By Mr Malcolm Fraser, member for Wannon and Minister for Education and Science

The year has almost ended and this will be my last broadcast for 1968 until Parliament resumes in February. For many Australians it has been a year of recovery — a good season in Western Victoria and better wool-prices are now having a significant impact over many rural areas. Unfortunately the marketing situation affecting dairy products overseas remains very difficult. The beef industry sustained a shock earlier in the year when quotas were imposed on all countries exporting to the United States. There was a momentary impact on prices, which however, recovered and have been sustained at good levels in the weeks since.

With the new Prime Minister at the helm it is quite natural there should be a good deal of public debate about the effectiveness of the Government and its record under Mr Gorton. The Opposition aimed much of its criticism at the new Prime Minister in an unsuccessful attempt to cause difficulties for the Prime Minister.

Their tactics came to a head in the want-of-confidence motion moved in the dying hours of the last Parliament. It is not my judgment but rather the general judgment of the Press Gallery and of other observers that the want-of-confidence motion failed dismally, that the Leader of the Opposition did not seem to have his heart in the attack and the Members behind him went off in many different directions. As a result they made no impact that was able to serve their own purpose.

It is my personal and strong belief that the Prime Minister has finished the year in very good position. There is a tremendous difference between being a Minister and being Prime Minister, and although Senator Gorton as he was had had a very considerable experience in handling affairs of many different portfolios in the Senate and as a Cabinet minister, it is still a very large step for any man to take.
It is the most difficult job that Australia can provide, and any person who attempts it needs not only a great deal of physical stamina, but a courage and a dedication of which only a few people are capable.

The Prime Minister in particular has shown that he wants to look to new horizons in social welfare — in looking after the aged and the sick, and those people in the community who need some additional help. I will mention in a few moments some matters introduced in the Budget as a result of an initial examination of these problems. The Welfare Committee of Cabinet which the Prime Minister established is making a full and comprehensive review of these matters.

A year ago many people supported John Gorton for Prime Minister because they believed he had the capacity and qualities for leadership and also because they believed he would be the best person to stand in the Parliamentary arena against Mr Whitlam, who in the previous year had begun to develop a not inconsiderable reputation. The faith of supporters of Senator Gorton for the Prime Ministership has been fully justified. Over the year he has slowly consolidated and strengthened his position and his authority in Parliament.

In contrast, Mr Whitlam, who a year ago appeared to shine, has lost a little of his glamour in the Parliamentary arena, and no doubt this is not only due to the nature of Mr Gorton’s Prime Ministership but also to the difficulties which seem to be inherent in the problems confronting any leader of the present Opposition. There is only need to mention Jim Cairns’ challenge to his leadership earlier in the year, which seemed to be something of a watershed for Gough Whitlam. He has not shown the same buoyancy and spirit which he had exhibited before this event.
People might well expect members of the Liberal Party and of the Country Party, as politicians, to be joyful about the problems and the political disarray which the formerly great Australian Labour Party has so often displayed in recent times. On the contrary, I think most of us look on these problems as Australians. We recognise that the national cause is not best served by having a strong Government and a very weak Opposition. It would be best served by having a strong Government and a strong and viable Opposition, which can prompt and probe and question with skill. It is an unhappy commentary on Australian politics that such an Opposition has not existed for a great number of years.

There were a number of problems which the Government had to face during the year. There were some significant international issues, in which Australia is only a small observer of the scene and without the power and resources to be much more. There was the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Russia and her Warsaw Pact allies, an invasion which surely caused many people to question the somewhat hopeful view that a number of people had been beginning to take of Russia and her long-term objectives.

Throughout the course of this year we have seen President Johnson working to achieve peace in Vietnam. We have the bombing pause and the negotiations in Paris. But much as we all fervently want peace we cannot expect a quick or easy solution to these problems. The pattern of Communist negotiation in Korea should be remembered. If my information is correct the Communists there first called for negotiations when they were militarily exhausted and weak, and when further arrogance and defiance might have led to an overwhelming defeat. Once negotiations were established and the level of fighting reduced they re-built their military strength, and at later times at the negotiating table they were in a position to co-ordinate their military policies and their negotiating
tactics to their advantage.

The North Vietnamese have suffered immense casualties over this year. The infamous Tet Offensive did not give them the success they had envisaged, did not reveal the support in South Vietnam that they had expected. Their casualties were enormous and have continued to be heavy. But if they follow the Korean pattern they will be re-building their military strength and they will dovetail their military activities with the come-and-go of negotiations in Paris.

Vietnam is still a testing time for a kind of aggression-by-subversion which the North has practised. We need always to remember this is only one of the many small countries in South-East Asia which is susceptible to this kind of subversion.

In more recent times there is the French currency crisis which left, at least for the present, the Australian financial scene pretty well untouched.

It is not possible to say what long-term effects overseas currency crises might have on the Australian scene. But it is of very real importance to all the free world that the major countries try to establish a situation in which these recurring crises are avoided, and I believe that the manner in which other countries have responded and reacted to the French situation shows that other countries are doubly conscious of this need.

Earlier in the year the Prime Minister himself expounded the new objectives for the aged, the sick and the needy. No nation, he said, could be great unless it sought to take care of the weaker, the aged and the ill within it. In the Budget came the first results of the Government's "new look" programme - guaranteed hospital benefits for the chronically ill, extended nursing home benefits and more help for handicapped children. In addition, the Government is co-operating with
the States to promote the development of co-ordinated home-care programmes. During the year a Committee of Inquiry under Mr Justice Nimmo was established to review operations of the health insurance scheme.

Finally, I would like to mention another 1968 Government decision which has far-reaching implications for Australia's future. This is the decision to move into the foreign shipping trade by chartering two vessels within shipping conferences for the carriage of imports and exports on the Australia-U.K-Europe and the Australia-North America routes. While this should result in considerable savings of foreign exchange, probably the greatest benefits will come initially from the flow of vital shipping intelligence from inside the conferences in this period of revolutionary change in world shipping.

I wish everyone a Happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year.