

The Honourable Sir Percy Spender

The Honourable Sir Percy Spender, President (1964-67) and Justice (1958-67), International Court of Justice, The Hague; Australian Ambassador to the USA, 1951-58; and Minister for External Affairs and Territories, 1949-51, was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws at the conferring of degrees ceremony at 9.30am on 28 April 1973.

Citation

Presented by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Bruce R Williams:

Of the 1914 matriculation class at Fort Street, all but two from a class of over forty gained entrance to The University of Sydney. One of the two who failed made a fortune in business; the other was Percy Claude Spender.

Spender's ambition was to play Rugby for Australia. His Headmaster, Kilgour, had other ideas and thought him specially fitted for the law. With Kilgour's help and encouragement he matriculated the following year as an outside student, topped the State Public Service Examination, and was appointed to a Petty Sessions Office.

He completed an Arts degree as an evening student in three years, gaining a Distinction in Economics II and III and a special prize for efficiency in Roman and Constitutional Law.

After a short spell in the Army, he enrolled in Law and graduated in the shortest permissible time, with First Class Honours and the University Medal - a very notable achievement for a part-time student. He was called to the Bar in 1923, achieved almost immediate success, and took silk in 1935.

At about this time he was official spokesman for a small group of graduates who were very critical of the administration, teaching methods and facilities offered by The University of Sydney. He engaged in public debate with the Deputy Chancellor, Mr Justice Halse Rogers, and played an important part in establishing the Standing Committee of Convocation. He was elected to the University Senate by Convocation and was a Fellow from 1939-1944.

This contest with the University establishment of the day had important consequences. His friends assured him that he had "the gift of the gab" and suggested that he should "give politics a go". Although by then he was in the enviable position of being very well paid for what he thought he liked doing best, namely practising the arts of advocacy, he did decide to enter politics. He was convinced of the need for a radical change in defence policy, and he advocated the creation of an Australian defence and foreign policy. Am I to take it, he asked at about the time of Munich, that my fate is to be in the hands of whoever happens to be the Prime Minister of England? In 1937 he challenged and defeated the Minister of Defence in Warringah.

When Menzies, who was responsible for his admission to the United Australia Party, became Prime Minister, Spender was appointed in rapid succession Assistant Treasurer, then Acting Treasurer, and Treasurer. He was the only Minister who had a consistent and clear-sighted view of what the problems of a war economy were to be. He was ahead of his Party and of the community, who wanted the problems of war economy to go away. Spender knew that they would not.

He was then made Minister for the Army and served there with devotion and distinction until the fall of the Menzies Government. He remained on the Advisory War Council, and for following what to him was a clear path of duty this man of strong will and strong principle was expelled from the United Australia Party.

He remained in Parliament as an Independent until after the war when he joined Mr Menzies' new Liberal Party. In the post-war Menzies Government he became Minister for External Affairs and External Territories. His *Exercises in Diplomacy* tells the story of his roll: in the ANZUS Treaty and in the so-called Colombo Plan. He was an early advocate, perhaps the earliest advocate, of the need for Australia to accept the reality of its geographical position and of the change in Britain's position as a world power. The Colombo Plan which emphasized the importance of economic development in poor countries was neither a plan nor conceived in Colombo. It was Spender's idea and known as the Spender Resolution until misnamed at the final conference in London.

He retired from politics in 1957 for reasons of ill health, as we now know from his *Politics and a Man* and Menzies' *Measure of the Years*. He started a new career as Australian Ambassador to the United States of America. After seven full and creative years in Washington, he returned to the law and for nine years was a Judge of the International Court at The Hague. For the last three years he was President and served with distinction in that great office. What a pity Kilgour did not live to see it.

Great visions are not always realised, said Spender at an international conference, but we can steadfastly try to make them come true. Spender had his visions and he was steadfast in his efforts to give them reality.

From The University of Sydney News, 13 June 1973