so the House never reconvened.

Caucus met immediately. The atmosphere was electric ==anything could have happened. We marched out of the Caucus Room singing, with the corridors of the building echoing to the words of Solidarity Forever. Thousands of people materialised in and at the steps of Parliament House—great feeling of anger and uncertainty. I stood some five feet behind Whitlam during that famous speech: "Nothing will save the Governor General." The rest is History.

The sacking was a turning point in parliamentary history and practice—it was never the same thereafter. A feeling of anger, bitterness, and contempt for the process, abandonment of customs, practice and adherence to Convention was born.

Ministerial

A high point was becoming Minister for Transport in the Hawke government in March 1983. Vast difference to being in Opposition. In my seven years as Minister, the last two as a Cabinet Minister, I

mainly covered Transport, Industrial Relations and Assistant Treasurer. My first Principal Private Secretary was from Russell Road, New Lambton, and my first Secretary of the Department of Transport was from Cessnock. They were there when I arrived.

Many of you have seen the TV program Yes Minister. Well, it is 95 % true. Over the first few weeks as Minister, I was presented with copies of Yes Minister: Can Ministers Cope, Who's Master? Who's Servant? I was told Yes Minister was an essential reference text etc. More of Ministerial days another time.

The Parliament I left in 1998 was a very different parliament to the one I joined in 1972. It had become a dour, polarised ritualistic, and humourless place. The rights and powers of backbenchers have been greatly reduced. They are ciphers more than representatives today, while the power and arrogance of the Executive has greatly increased.

The move to the new Parliament House has exacerbated the divide across the Cathedral like chamber. The new building is expensive, isolated and highly inefficient to operate. Much of the courtesy and respect for the processes of Parliament has been lost. Once each side attended and listened to the other side's important speakers. Today the Whips on each side are likely to be seen asking their members to leave the Chamber when their opponents are speaking.

Another element has been the contraction of the media and new technology. Once the press gallery would be packed at Question Time. When I left, two or three journalists would attend. The others take it from their networks, or watch the TV monitors in their offices. They miss the interjections, the body language, the asides and the atmosphere of the chamber. There are fewer investigative reporters, and there is much more tabloid style coverage. Brief, sensationalist and nasty. It is easier to write and to regurgitate.

Networks have a corporate view of events, rather than the wider and more analytical views that flow from multiple journalists.

Parliament is the loser from these changes, but the public is the bigger loser.

This Brings Me To Beyond

During our working lifetimes we amass a wealth of knowledge and experience. I believe that, if we are able, we should not waste that knowledge and experience—we should seek to use it for the benefit of our community and nation. Many do this, as I see them at work.

People often ask me what am I doing, haven't I retired. My answer is no –I have had a career change— I have regained my rights and freedoms as a citizen –and I do not have to be nice to everyone. I have been fortunate in that I now have time to help local community projects like the creation of the new Maritime Centre on the Honeysuckle Foreshore, utilising knowledge and helpers.

I have chaired a major inquiry into international shipping safety, and John Sharp and I are concluding a review of the Australian Shipping Industry.

I am involved in too many other tasks to mention here.

This evening I have tried to tell you something about experiences from Public School to Parliament and beyond. I hope it has been of some interest to each of you.
