

The Hon. M. A. BIRRELL (East Yarra Province) - -Mr Chairman, on my maiden speech I have chosen to deal with the Supply Bill, for it covers the whole gamut of Government operations, and particularly the items relating to Parliament and the Attorney-General's Department.

I recall that it was one of my predecessors who began his maiden speech with the statement that he "had not intended to speak in this Chamber quite so soon", because he had "learned to appreciate the virtue of discreet silence at times".

I readily accept the wisdom of this observation, but find my viewpoint balanced by the fact that the very same person was soon to become one of Australia's most eminent Parliamentarians, certainly not prone to periods of long silence.

That man was the Honourable Robert Gordon Menzies, who was later to be knighted for his outstanding service as Deputy Premier of Victoria and Prime Minister of Australia. The standards that he set, both as a political leader and, more simply, as a fine Australian, provide a fitting yardstick by which others have long been judged. Menzies had a vision for Australia and a personal determination to advance the interests and living standards of its people. He was a great Liberal; indeed he initiated the birth of Liberalism as we know it.

In 1958 another great Liberal was to begin his political career as the member for East Yarra Province. Like Menzies, he was a man of profound vision. Through his own fine qualities of decency, compassion and foresight, he gave real meaning to the term "quality of life". That man: Sir Rupert Hamer.

It is an honour to follow in the footsteps of these fathers of Australian Liberalism, not only because of their contribution to this and other Houses of Parliament, but because they were responsible for establishing and advancing the Liberal cause in this State.

I take this opportunity to pay several tributes. First, to my colleague in East Yarra Province, the Honourable Haddon Storey. It will be a privilege to work with such a senior and respected member of this Chamber and a pleasure to continue the friendship that we have had for many years. Mr Haddon Storey and I have similar backgrounds in that we were both State Presidents of the Young Liberal Movement. My appreciation is extended to the Young Liberals for the support, experience and encouragement they have provided over the years.

Finally, I record my personal thanks to my political party, which chose me to represent its better interests following the retirement of the Honourable Bill Campbell. I commit myself to repaying the party and the electorate for the faith they have shown in me.

Like the men who came before me, I enter this Chamber as a Liberal, committed to a philosophy that emphasizes the freedom of the individual, acclaims the value of the free enterprise system and champions the rights of the citizens over the State.

Given my concern for human liberty, equality of opportunity and social responsibility I could be nothing but a Liberal.

I agree with Sir Robert Menzies, who said of our great party:

We took the name Liberal because we were determined to be a progressive party, willing to make experiments, in no sense reactionary but believing in the individual, his rights and his enterprise,

And I find strength in the words of Sir Rupert Hamer, who said:

For the Liberal Party it is people who matter most... we believe that Government exists to serve the people and to respond to their needs and aspirations.

I am a Liberal, believing that progress and growth are the natural products of individual initiative and personal enterprise. I am not a Conservative, nor a reactionary. It was Woodrow Wilson who succinctly described a Conservative as, "one who does not go far enough", and a reactionary as "one who won't go at all.". I find no warmth in either of those concepts.

A Liberal must go forward, providing innovative and responsible leadership, initiating necessary reforms and seeking, at all times, to care for the welfare, freedom and rights of the individual.

I completely reject the dogma of Socialism. Socialism is a failure because it seeks to restrain and restrict natural freedoms, imposing bland conformity at the expense of individuality and spontaneity. Tragically, Socialism demands total support of the State instead of placing trust in the creativity, goodwill and unique qualities of its people. By contrast, Liberalism believes, to use the words of John Stuart Mill, that:

The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it.

As I said, I come here as a Liberal, and as a member of the only party that represents both city and country, the only party that gives equal representation to men and women in its policy and administrative forums and the only party that has consistently and successfully encouraged youth involvement in politics.

Given that the average age of my colleagues in this Chamber is close to 50 years, my contribution, as a 25 year old, will necessarily be quite distinct and, I trust, as fresh and positive as you would expect of any young Australian. I do not simply seek to be a spokesman for youth, but I do commit myself to giving voice to the needs and aspirations of today's young people. In a time when more than 50 per cent of Victorians are under the age of 30 years, this Chamber, this Parliament and this Government must all turn their minds to the critical issues of youth unemployment, homelessness, street crime, epidemic drug abuse and the increasing feelings of alienation and frustration that have beset young people. We ignore these issues, and their underlying causes, at our peril,

This Chamber is uniquely suited to the task of tackling serious economic, social and intellectual problems. Most importantly, it has a key role to play in scrutinizing, analysing and testing the actions of the Government of the day, and in initiating legislative proposals of its own.

The critical requirement of an effective review mechanism has, over the years, been highlighted by numerous eminent commentators, each of whom has cited the fact that our governmental and bureaucratic systems appear to be moving further and further out of public reach and becoming more and more prone to arbitrary and aloof decision-making.

Professor Gordon Reid, in his essay, "The Changing Political Framework said:

.. the elected Parliament is a weak and weakening institution (and) the Executive Government is the principal beneficiary of the Parliament's decline.

A former member of the Legislative Council, Or Kevin Foley, was moved to sum up the situation

by writing in 1982 that:

the entire system of Government in Victoria is in desperate need of review and reform, Much of Victoria's machinery of Government was developed in the 19th century and since then when changes have been made they have, in the main, been at the margin and ad hoc, In that regard the processes of Government in Victoria offer an almost classic example of disjointed incrementalism.

These are strong words, but they correctly emphasize the need for the creation of effective mechanisms in this State, which will keep a watching brief over the activity or inactivity of Ministers, departments, bureaucrats and statutory authorities.

The Legislative Council should do this vital work -indeed, the Council's very existence would be further justified if it did take on this responsibility. A comprehensive committee system should be established by the Council, one which would make this place a true House of review and which would use the resources of honourable members in a more thorough and searching fashion.

Such a suggestion is not new. Others have recommended it before, including the all-party Statute Law Revision Committee, but I am aware that we are no closer to achieving the desired goal. The Committee system that was introduced into the Australian Senate in 1970 provides a fine model for us, as do the systems used by the British House of Commons and the United States Senate. Careful consideration should be given to the number, size and scope of the standing committees to be established, but it is imperative that the first step be taken without further delay.

The role of the Legislative Council committees would be to:

1. Review significant or controversial pieces of legislation, and hear public evidence on the desirability and suitability of the Bills concerned;
2. Conduct Parliamentary oversight of the Budget Bills, and, thereby, scrutinize the projected expenditure and taxation proposals of the Executive;
3. Examine major new areas of policy, which may have been neglected or ignored by the Lower House; and
4. Thoroughly scrutinize subordinate legislation-, the regulations that so often affect the rights of individuals, families and businesses more severely than specific legislation does.

Surely it is not beyond the will of this House to take upon itself the task of establishing a modern committee system. I commend the recommendations on this matter that my colleague, the Honourable James Guest, has previously put before this Chamber and I hope that in a bi-partisan way we can work to give the Legislative Council a new role and a new sense of purpose.

Other Parliamentary reforms should also, in my humble view, be seriously considered. The community is sick and tired of the excessive number of elections that it has had to endure over recent years. The need for fixed terms of Parliament, which has been strongly advocated by the State Parliamentary Liberal Party, is self-evident and has wide community backing. Support should be forthcoming from all parties for the introduction of this important reform.

In addition, we should seriously consider the introduction of numerous electoral reforms - administrative reforms like placing how-to-vote cards in polling booths and listing political parties' names on ballot papers.

Like any other element of society, Parliament must be kept in touch with changing times and

modern demands. We should not shirk at making considered and sensible reforms whenever the need for improvement can be demonstrated.

I have commented on the roles and duties of Parliament, as I see them, but I would like to conclude by looking at a matter that is closer to home—the stature of Parliamentarians themselves. It is a sad fact of life that politicians are frequently looked upon in a highly cynical manner by the people they serve. A recent Gallup poll asked 1200 Australians to rank seventeen occupations according to their perceived honesty and ethical standards. Members of Parliament came a lowly eleventh on the list, marginally above car salesmen and, with due respect to honourable members on the Government side of the House, only just above trade union leaders