

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. R.G.  
MENZIES, AT KING'S SCHOOL, SYDNEY, ON WEDNESDAY  
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This kind of speech is much the hardest kind of speech to make. Do you realise that, all of you who suffer from speeches and don't make them? (Laughter) It's much the hardest of the lot.

When I arrived I looked around. I had no idea how many political characters I knew, masquerading today as Old Boys of the King's School. This in itself is a most embarrassing affair. Some of them, no doubt, have every right to be here. (Laughter)

Then the place is full of parents who regard a Speech Day as their annual penance and celebrate their penance for the next three days as Christmas virtue.

Then there are the poor unhappy boys of the School who have to sit around, as I used to in my time, and listen to some ponderous old politician make a boring speech, saying to themselves, as some of them are already, "I wish he'd cut it down and make it short". (Laughter)

But there are just one or two things that I really ought to say by way of self-excuse at the beginning.

The Headmaster, I thought, went to some pains to demonstrate that John Pascoe Fawkner - wasn't it John Pascoe? Batman? Oh, well, both good Melbourne fellows (Laughter) But when he pointed out that Batman started here, and I gathered, from what he said, steadily went down in life (Laughter) by going to Tasmania, and then establishing Victoria, he made me feel that I was really speaking as a representative of a quite parvenu city. (Laughter)

But I retort to him that I am not here speaking for the parvenu city, but I am here as Prime Minister of Parramatta. (Laughter, applause)

Then when I was looking through the book of the words - because you boys ought to realise that before somebody like myself is asked to come to make a speech, the school authorities give him the book of the words, containing all sorts of strange information about the school - I realised, with that eagle eye that characterises a politician that the Headmaster and I became Head masters ourselves in the same year. He became Headmaster of King's; and I became Headmaster of Australia - in the same year, in 1939.

But what gives him that almost unconscious air of authority as he speaks to us today derives from the fact that he's never been found out, and his term of service has been continuous. (Laughter)

Sir, I just want to take off one thing that you have said which has been very much in my own mind.

It isn't easy for a school that has history, for a school that has Old boys who think back to the Old School, and the old school buildings, to make a departure and to move to some other area. You mentioned Scotch College in Melbourne, cramped in to about half a city block with a cricket ground two miles away. It was an adventure when it was finally decided to move it out into a big expanding site.

I remember at another school in Melbourne going along to lay a foundation stone, which I do occasionally, but not too

frequently. And I said, because I knew this school very well, "I have never understood why you have a cricket ground and a half here, in this place. Did you ever own more land?". The answer was, "Oh, yes! We owned all the land for about two blocks. But some prudent Council at some stage where there was a little difficulty, said that we might as well "cash in" on the extra land". The result was that they cramped, and almost crippled, the School that they were supposed to govern.

There are plenty of examples of this, and I think that one of the reasons for this kind of thing was that although our forefathers were great men, and laid profound foundations in Australia, there was a disposition - perhaps it's not entirely gone yet - to have wide geographical horizons in Australia, but somewhat narrow mental ones. This is something that we must beware of.

If somebody today in a city like Canberra, for example, says, "Well, obviously this is going to be a University city, we must have plenty of space for buildings of the future" somebody is bound to say that this is extravagant.

I don't believe that any provision of land for a great school or a great university was ever extravagant.

Here I must say that I feel, as you do, tremendously excited to think that this most ancient of public schools in Australia should have taken this decision to move out where it will have elbow room, where it will have everything in the long run that goes with a great school, not forgetting beauty and setting and illimitable prospects for the future. This, I think, is a notable event, though I'm perfectly certain that if I were an old King's School man I would have felt a little pang about the prospect; but I am sure that this has been a great thing.

It is a very interesting matter to remember that just as the war was ending and taxation was very high - much higher than it is now - but just at the end of the war when taxation was, really, still on the war time level, I used to become troubled about the future of what we called the Great Public Schools, the great Church Schools, here and in my own State, and elsewhere, because I believe in them most passionately.

I believe that they contribute something which is the very reverse of snobbery - which some of their critics like us to believe - they contribute a superb spirit of humility, of understanding, of some of the relations between God and man. These great Church schools have a part to play in Australia that nothing else can play.

And I thought, "Well, it's not going to be easy for people to send their sons to their own old schools, or to send the son to one of these foundations, because of the high level of taxation". Of course taxation has never gone back to anything remotely resembling pre-war conditions. Yet the fact is that in these last 10 or 15 years we have seen the greatest era of development in schools of this kind that Australia ever saw.

This proves what? I think that it proves that more and more we have people in Australia who see the value of this, and who are determined that their children are going to secure some benefit from it.

I think it is not for nothing that this property owns a Scots name. This argues a decent ambition on the part of the Church of England which I am happy to record. (Laughter) Here is a Scots name, even though I learned, with regret, that the Captain of the School was called Dalziel, when obviously he was "De-ell". (Laughter)

May I say something about the Scots? You will permit me a little bigotry, won't you, on this matter? But the Scots always had a great notion of education. They had a great notion that each generation in a family, however humble, should have some opportunity that the previous generation didn't have. So that the son of the ploughman went to a secondary school and got a little better educated, and learned a little bit of Latin - in those good days when people had to learn Latin - and the grandson went to Edinburgh and took a degree.

This was a passionate belief in education. And I'm as proud as Lucifer to think that in this post-war period which could have been, in some ways has been, materialist, we have seen this passion for education grow in Australia in the most remarkable fashion. What we are doing today is to celebrate one manifestation of it.

Now I wonder if, with your kind permission I might address a few brief words to my fellow students. The rest of you are under no obligation to listen to this; though I regret that, because if this were a political meeting 90% of you wouldn't be here. (Laughter)

The Headmaster has said some good and memorable things to all of us about courage, the great virtue. Courage which is not only the courage of the hand, but the courage of the heart and the courage of the mind. It is very easy to agree with everybody else, it is very easy to have your thinking done at second hand so that you wait until somebody writes what his thoughts may be and then you say, "There you are, those are my thoughts".

Thinking is frightfully hard work. But it is the most rewarding work in the world. Thinking with all the hard work that goes with it, preceding it, preceding the point of judgment, to narrow the facts, to be prepared to look them in the eye, not to be led away by some cheap argument on the side, but to hammer it out for yourself. This is one of the great qualities of man. I strongly recommend it to myself as well as to my fellow students.

My old school in Melbourne had a motto, "Dare to be wise" and when I was a boy I thought, "What an odd proverb that is". I've come to know how true it is. Because to be wise, that is to say to be able to form a judgment, and stand to it, requires courage. It requires daring - though many people perhaps don't always appreciate it.

The second thing I want to say to you is this. We are very clever nowadays - it's a very clever generation. People fire things off into the air, and one of them is credibly reported to have hit the moon - though what the moon ever did to deserve this, I've never been able, quite, to discover. But it's a very clever period of life, and we must be a little careful that we don't become overwhelmed by our own cleverness. Because wisdom is more than cleverness.

One of the troubles about this clever period of life is that we have a tendency, all of us, to think that we know so much better than anybody else, and we are the cleverest generation ever to live in Australia - though I don't think we are, but we occasionally think we are - that we fall into error, we become a little brash, we brush aside other people's views. We fall into bad manners, to put it simply.

I'm not at all sure that the standard of manners, of courtesy, has improved so much in the last twenty years as the standard of objective knowledge.

Therefore, I want to say that no man was ever an inferior man because he had good manners, because he had the courtesy which recognises that there are other people in the world and that those other people may have other views.

That doesn't mean that you are not to fight hard to convince them. That doesn't mean that you are to avoid conflict about ideas. You can't avoid conflict unless you run away. Therefore right through your lives you may be engaged in the clash of ideas, in the clash of personalities. But above all things, let us have that degree of tolerance which is embodied in the idea of courtesy and good manners. It will be a very much happier world if we can all come up to that.

In the third place I would just like to say this. I said it somewhere else the other day but Dean Pitt has given me express permission to repeat it.

Good speech, clear speech, speech which pays a just attention to the meaning of words is tremendously important. There are men here this afternoon - I've seen a few of them - who run, or have run vast concerns in Australia. They know perfectly well that if they didn't have the faculty of conveying their ideas justly, and clearly, to those who work under them, they could not be effective in their positions.

In the modern period of life some of the very greatest Generals and Commanders have become great Generals and Commanders, not only because they had a certain genius for the military art, but because they were advocates, they could explain ideas and do them clearly with economy and with justice.

Therefore, nothing annoys me more than to hear people who ought to know better - I'm now still talking to the boys - say, "Well, you know what I mean, you know what I mean", when I really don't know what they mean.

In quarters not frightfully far removed from me I have had occasionally to say, "I'm sorry I've not had the advantage of studying Hottentot, would you mind speaking ordinary English".

Now, Sir, I think the Girls' Schools give us an example on this matter, because I do think, so far as I have been able to see, that they pay some attention to it.

What I want to say to the boys is this. This is a wonderful language of ours. There is no language in the world that has such flexibility, that has such great literary stores in it, the greatest language of poetry that man has ever known, the great language of prose. It may lack some of the kick of French prose, but it is a marvellous language. It has contained some of the greatest writing, and some of the greatest speech in history.

Let us respect this language. Don't let us have it broken down by all sorts of cheap importations - there are bound to be one or two. Let us respect this language. Because, I tell you that as you go through life, whether you are a lawyer, or a chemist, or a doctor, or a soldier, or whatever it may be, some element of your success, some aspect of your capacity to give expression to what you know, will depend upon your respect for the English language and your quiet command over it. Not long words - long words are pretty silly: they are used as a rule only by people who don't understand them.

Aim at simple, clear speech, and if you aim at that, and achieve it, you will find that this will make a very great difference right through your lives.

Now, Sir, it's quite clear, as is already obvious, that I am talking too long and I am therefore going to bring this lamentable lucubration - long words boys (Laughter) - to an end. But I do want to say that I was delighted to be given the opportunity of coming here. I know what a great event this is in the history of this famous school, and it is a very great honour to have been allowed to share it. (Applause)

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