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AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF FORENSIC SCIENCES

DINNER, SYDNEY, 23 APRIL 1983

IN TRIBUTE TO SIR PETER LAWLER OBE

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The Hon Mr Justice M D Kirby CMG  
Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission

YES MINISTER

Sir Peter Lawler is leaving our shores. My task is to express a vote of thanks to him. His departure brings both good news and bad news. The good news is that his celebrated career in the service of Australia continues. The bad news is that he is leaving us for a time and the harrowing, remorseless telephone calls of our Secretary-General will, for him, be a thing of the past.

Now, it is rumoured that he will proceed to represent this country to the Irish Republic and the Holy See. In deference to my Ulster ancestors, I will say nothing about the latter appointment. But as to his appointment to the Irish Republic, I can pass on to him a little advice. It was given, you may think typically, to the Britain-Australia Society. It was offered by another Sir Harry, Sir Harry Secombe. He told a luncheon of that Society how one could always tell a genuine Irishman.

According to Sir Harry Secombe, an Irishman, anxious about his accent, took elocution lessons for many months. The object was so that he could talk like an Englishman. The aim was to get the lilt out and the plum in to his mouth. Months later, when he had built up sufficient confidence and felt that he had achieved his objective, he went over to England. He went into a shop and asked in his poshest accent 'Can I have a volume of Shakespeare's Collected Works?'

Quick as a flash, the shopkeeper said 'You're Irish, aren't you?'. Puzzled, the Irishman asked 'How did you know?'. 'This is a fish and chip shop', said the shopkeeper.

I pass that test on to our guest, in case it should ever help him to determine the genuine Irish article from a fraud.

A clue to Sir Peter Lawler's career can be found in the brief and modest entry in Who's Who. This records that between 1952 and 1953 he was an officer of the British Cabinet Office in London. He was then at the impressionable age of 31. He saw the great man of that time : Atlee and Bevan, Churchill and Eden. There he ushered in the new Elizabethan age. He saw the Coronation. And in the hallowed offices of Whitehall, he learned a few tricks. In fact he became the subject of a celebrated television series. I am not referring to his cameo part in 'The Dismissal'. I refer to the whole series 'Yes, Minister! .

Sir Peter Lawler brought back to this country from Whitehall all the techniques of Westminster. And it has taken six Governments, 12 Attorneys-General, six major Acts of Parliament and countless cases in the courts, in a fruitless attempt to roll back the dominance of the bureaucracy which this most ingenious of civil servants learned from the experts during his period in London.

In Australia, Sir Peter has virtually always been at the centre of power. Between 1949 and 1968 he was an officer of the Prime Minister's Department in Canberra. Between 1968 and 1971 he was Deputy Secretary of the Cabinet Office. Between 1972 and 1973 he was Deputy Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. From 1973 to 1975 he was Head of the Department of the Special Minister of State : a curious anachronism lately revived. In 1975 he was appointed Secretary of the Department of Administrative Services : a position he held until March 1983 when his appointment to our Foreign Service was announced.

Sir Peter Lawler has, for many years, been a Member of the Council of the Academy. He has been a benefactor of the Academy, showering on it funds, Government support, premises and promises.

#### THE PRIVATE PUBLIC SERVANT

Indifferent to my constant warnings to the nation about privacy protection, I pried into the life of this most private of public servants. I want to offer you a pot pourri of comments given to me during the last week by residents of Canberra : those selfless, gentle, kindly, generous-spirited folk who inhabit the capital city of our nation.

My informants, whose names I must not mention, are amongst the most venerable officers of the Commonwealth. By definition they are therefore completely honest. Listen to what the normally austere, tongue-tied colleagues of Sir Peter Lawler say of him : none of them given to leaks and normally most reticent in their comments on a fellow public servant.

- \* A good man for 'the eye of the storm', said one colleague : and my goodness he has had plenty of opportunity to exercise that talent.
- \* 'One of the last great mandarins' said another senior officer : admitted fresh from the official luncheon to the Chinese Premier.
- \* 'A man with unrivalled contacts throughout the service : the LBJ of the telephone of Canberra', said another.
- \* 'A member of the most exclusive club in the nation, the First Division Officers', said still another.
- \* 'He is given to jokes — but mainly about other people' said one commentator.
- \* 'He is able to inspire loyalty by his attention to his staff : he even knew the names of his filing clerks', said another.
- \* He is known as the 'white knight' of Canberra. Not only is this because of his shock of white hair. It is because of his dedication to justice, law enforcement, due process, probity in Government and the Rule of Law.
- \* Another suggested that he has always avoided those nasty clashes with Ministers. Even with Prima Donna Ministers. Even with one who, by his own description, was no Prima Donna but a Prima Donna assoluta.

Sir Peter's hobby is his farm. Endearingly enough, he has run this (as I am informed) with total inefficiency. It is expected to make a grand profit immediately he departs this country. He has given as his recreation, his membership of the Canberra Wine and Food Club. I ask you to note the order of the attentions of that club : wine before food. He is also a member of the Canberra 'Bar Flies'.

We celebrate tonight the distinguished service to the nation of a powerful but thoughtful administrator; a loyal officer to many Governments and numberless Ministers, a respected colleague of officers of the Commonwealth in all branches of Government and a good friend of this Academy.

#### GOOD GRAY HEAD

Sir Peter has informed us about the proposed establishment of the Institute of Forensic Sciences. This Academy, which has a distinguished history of 18 years' service, and collects together some of the most prominent people in Australia knowledgeable

about forensic sciences, will take into account the establishment of the Government Institute. We will have to seek out an appropriate relationship with that Institute. To this objective the Council will lend its attention.

Typically and you may think suitably enough, Sir Peter and Lady Lawler live in Tennyson Crescent, Forrest, in the Capital Territory. Now, Alfred Lord Tennyson is a trifle out of vogue in some quarters. But not in this Academy. As usual, he had a few words for this occasion. As we celebrate a colleague, a fine officer of the Commonwealth who goes across the waters to reach the apogee of his career, listen to what the old Laureate said of another. See if it is not apt of this fine man:

Rich in saving common sense  
And as the greatest only are  
In his simplicity sublime  
A good grey head, which all men knew.  
O iron nerve to true occasion true!

On behalf of the Academy, I offer thanks to a good grey head, to the white knight of Canberra : Sir Peter Lawler.