

Victory speech: Gough Whitlam, Prime Minister (ALP)

May 29, 1974

“Eleven days ago, we all voted to elect a new House of Representatives and an entirely new Senate. Any doubt or delay in the outcome stemmed not from any indecision on the part of the electors, but from the complexity of our electoral laws.

The thrust and clear meaning of your decision is beyond doubt. You have returned the Government which you elected less than 18 months ago. You have returned us with a comfortable majority.

You have strongly re-affirmed our programme of 1972 – to expand the opportunities for all Australians, and make those opportunities more equal for all Australians.

In the House of Representatives, the House which decides who shall govern, which alone has the right and power to decide who shall govern, you have given us a solid working majority of at least five maybe seven.

Further, you have strengthened our position in the Senate.

You will recall that the Governor-General granted a dissolution of both Houses on the grounds that the old Senate had twice rejected six bills.

These were bills to provide for more equal electorates, two senators from each of the two Territories, universal health insurance and the petroleum and minerals authority.

These bills can now be passed and they will be.

Finally – although this does not directly determine the results of Australian elections – the percentage of Australians voting for the Australian Labor Party, the percentage of Australians wanting the return of this Government was decisively in our favor.

Some 200,000 more men and women voted for ALP candidates than for the candidates of the Liberal and Country parties, the DLP and their offshoots.

There should be no uncertainty in any quarter about our ability and determination to carry out our program and to provide strong, effective government for the full term of which you have once again elected us.

Let me emphasise two points.

First, when parties in Australia go to the people they present, or have a duty to present, programmes designed for three years, the normal life of a parliament.

That’s what we did in 1972, and again last month.

Governments should be judged on their success or failure in that period.

That was the true meaning behind our successful appeal to you for a fair go.

You upheld that appeal.

Secondly, the nation's business, particularly its economic affairs, may sometimes call for unpopular decisions.

If a Government, unbeaten and unbeatable in the people's House, can be forced to an election by an irresponsible chance combination in the Senate any time the national interest demands tough decisions, then there is an end to firm, responsible government.

It would be the beginning of the end of strong parliamentary democracy in Australia.

It is insupportable to suggest that the same upheaval we have just been through, the same falsification of democracy – to use Sir Robert Menzies' indelible phrase – should ever again be attempted.

It would not just be a question of holding an elected Government to ransom, it would be a matter of holding our whole parliamentary system to ransom.

I note a comment made – repeatedly made – that the elections polarised the Australian people; that is to say, the poor vote of the minor parties and your clear choice between the major parties represented a sharp dividing of the people.

This is so much nonsense.

What you have done – and I congratulate you upon it – is to restore the two-party system to a healthier state than it has been for 20 years.

It is only a sound two-party system which has made democracy work effectively in the English-speaking world.

So in two ways – by rejecting the attempts of senators to destroy a duly elected Government, and by restoring strength to the two-party system – you have voted for strong parliamentary democracy.

So this is not just our victory, victory for the team you elected in 1972 and confirmed in office 11 days ago.

Not just victory for the programme we have tried to implement according to our pledges.

It is your victory, the victory of an intelligent, aware and, I believe, a basically idealistic people.

The support, the continued confidence of such a people is something profoundly worth having, and I value it beyond words.

I recall that in the policy speech I said that we Australians are faced together one of the great historic challenges of our time – to make democracy work, to make the parliamentary system work and make it work better.

You have responded splendidly to that challenge.

I said, too, that we shared with most nations of the world another challenge – the problem of fighting inflation while fulfilling the wishes, hopes and needs of the nation, and protecting the weaker sections of the community.

This is the continuing task – not easy, not simple, but certainly not insuperable.

It requires co-operation, it requires courage.

I am confident we have those qualities in abundance in this nation.

Exactly one month ago, I asked you to let us get on with the job.

We are back at work after the interruption.

The Parliament will meet as soon as possible after the completion of counting for the Senate.

The legislative programme for the 29th Parliament will include the uncompleted business of the last Parliament outlined by the Queen when she opened the last session three months ago.

Its work will include the completion of our 1972 programme and the expansion of that programme as I foreshadowed in the policy speech one month ago – national compensation, national superannuation, modernization of Australia's social welfare system, labor retraining, help for home owners, national involvement in remodeling our cities and centers and rebuilding our education system, the provision of care and education for pre-school children, the protection of Australia's resources and the promotion of Australian ownership.

Fellow Australians: The times ahead will not always be easy, but they can be exciting and purposeful.

We face the future as a strong, prosperous, confident, united, respected nation.

Together in the months and years ahead, we shall all go ahead – together.”

Source: Compiled from The Age, 30/5/1974, page 12 and the Sydney Morning Herald.