

Sir Robert Menzies on Canberra and the Civil Service

Canberra

“Every nation needs a capital city of which it can be proud. Old nations have old capitals, rich in history and the beauty of age; London, Paris, Rome. But for a new nation the problem is different, for it must consciously create a capital with all its history to come... As the new capital will inevitably have small beginnings it will begin by being looked down upon by its elder State brethren, and later, as it grows at the centre of power, be looked at sometimes with envy, but ultimately with pride...

My ...view was that, well done and with its surroundings properly landscaped and planted, [Lake Burley Griffin] would become the real centre of a united city. It would lend itself to the construction of splendid bridges which would provide easy road communications, would be a great attraction to tourists; and would, therefore, build up Canberra as a capital in the eyes and minds of the Australian people...

Canberra has emerged as a lovely city. Departmental officers would no longer feel it a hardship to go to live there. It had become a university city and a city of schools, with unrivalled facilities for water sports and a unique charm of its own. Nowadays, of course, its population has grown apace. It already exceeds a hundred thousand and may well exceed a quarter of a million by the turn of the century. Thousands of people from Interstate come to visit it and admire it. When I remember how every penny spent on Canberra used to be grudged and how many arguments I had to engage in when travelling from State to State, I am delighted in my old age to think that Australia's capital has now become an object of pride and pleasure. This was always a national conclusion devoutly to be wished.' R.G. Menzies, 'Canberra the Makin of a City', *Measure of the Years* (1970) 142, 144, 147.

The Civil Service

“I believe that our treatment of the Civil Service and, in particular, the terms of mutual confidence which was enjoyed with the senior Civil Servants were such that the morale of the Service was never higher. ...When I came in, towards the end of 1949, for my long second term as Prime Minister, there was a feeling around that Labour had attached significance to the political views of senior public servants; that the service was becoming somewhat political.

Whether this was true I have always taken leave to doubt. But the very existence of the rumour made me quite determined that my own administration's record should be clear. At the very outset I was told by people in my part organisation that certain men in the Prime Minister's Department were or had been officers or members of the Labour Party. I recall my reply with some satisfaction. 'So long as they are competent and honest men, what of it? Kissing will not go by political favour in my department!'

At least two of the officers my party official had referred to were relatively senior, and in a position in which they might be required to offer advice. Each in his turn did so on occasion, and always with complete objectivity and integrity. I have no doubt that they discontinued their political activities for, being men of quality, they realised that a senior civil servant who is called upon to inform and sometimes to advise his Minister is on terms of strict confidence with him, given and receiving confidence, and must therefore avoid all occasion of embarrassment.

In Australia, all employees under the Commonwealth Public Service Act have a full right to have their own political views. This is as it should be. After all, a member of the service is presumably an educated and intelligent citizen. We even provide that he has certain rights of reinstatement if he resigns to become a candidate for Parliament and fails to be elected.

But I firmly believe that the position of the senior civil servant in relation to both his Minister and Parliament is quite special and should be clearly understood and zealously guarded. When, in Australia, we decided on permanent tenure of the Public Service proper, we wanted to avoid the evils which had been prevalent in the United States when a presidential election determined the fact and future employment of many thousands of holders of public office, great or small.” R.G. Menzies, ‘The morale of the Civil Service’, *Measure of the Years* (1970) 148-149

“Civil servants ought not to be dragged into parliamentary debate. They have great responsibilities which, in my experience, they discharge with outstanding honesty, and it would be deplorable to have their names and views bandied about in Parliament, thus involving the civil servant much against his will in party political controversy.” R.G. Menzies, ‘The morale of the Civil Service’, *Measure of the Years* (1970) 151.