

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. R.G.
MENZIES IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ON THURSDAY
24TH MARCH, 1960

Mr. Speaker, the presentation of this bill marks an historic occasion for the national capital, and, therefore, for the nation. The Canberra University College was established by ordinance in December, 1929. The Australian National University was established under the Australian National University Act 1946-47, in which provision was made in two sections, not directly for the incorporation of the Canberra University College, but giving power under university statute to incorporate the Canberra University College. Therefore, although the Canberra University College was not chosen to be the body from which the National University would spring the possibility was obviously contemplated at that time that when the Australian National University came into full operation, and when the college became sufficiently advanced in its own development, the two bodies might become associated in one.

The Australian National University legislation was in the charge of the Minister for Post-war Reconstruction, Mr. Dedman, and I take this opportunity to say to the House that his name will always be honorably associated with that achievement. He said upon the introduction of the bill that the Government had had the help and advice of the council of the college. He referred to the fact that the college had always looked forward to the creation of a university and that it had held very steadfastly to its ideas for many years. Referring to his own bill to create the Australian National University, he said -

It will not be long now before they see their ideas translated into action

Well, perhaps it has been a little longer than might have been expected, but in the meantime there has been quite remarkable growth in both bodies.

I have the feeling that at that time the notion of eventual association was clearly in the minds of people on what I will call both sides, but in more recent years the National University, or its representatives, and the college, or its representatives, developed some opposition to association feeling that it might be an error to bring them together. But a decision had to be made. The matter was quite urgent. During the whole of the time that the college has existed, the University of Melbourne has been responsible for the granting of degrees and for the general oversight of the work of the college in the relevant faculties. The Council of the University of Melbourne some little time ago indicated that it did not feel that it was practical to continue that association for very much longer. In point of fact, the original terminal date of the association was the end of 1959.

I myself had a number of discussions with representatives of both the university and the college because this is a matter which has deeply interested me and, in any event, my department embraces the activities of the Australian National University. Finally, when the Government was about to come to a decision I indicated that it would be desirable if the University of Melbourne could grant an extension of one year, thereby giving us a new and final deadline - the end of 1960. My request was considered by the Council of the University of Melbourne and the council acceded to it. That means that the new organisation in Canberra must be ready to operate by the end of this calendar year so that the new academic year 1961 will be conducted within the scope and on the terms of the proposed act.

I should say, on behalf of the Government and of all those concerned, that there is a very profound appreciation of the work that has been accepted by the University of Melbourne. The Canberra University College and the Australian National

University will always be profoundly indebted to it. I acknowledge that debt with great pleasure.

When the ultimate decision was taken that there should be association and not a development of the college into a separate entity, thereby providing two universities in Canberra, I asked the representatives of the college and of the university to get together and to work out the broad outline and, as far as possible, the details of an association which, in their view, would work satisfactorily. I am very happy to say that from the time when they were asked to do that, every attitude of hostility to the change seemed to me to disappear. They sat down together; they worked together; they rose to the highest standards of their occupation, and in the result they were able to produce to me the terms of their agreement, and two or three points of disagreement, some weeks before the date that I had asked them to observe.

Before I go on to describe the scheme, I think that I should say that we thought it desirable to reinforce our minds by reference to the chairman of the famous Murray committee, by reference to the committee's report, and by reference to the newly constituted Universities Commission under the chairmanship of Sir Leslie Martin. From those sources we obtained marked confirmation of the idea that there should be an association and that there should not be a continued separation of the university and the college.

Perhaps I should indicate quite briefly the principal reasons for our conclusion that the two bodies ought to be associated; The first is that if the Canberra University College were to become a university of itself, as, say, the Canberra University, it would become and remain a second-rate university unless it were able to do all those things which a university of standing normally expects to do. In other words, it would not be able to confine itself to first degrees or even to the degree of master. It would have to look forward to research work, post-graduate work, and the further it proceeded into that field, which is a legitimate university field, the more would its work tend to overlap some of the work being done in the present Australian National University. Duplication of that kind is not to be readily contemplated in a comparatively small city.

In the second place, we thought it would be very difficult to justify the existence of two separate universities in Canberra, considering its population, at a time when the pressure for second and third universities in great centres of population is mounting every day. There is a tremendous amount of university development going on in Australia now, and I can assure honorable members that the pressure for it is beyond all belief. It might interest honorable members if I told them that the investigations of the Universities Commission so far have shown that even the estimate made by the Murray Committee of the future undergraduate population in Australia - an estimate which the committee thought was liberal, and which I am bound to say I too thought was liberal - has been quite falsified already. The numbers coming forward are greater than anybody three years ago imagined would be the case.

In point of fact, it is a great thing from the point of view of Australia to be able to say that by the end of another eight or nine years, on the present estimate of increased population and increased demand for university training, there will be in Australia, if we can meet the demand, more undergraduates per 1,000 of population than in the United States, Canada, Great Britain or New Zealand. I am sure that honorable members will agree that that is all to the good. It means, however, that there is a tremendous demand in the big centres, and in other centres perhaps less big but still very important. In those circumstances the existence of two separate universities in Canberra would be very hard to defend.

In the third place, Sir, we felt that there would be a great advantage in associating a body in which most of the students are undergraduates with a body in which all the students, readers and professors are graduates of a high order. This will give to the undergraduates the benefit of an association, even if only occasionally, with eminent specialists in their branches of knowledge or study. To take a simple example, how many times have we heard a great physicist say proudly, "I worked under Rutherford"? I am perfectly certain that this association will have a splendid effect both ways. The presence of an undergraduate body under the broad cover of the one institution will have a stimulating effect on those who are engaging in research, and the impact on the undergraduates of men of distinction and of great intellect is bound to be strong and memorable.

Those were reasons which commended themselves to us, but I thought it desirable to go back to Sir Keith Murray himself and to the Universities Commission. Let me remind the House of what the Murray Committee said in its famous report. I shall quote this one passage -

It should be possible, in our view, to devise a form of constitution giving to the College all the independence in operation which both the National University and the College desire, and yet making it possible for students at the College to receive degrees of the National University and for common services to be organized and maintained without unnecessary duplication.

That was not a definite statement, but, so to speak, it gave a broad hint of the way in which the mind of the committee was running. When I saw Sir Keith Murray in England last year, I put to him the problem that I had been looking at. I indicated how my mind was running and I invited him to challenge what I had in mind, if he thought proper. So far from challenging it, he said that he felt that the case for integration of these bodies was complete. I then referred the matter to the Australian Universities Commission to get its independent and expert opinion. The commission wrote to me setting out its unanimous view. It said -

The Commission has considered this problem, with a knowledge of the facts and views recently put before Cabinet, and has unanimously concluded that some form of association is both desirable and practicable. Further, Commissioners believe that if the concept of association is accepted it can be more easily achieved now than later. . . . Before reaching its decision to recommend in favour of association, the Commission gave some thought to the means by which this could be achieved. It seems to the Commission essential that there should be one institution, to be called the Australian National University, and that it should have one Council, with a Vice Chancellor as its chief executive officer.

Then, Sir, we made our decision. We put the matter to the two bodies and, as I have said, they responded with remarkable promptitude and with extreme goodwill. They worked out a plan of association, and we have accepted it. They had one point of difference, to which I shall refer, which was of some materiality, and there were other quite minor points of difference, but on the whole the two bodies agreed on a structure.

It may be thought to be a little top-heavy. It may be thought, for example, that the council is a little too large. It may well be that that is so, but I ask honorable members, in considering the balancing of various interests in the administrative structure, to bear in mind that it has not been easy to get the Canberra University College to give up its vision of a separate existence as a separate university, or, for that matter, to get the Australian National University to accept a position

in which its degrees could be given as first degrees or as Master's degrees, its degrees being given at present only in the higher reaches of scholarship and science.

Under these circumstances, I did not feel disposed - nor would the House, I am sure - to haggle about some details on which the two bodies had agreed, merely because I thought that, to use a modern phrase, they could have been more stream-lined. On the whole, I think it is a good scheme. I am sure that it will work. It will work all the better at the beginning if there is an atmosphere of goodwill.

There was one point of difference to which I said I would refer. It relates to the awarding of the degree of doctor in the Australian National University - the degree of Doctor of Philosophy or Doctor of Science. The present National University attaches supreme importance to the principle that the standards on which those degrees are awarded should be of the highest, and that those standards should be maintained so that world recognition and prestige will attach to the degrees. That of course, is completely right. The National University believed, therefore, that there ought to be a control from its side of the university over the standards for doctoral degrees. The Canberra University College representatives, on the other hand, felt that that might suggest that doctorates in faculties not at present embraced by the National University would be beyond their power, and that this would inhibit the recruitment of men of the first quality to their teaching staff. The answer that we make - and I am happy to say that it is acceptable to both sides - is that, under the statute, for ten years the degree of doctor shall be based on standards laid down by the modern replacement of the present Australian National University, that is, the Institute of Advanced Studies, and that after ten years the whole matter shall be dealt with - no doubt by university statute - by the council, which, by that time, will have settled down and will have found its feet. By that time the members of the council will have achieved a common understanding of what is best for the institution as a whole. I am happy to say that that ten-year period is acceptable to both of the interests, if I may so describe them.

I should just like to say that although there is this association, it is not to be understood that undergraduates going to this university and going for their first or second degree will be, in some way, inhibited from proceeding to higher degrees. It may very well be that in the undergraduate body - I will describe it more precisely in a moment - there will be faculties which are not in the present Australian National University and that in those faculties provision will be made for research and further teaching and, of course, for higher degrees. I do not want it to be thought for one moment that this new body is to be divided into the sheep and the goats - the sheep being those who browse on the higher pastures of research and the goats being those who, as some of us have had the experience of doing, struggle through and take a first degree. That will not be the position at all.

Mr. Whitlam - Like the inner and outer Cabinets.

MR. MENZIES: Yes, like the inner and outer Cabinets - except there are no goats in either of those pastures! I advise the honorable member not to tempt me on this question.

One other matter that was put up at the time when we were looking at whatever differences there might be was the question whether some of the members to be appointed to the council by the Governor-General in Council should be appointed after consultation with certain specified bodies such as the Academy of Science, the Humanities Council and so on.

Mr. Whitlam - Including the Social Sciences Research Council.

MR. MENZIES - Yes, all of them are in the same premises - that building with which we are now familiar. I indicated that I did not think very highly of those provisions which find their way occasionally into statutes under which, when a nomination is to be made to a body of this kind by the Governor-General in Council, he is placed by statute under some restriction or some obligation to other bodies. For myself, I am bound to say that so long as I have anything to do with this matter it will be a great pleasure to consult such bodies because they can contribute a great deal in this field. I have no doubt that that would become the regular practice, but I did not think it was desirable to put it as an inhibiting element in statute. I have had representations from one or two other bodies claiming that they ought to be allowed to nominate or to be consulted, and to them I made the same answer.

I shall summarize pretty briefly, what the scheme is. The government of the university is to be vested in a council of 38 persons. As I said before, this is larger than we first expected. It had been hoped to make it about 30. But still on examination, if honorable members look at the constitution of the council in the bill, they will see that there has been a genuine attempt to give a balanced administrative authority.

I may say also that, although this is not in the act itself, as honorable members know there is already a provision for a convocation with certain functions. Although it is not necessary for us to legislate in this measure about that matter I did venture to say to them that I hoped that the new council would consider the possibility of adding to the convocation, as members of it, members of the Federal Parliament who happened to be university graduates. I think there is a bit of merit in that. It would give more honorable members than could hope to have it at present, fairly close contact with what goes on. Whether that suggestion will be agreeable or not I do not know, but it is not a statutory provision and it does not arise in this bill.

Apart from these matters, Sir, what has been done, in this broad, is to take the present research sections and constitute them - that zone inside the university - as an Institute of Advanced Studies and the rest of it as a School of General Studies. This is merely to distinguish between what has gone on in one and what has gone on in the other.

By having these two separate bodies each with its own professorial boards but under the council and the general administration of the vice-chancellor and with contact at all levels to produce co-operation, it is felt by both of the parties to this matter, and certainly by the Government and myself, that we will develop a harmonious institution without, in any way, threatening what is vital in this matter - the high standard of those research degrees which it has been the main object, or one of the main objects, of the Australian National University, to produce. That is really its second object, the first being, of course, to conduct research and to add to the general store of knowledge.

As for the bill itself, it is not unduly long, and it is, in large measure, almost entirely - I would hope entirely - self-explanatory. But what I have said will perhaps assist honorable members when they read the bill. When they do I am sure that they will agree very warmly that this is not to be regarded merely as a marriage of convenience or a marriage under threat. It is to be regarded as fulfilling what was the ultimate ambition regarding this university - to make it an all-embracing university, one that will give the highest possible advantages in instruction and in reading to those who come as undergraduates and at the same time make an honorable name in the world of learning and so bring great credit to this country.