Mr Cope's Resignation

Last Thursday the Federal Parliament erupted without precedent. As a result Mr Speaker Cope resigned and Gordon Scholes from Geelong was elected Speaker later that day.

Press reports on Friday gave, I believe, a fair interpretation of what had happened.

The climax came when Clyde Cameron, the Minister for Labour was called to order by the Speaker. Clyde Cameron said, "Look I don't give a damn what you say".

The Speaker three times asked the Minister to apologise. There were some signs that he was going to respond to the Speaker's request, but the Prime Minister intervened and answered for Mr Cameron and said "No."

The Speaker then followed normal practice and named Mr Cameron. If tradition had been followed, if centuries old convention had been preserved, the Leader of the House would have moved that Mr Cameron be suspended from the House.

The Prime Minister would not allow Mr Daly to move that motion. The Minister was protected by the government's majority and by the Prime Minister's decision.

Their own Speaker was dis-owned and destroyed.

The Prime Minister forgot that the Speaker is not an extension of the executive arm of government. He is there to see that the conduct of the House and government business is undertaken fairly, that there is equal protection for all members of parliament. Once a person becomes Speaker he ceases to be an active parliamentarian.

The Prime Minister forgot that if Parliament is to operate, it can only do so by general respect for the Speaker and his office, by a preservation of the rules and conventions which make the Parliament workable.

Rules and conventions were both broken by the Prime Minister. As a result of this and other events, I would believe that the general reputation of the Federal Parliament has never been as low, that there has never been less respect for Parliament throughout the Australian community.
We cannot blame the media or the Australian public for that. We can only blame the way in which the Parliament has operated in recent times. The government and the Opposition both have a role to preserve the status and dignity of Parliament. Not particularly in their own interests, but in the interests of the people of Australia whose servant the Parliament is.

There have been many occasions in which the Parliament has been quite directly by-passed by this government. Policy matters which should have been referred to the Parliament have been executed without legislative approval. Policy decisions, reports of major negotiations have been announced by the Prime Minister to the media, instead of directly to the Parliament. That in itself is breaking a convention.

In Sir Robert Menzies' time, Ministers were rigorously told that policy decisions must first be announced in Parliament, and reports of visits overseas reported in the Parliament. It is within the power and prerogative of government to enhance the status of Parliament.

The government has failed to take its responsibility. The Prime Minister fails to understand that the Parliament will quickly become unworkable if the general conventions of the Parliament are not maintained by both government and Opposition. There should henceforth be a determination by all members of Parliament to raise the status and general respect of the Parliament; to maintain the rules and conventions and respect properly owed to the Chair, to the Speaker who is the custodian of those rules and conventions.

I have pointed to the responsibility upon the government. There is also responsibility upon the Opposition which I am certain each member of the Opposition would want to sustain.

If the Parliament becomes unworkable by destruction of convention, Democracy itself becomes unworkable because Democracy rests much more on adherence to convention than to the rigid application of rules and laws.

Parliamentary government is the most rational and sophisticated form of government yet devised. Its purpose is to preserve and enlarge the areas of individual freedom. Its privileges and freedoms were won under duress, difficulty and civil war. Its traditions are centuries old.

Traditions give Parliament great strength. That strength will only prevail if those now in Parliament recognise that the continuation of Parliamentary government depends upon general support throughout the community, whether they believe particular actions are right or wrong, and on the general belief that the Parliament is there to act in the interests of all our people to preserve and enlarge freedom.
Parliament must show as it has never shown before that it is the honest servant of all Australians. Members of Parliament must strive as they have never striven before, to enhance the status, the general reputation of Parliament so that it can regain the respect and the general acceptance of all Australians.

There are many challenges to the preservation of Parliament. There are forces within our community, some of great power, that do not believe in Parliamentary government. There are economic and social problems which the Parliament has not yet been able to solve.

These problems alone would be daunting for present legislators and Ministers. If we add to that list the problems created by the behaviour of Parliament itself, the destruction of convention, the defiance of reason, the pursuit of power without concern for the rights or privileges of minorities, then Australians will have little faith in the future of Australian Democracy.