

## Introductory Remarks

John Stone

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this tenth Conference of The Samuel Griffith Society, and our second here in Brisbane. As one who had, briefly, the privilege of serving as a Senator for Queensland, and of therefore becoming temporarily a kind of honorary Queenslander, it is a particular pleasure to return here in this way.

When, last March, the Board of Management decided on this venue, we were aware both of the possibility of a federal election in the second half of 1998, and of the likelihood of a Queensland State election around mid-year. Since election campaign periods are never the best time for holding Conferences about genuinely interesting questions, the Board naturally wished to avoid clashing with either event.

In the outcome, as you know, the Queensland election was held on 13 June last, so that our choice of this weekend for our Conference proved well-judged from that viewpoint. Until recently, however, some of us were still holding our breaths lest today (or a subsequent Saturday this month) might still turn out to be the day of the federal election. From the viewpoint of the Society, we can only be grateful that that danger too has been averted.

As you probably know, the Society has had, almost from the outset, a policy of inviting the Premier of the State in which we are meeting to address the opening dinner on the Friday evening. Thus, when we met in Brisbane in 1994, we invited the then Premier, the Honourable Wayne Goss, to address us — although, because of a clash of dates with a Premiers' Conference in Sydney, he was in the event unable to do so.

So, when we had decided to hold this Conference in Brisbane, and having in mind the timing matter about the State election which I have already mentioned, we were in something of a dilemma. If our judgment proved to be right (as it did), the question was, who would be Premier of Queensland when we met on 7 August?

After due deliberation the Board decided that, in these circumstances, the only proper course was to issue our invitation to the then Premier, the Honourable Rob Borbidge — *not* by way of implicitly expressing a view about the electoral outcome, on which we had no opinion, but, on the contrary, because to do otherwise *would* have been to express such a view. We also took the view that, if Mr Borbidge were to be good enough to accept our invitation, then that invitation should stand irrespective of the election outcome.

So that is how we came to be addressed last night, not by the Premier, but by the new Leader of the Opposition.

I thought that I should put these facts on record to avoid any possible misunderstanding. In the event, Mr Borbidge's address to us last night on *Reinventing the Federation* proved to be a valuable contribution to the debate which, for the past six years or so, this Society has been doing its best to stimulate.

In his address to us last night Mr Borbidge remarked on one point in particular which I think is worth reiterating here this morning. At a time when we are all being enjoined, in the strongest terms, to value our "diversity" as a people, and when those most vehemently expressing that view are the opinion-forming elites in our academies, in our major political parties, and not least in our media, it is remarkable that those same elites should appear to value so lightly the marvellous opportunities for diversity which our federal Constitution so fortunately provides. If "assimilation" is not appropriate for our people, why is it that a "one size fits all" approach to centralising power in Canberra is thought to be appropriate for our polity?

When we last met, in Perth last October, the "ten point plan" Native Title legislation was before the Parliament, and the Government had indicated that there could be no further

compromise on that matter. Now that its “7\_ point plan” has been enacted, one can only reflect on what a difference a Queensland election can make.

At that time I referred in my introductory remarks to the equally serious matter of the so-called “vertical fiscal imbalance” between the States’ spending responsibilities and their much diminished revenue raising abilities. I noted that that was one of the matters to be addressed in the Commonwealth Government’s proposals for major tax reform, but added that I was “ not noticeably holding my breath”.

Next Thursday we shall finally see those proposals formally unveiled, and tomorrow morning two of our speakers, Professor Brian Galligan and *The Australian’s* economics editor, Alan Wood, will give us their appraisals on the situation in regard to vertical fiscal imbalance. Subject to what they may have to say, I am still breathing regularly.

This morning, however, we shall commence with four papers comprising, so to speak, a post-mortem on the outcome of the Constitutional Convention held in Canberra last February. So far as the republican “model” emerging from the Convention is concerned, the term “post mortem” appears wholly appropriate. The first of these papers is by Sir David Smith, who is well known to all members of this Society for his courage, his personal integrity and his devotion to public service. Your chairman for that and the three subsequent papers will be our Vice-President, Sir Bruce Watson, and I ask that you make him welcome.