POLITICIANS' SALARY INCREASE

In the last two or three weeks Federal politicians and the Federal Parliament has experienced an abnormal and unreasonable public criticism as a result of the Richardson Report. I say abnormal and unreasonable because the most vocal criticism has come from people who have not read the report or from people who have read various statements in the metropolitan press, several of which have been complete misrepresentations of the facts.

I am not going to detail these misrepresentations in this statement. A few days ago I wrote a letter to all the local press concerning them. If there is anyone who would like more details copies of the Richardson Report, which was not published in full in any of the press, are available. I am prepared to discuss the Report with any person or group so long as they have read the Report first.

I want to make it quite clear from the outset that I support the recommendations made by the Richardson Committee as they were introduced into Parliament, recommendations which excluded certain things in the original Report such as non-contributory pensions for long service Ministers. I also support the method of making these changes.

The recommendations of the Richardson Committee can be divided into two main categories; those concerning Ministers and those concerning Back-benchers.

The Ministers are the leaders of the greatest undertaking in this country - the Government of Australia. Their decisions collectively are more important than decisions of any other group of people. Australians should not deny them a remuneration that is in keeping with their responsibilities and of the burdens of office which all too often have aged men long before their time.

When you consider the question of Back-benchers, it is quite true that members with some outside salary can undertake their work properly without jeopardising or penalising themselves or their family. However, I am quite convinced that because of many
of the difficulties of a politician’s life a member without any outside salary, and this concerns a great number, is having great burdens placed upon his family in an unreasonable manner. I wonder how many people realise that for a great part of each year a politician’s wife lives as a widow, and if that politician has a young school age family his children grow up knowing their Father almost as a stranger.

If Parliament were composed of people who were all in the latter half of their lives, whose families have grown up and departed, then this kind of consideration would not apply, but there are many politicians with young families and, under present circumstances, their family cannot help but suffer. Very often it is physically impossible for politicians to return home in the weekends, and they are absent from home for long periods. Parliament sits for about six months a year and unless politicians can make some arrangements to bring their family to Canberra for a short period their family life becomes pretty well non-existent because when a man returns to his electorate in the Parliamentary recess he is not infrequently out at some function or attending to some electoral duty several days and nights a week. In country electorates it often means staying away from home. Members do not object to doing this; they willingly accept it as part of their functions, but there comes a stage when they do most strongly object to the penalties that are imposed upon their families.

On Page 12 of the Richardson Report a paragraph of my own evidence to that Committee is published. I said:

"One does not become a politician to make money or to become rich, but rather to serve, to try to achieve objectives that one feels are desirable and for the general good. I believe this entails some sacrifice on the part of politicians. It is they who set the example to the community they are meant to lead and govern."

This is recognised by politicians even if the members of the public don’t believe it.
I think, in general terms, few people realise the very great expense involved in representing a country electorate. I have no intention of giving details of my expenses at this particular time, but I can assure you that the come to considerably more than the allowance that is made for these expenses, and my case is certainly not unique. This does mean again that if a member has no outside income either his electoral duties or his obligations toward his family will be made to suffer. If any person doubts this I will give him privately details of electoral expenses.

There is one final thing I want to say. I could have voted against this legislation in the Parliament. However, I know very well that this would have penalised a great number of members who have no outside income, who are doing a good job and whose school age families are carrying the burden; I am not prepared to do this. I am convinced that there are many members from all Parties who do need the salary increases recommended by the Richardson Committee.

Previously I had felt that a permanent Committee composed of the Public Service Arbitrator, an Arbitration Court Judge and one other should be formed for the purpose. This has a superficial attraction but, quite apart from the technical constitutional objection, there is another sound objection to this process. The salaries of these people are fixed directly by Parliament; if they were doing the job of fixing politicians' salaries they would be open to the charge of getting a "sit for tat" from Parliament. It would be a tragedy to draw these judicial people into this kind of argument, I would sooner preserve the present procedure under which politicians take full responsibility for their actions.
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