

Introductory Remarks

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Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this, the third major Conference to be held by The Samuel Griffith Society.

Before I come to my introductory remarks proper, I hope that you may indulge me if I venture some personal remarks.

First, as many of you are aware, I am myself a Western Australian – as is my wife Nancy – and have always described myself as such, even during the period when, briefly, I had the honour to serve the people of Queensland as a Senator for that State. (During that time I used to describe myself as "an honorary Queenslander".)

It is therefore a source of great personal pleasure to me that the Society should have chosen Western Australia as the place in which to hold our first Conference out of Melbourne.

As many of you will be aware, we also launched the first volume of the Society's Proceedings, Upholding the Australian Constitution, in Perth last November, when we were privileged to hear an address penned by one of Western Australia's most illustrious sons – now, I regret to say, the late Sir Paul Hasluck.

In saying "penned by" Sir Paul I was of course choosing my words carefully because, as those of you who were present on that occasion will recall, Sir Paul was at that time convalescing from a bout in hospital after a nasty fall resulting in a broken hip. His splendid address was therefore delivered on his behalf by his son Nicholas.

As I subsequently said in my Foreword to the Society's little publication, Native to Australia (itself a phrase taken from Sir Paul's address), in which that and two other such addresses were later published:

"As things have, sadly, turned out, his death on January 9, 1993 at the age of 87 means that this was the last public utterance by a very great Australian. Nobody reading it can fail to be moved, not only by its inherent qualities, but also by the thought that, lying in his hospital bed composing it, that possibility may not have been entirely absent from his mind".

Sir Paul was a very good man, whose life – and perhaps also death – may serve as an example to us all. On this, the first occasion on which the Society has met in Western Australia since his death, it seemed to me only fitting that we should honour him.

Having just referred to a very good man, let me now mention a good woman, and in doing so note the appropriateness of holding this conference in the splendid ambience which this beautifully restored Esplanade Hotel provides. If Australians could be trusted to be as careful in maintaining, and restoring, their heritage as a whole – including their constitutional heritage – as they have been in the case of this hotel, we should indeed be a proud people.

As many of you know, Mrs Marilyn Rogers, who nowadays is the fortunate owner of this hotel, is the daughter of the late Ric New, who was for many years a breath of fresh air within what can often be the somewhat stuffy ranks of corporate Australia. He was a man who believed passionately not only in freedom, including as much freedom as possible from the oppressive role of government, but also in the need to stand ready to fight for what you believe in. He was one of the early, and more notable victims of the Burke administration, which set in train those processes of WA Inc. to which we shall be devoting two papers later this morning.

The story of the governmentally-inspired attack on Mr New has been graphically told by Professor Paddy O'Brien and Mr Tony McAdam in their fascinating, and in many ways frightening, book *The Burke Shambles*. I mention it here not only for its relevance to our proceedings later today but also, as I say, because our host, Mrs Rogers, is the very fitting daughter of that redoubtable man; so that, in thanking her for the way in which her establishment is looking after us, I take the opportunity of honouring him also.

In this list of "credits" let me finally come to the man who honoured us by his presence, and his address to us, last night – the Premier of Western Australia, Mr Richard Court. Although I come to him last, I recall in doing so the Biblical text that "the last shall be first".

And first, indeed, in Australia today – at least where the Mabo matter is concerned – he is. Throughout these past four or five months in particular, there has been no other public figure of comparable standing who has emerged with such credit from the flames of Mabo, so recklessly ignited by those "Mabo Six" members of our High Court in June last year, than Mr Court.

Steadily, coolly, reasonably and above all, steadfastly, he has stood there while the shot and shell of both the malignant and the merely ignorant have rained down upon him. On Thursday of this week he introduced into the Western Australian Parliament his own considered response to them – the Land (Titles and Traditional Usage) Bill. Suddenly, some of the critics seem to be growing, if not (yet) silent, at any rate more muted in their criticisms, less violent in their dogmatism, more circumspect in their attacks.

These are however early days, and last night, naturally, the Premier did not speak principally about the Mabo issue, but about the more general topic which we had suggested to him, namely Western Australia and the Federal Compact. Of course, the Mabo matter, and its implications, also go to the heart of that Federal compact, but that was not, as I say, the chief gravamen of Mr Court's remarks.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think this Society may take some pride in the fact that when an exceptionally busy – even hard-pressed – Premier came to speak to us, he paid us the respect of giving us not some mere political speech (which I would not have expected in Mr Court's case anyway), but a serious, thoughtful and clearly carefully considered analysis of the chosen topic. In doing so he honoured us, and we in our turn now take this opportunity of honouring him.

When the Board of the Society chose not only Western Australia for the venue of this Conference, but this weekend for its convening, we could hardly have predicted that both place and timing would prove to be so marvellously apt so far as the Mabo issue is concerned. Our first two papers this morning are, as you know, focussed on that issue, and the first of them, *The Racial Discrimination Act 1975 and Mabo*, will be given by Dr Colin Howard.

Colin Howard, as many of you will know, has already made a distinguished contribution to the Proceedings of this Society, having delivered papers to each of its previous conferences. For reasons which may not be totally unconnected to that, he has recently been serving as an adviser to the Premier on the Mabo matter, and as a consequence he has been enjoying the experience of being, for a time at least, "an honorary West Australian" – and a very good one too. So let me now, more formally, introduce him.