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THE FUTURE OF THE PUBLIC FORUM

From the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 until the end of 1961 there was no place in Brisbane where citizens could gather for free discussion. No political party made any attempt to restore the Domain – the pre-war open air forum – for the use of the public. The expression ‘freedom of speech’ gradually degenerated into a meaningless political platitude.

Only politicians could have failed to see the truly symbolic nature of their action in choosing the Domain as the site of the new city morgue.

In January 1962 Mr. Clem JONES, Lord Mayor of Brisbane, made Centenary Place available as a public forum for the citizens of Brisbane. This was the first action by any politician of any party in almost a quarter of a century to give some practical meaning to the phrase which rolls so readily off the tongues of all the politicians – “freedom of speech.”

This restoration of the rights of the people strangely enough aroused the opposition of the C.M.O. aldermen in the Council. Later in the same year, in July and August 1962, members of the C.M.O. opposition stated that the forum should be removed from Centenary Place. An alternative site at Albert Park was suggested. This criticism by the gentlemen of the C.M.O. would have had greater virtue had they themselves, when in power, ever taken any practical steps towards providing a public forum.

Those who are familiar with the forum will be aware just how much the action contemplated by the C.M.O. would inconvenience Brisbane citizens and the extent to which it would serve to ‘kill off’ the concept of open-air speaking in this city. The ‘Courier Mail’ stated that removal of the Forum was C.M.O. policy.

In order to be informed on the present policies on Centenary Place, and in fairness to those concerned, I wrote on 8/7/1963 to both Mr. Jones and the C.M.O. candidate for the Lord Mayoralty. Each was advised that I had written to the other. Both were aware that their replies would become public property. They both were asked:

“If elected:

1. Will you ensure that a Public Forum is maintained in this city?
2. Do you intend to continue the Public Forum in its present central location at Centenary Place?
3. Do you intend to remove the Public Forum to some other less central area in the city or near suburbs?
4. Do you intend to close the Public Forum?
5. Do you consider that Brisbane is less entitled to a central public forum than, say, such ancient cities as Rome and Athens, or such modern Australian cities as Melbourne and Sydney?

I think you will agree that the questions are quite specific..”

To these questions, Mr. Jones replied as follows by letter dated 17/7/1963:

“I am in receipt of your letter of the 8th July, and desire to advise that the Australian Labor Party has no intention of interfering in any way with the Public Forum which it established in Centenary Place.

I think you may recall that the establishment of the Public Forum followed an undertaking I gave in answer to a question proposed to me at my policy speech in the City Hall in 1961. In my opinion there should be a Public Forum in every City, and so far as I am concerned, Centenary Place is the best location for it in our City, since it is convenient for all and I see absolutely no reason why it should not remain there permanently.

I trust that this answers all your questions.”

From this reply – viewed against the questions asked – one thing is clear. Mr. Jones has one outstanding qualification for Lord Mayor. He understands English.

To the same questions the C.M.O. candidate replied on 29/7/1963:

“You have my assurance that when I am Lord Mayor of Brisbane I will ensure that facilities are provided for Sunday afternoon speaking.

I have stated this publicly – see Telegraph 26/7/1963.”

Should you reach the conclusion that this C.M.O. reply actually evades answering questions (2) and (3) above – questions which were quite specific – it is suggested that you write to the Leader, C.M.O., City Hall, Brisbane, and ask for a specific statement of C.M.O. policy on these two particular questions.

Authorised: E. P. Wixted, - - - - - , - - - - - , Brisbane, Q. Aust.

My interest in the rights of the individual has a religious, not a political basis.

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