

Speech given by the Rt. Hon. R.G. Menzies at the Wool
Industries' Research Association on 21/22 March, 1961

"Mr. Chairman, my Lord Mayor, my Lord, ladies and gentlemen, I have now successfully performed the first part of my duty. You don't know how lucky you are, because sometimes when you invite a politically-inclined fellow like me to come to open something and to unveil a tablet, he's liable to forget to unveil the tablet. Which, of course, means that what he was doing remains veiled in decent obscurity. So I've developed rather a prudent habit nowadays of unveiling it first, so that, at any rate, you will all know what it's about and whatever I may say.

"Now you have been told I've already dealt with two audiences today - I rather suspect that some of you were in the earlier ones - this is a form of torture which exists only in English-speaking countries. But at any rate, this afternoon I'm back on the home ground; because it can't be too difficult to speak about wool if you are an Australian, or even if you're a politician. So you've been properly reminded that this is the greatest of Australian industries. When the price of wool goes up, everybody smiles, the balance of payments problem diminishes in intensity, treasurers become genial, you can get a little more money for the universities, and if you have an election, you win!

"If the price of wool goes down, faces become long, Governments have to do unpopular things, and you avoid having an election - for as long as you possibly can! So that, from my point of view, in that horrible sense, wool is tremendously important. But, of course, to the whole national economy of Australia, it means so much. And to the economy of your country, the country of most of you, it means so much. And I suppose one of the troubles that we have all been suffering from is this very fluctuation in the cost of wool, which may, in some ways, be related to a fluctuating demand for wool. And the makers of artificial fibres have an advantage, because the price of their raw material doesn't fluctuate within the same violent fashion and they can therefore attend to their costing a great deal more simply. We are familiar with these problems; and of course we are also familiar with some of the oddities that bemuse political people and administrators. For a long time Australian wool - which, after all, is a very different proposition from home-grown United States' wool, as everybody knows - has been met at the Customs' barrier in the United States by a high duty. Why? Nominally to protect the native woolgrower. And if I may say so, quite bluntly, to relieve him of the necessity of becoming a little more up-to-date, as a woolgrower and as a wool-marketer. But in reality, of course, the effect of the duty is to give a comfortable protection to the makers of artificial fibres.

"And these are matters that have to be attended to steadily so far as we can on the political level by persuasion and otherwise. But in reality what we have all begun to see more and more in modern times is this - that wool must not simply remain something that we proudly refer to as the greatest of all fibres, but that it should meet the challenge of other things by the most persistent research into its quality, into its use, into its treatment, so that when it does meet competition, it will continue year by year to meet it at an advantage, and not at a disadvantage.

"You know, there wasn't much said about research when I was a boy, it was regarded as some mysterious (I can always be relied upon to do that) /knocked over microphone/, some mysterious and rather malodorous operation conducted in universities. It's only in my own time that the world of industry, the world of business, has become aware of research, of the pressing need for it, of the fact that without it no great industry will develop.

I remember during the war, just about the time I was given the livery of the Clothworkers' Company, going over a great and world-famous motor engine establishment - it needs no advertisement from me - and into their research establishment, with hundreds of people employed, a vast series of factories and workshops, all engaged on research - not engaged in the production of a single thing for sale at the time - that's what we were looking at as a possible development for 1944. So that we think: 'If it comes out might be coming right in 1948'. You know, this kind of thing. And the result of this enormous vision and concentration on research is today, it stands pre-eminent in the world. It is the first with the latest and the best - all the result of spending, what I'm sure some people thought, a waste of money, so many years ago.

"Well, gradually we are beginning to approach these things in the right way. And it is comforting to me to know that in the case of wool there is this approach at, I think, all stages in the industry. You go down to a sheep station in the Western District of Victoria and you stay for a weekend with a man and whose name is a famous name (Oh, dear) /knocked over microphone/ (Leave it out - these modern inventions). You do down to one of these places, the present owner has a name that has, for a hundred years, been connected with that property - it might be supposed that he has inherited the fruits of the earth, and that he can have a good time and not worry too much. Time after time the first thing he wants to tell you about is how much he has increased the yield, how many pounds he has put into the fleece, what he has been doing in the way of breeding and development, what he has been doing in pasture improvement. All these things go on at that level, and have, of course, enormously increased production of the country.

"The great thing (you refer, Sir, to C.S.I.R.O.) perhaps one of the great dramatic things is, of course as you know, was the treatment of our friend the rabbit with myxomatosis. After this brutal business some people said, there were others who complained that you could no longer prudently buy a rabbit for a rabbit pie - and admittedly that was a defamation - but the estimates that have been made as to what myxomatosis with its successful war on the rabbit it has meant to the Australian wool industry, are of course as you know, fabulous.

"I believe that but for that, but for the attack on the rabbits, but for this scientific approach to what had become a great national economic problem, we wouldn't have anything like the number of sheep we have today, and nothing like the quantity of wool production that we have today. People, with modesty, estimate the difference that has been made at least £50 million a year - pounds, money, a year. And therefore on that side of research with the kind of work that is done by C.S.I.R.O. on the field, so to speak, the effects have been enormous. But then, of course, C.S.I.R.O. has been working in other fields. For a long time now we have been vaguely aware of the work done by devoted scientists to discuss the problems of shrinkage in wool, the problem of getting a pair of trousers for a humble decent citizen that won't get baggy at the knees in side two or three days, permanent creasing (These are not permanently creased, but the other pair I've got with me, out in the bag, they're permanently creased). A very great advantage. And then, Sir, you are devoting a great deal of time and an enormous volume of ability and knowledge to the problems of the processing of wool at its various stages in the course of manufacture. And when all that is done, then we have to take the end products of all these things we have to present them to the world attractively, have to add to their variety, to their quality; we have to make them appeal not only to rugged, masculine characters in the country, but to finely drawn women in the cities who want a fine, delicate, shimmering piece of woollen material that looks as if it almost might be silk. This is it. This is the problem we have. And I am delighted, myself, as the more or less temporary head of the Australian Government, I'm delighted to come once more into contact with an aspect of this enormous task.

"Interestingly enough, you know, when you try to do something for a particular industry, it says: 'Yes, that's a very good idea - you pay for it - you, the Government, you, busy bodies, you butt in on this matter, you find the money'. In the case of wool, I must say for the wool people in Australia they have shown at all times a very enlightened approach to this matter. They have subjected themselves to levies, they have raised large sums of money for research; they are aware of this problem, because they know that unless this problem is dealt with progressively, then the future of their industry, and of the country, may be adversely affected. Now I was almost tempted, for a moment, to say: 'When these problems are solved'. I don't want to encourage you into a belief that you have had a species of professional immortality, but I think you have; because I don't think that the problems will ever be completely solved. These will be new problems arising every year; there will be new aspects of competition in the world which will arise; these will be new things created in the world, that are a competitive kind. And therefore the problems of wool will never be completely solved, anymore that the problems of human happiness and human health and human political satisfaction, will ever be solved. This is a continuing thing. But the great beauty of it is that I think we awake to it today; I think we are conscious of this problem, and conscious of it as a continuing problem. And to me it is a wonderful thing to recall that not only on sheep stations in Australia, in scientific laboratories in Australia, but here in Leeds - here in Great Britain - somewhere else in the field of presentation, all around the world people who are concerned with wool are realising that their task is not a defensive one, but is an aggressive one. It's attacking something done. This is the very dynamic exercise so far as the economy of Australia is concerned and, I venture to believe, in the long run in its various aspects so far as the economy of this ancient country is concerned.

We are never to become defensive. You know, people talk about Great Britain as "the old country" - well, if somebody in Australia, like myself, refers to the "old country" that's a glancing reference to the fact that Gran-Papa came from there, you see, and Gran-mama - that's very interesting - it's the old country. (And I speak quite freely about my grandparents - they went out quite freely, themselves). But what you must feel troubled about is when people talk about Great Britain as "an old country" - not as "the old country", but as "an old country". Ah well - so to speak - they are old, tired - they've had it! I've heard it said, you know, quite a bit around the world. I don't believe it. If anybody wanted disproof of it, he would need only to come here today. But at the same time, it will become an old country, and heaven help many of us around the world if it does, it will become an old country, if it assumes a sort of static position on various matters. If it forgets that the whole source of its greatness was the dynamo that was in it right through the 19th century, in particular, and before that. And therefore this must be kept alive, the spirit of research; the spirit of looking for quality, the spirit of meeting the world and meeting all competition with the certain feeling that "these goods are the best". And, in the long run, the best goods will defeat the second-class in the judgment of people who matter. I always remember that I had a remote relative who was old enough to me my uncle and was then, I thought, an immense age - I think that he was probably a shade younger than I am now, but he seemed to me to be incredibly venerable at this time - and I said to him: "Where do you get your clothes? Where do you get your suits built?" - you see - he lived in Melbourne. He named the most expensive tailors in Collins Street and he added, with a wry smile: "You know, Bob, I'm much too poor to afford to have any clothes built anywhere else". Now you can broaden that out; this is what we said about wool.

"We must persuade the world - and we will, if we maintain quality, if we raise quality and if we solve all these problems of the kind to which you are directing yourselves. And therefore, if this goes on, Great Britain becomes greater, Australia becomes greater - in fact, you might become so great, you people who are Englishmen, you never know that in due course, you might win a Test Match against Australia - at Heddingley. Sir, if I'm not occupying your

time too long, might I - before I conclude what has been an over-serious address, perhaps - by giving you one simple reminiscence of a Test match at Heddingly in 1948. This was an introduction to a new aspect of English character to me. There we all were - I was sitting with the great; I was sitting with the Lord Mayor (not you, Madam, but your then predecessor) and the people sat behind these little low ropes. (We keep people outside the pickets in Australia, you see). There is no argument then as to whether it is a four or not - you hear a crack or rattle on the pickets, you see. But when the people sit down 8 or 10 rows deep right down both sides of the ground, there can be an argument occasionally, I suppose, as to whether it's a 4 or it's a 6. Of course, we never argue and the last people in the world to argue about cricket would be Yorkshiremen, of course!) But one of our fellows - one of the Australian players - hit a noble, towering 6 mid-wicket (and it seemed to me to almost kill somebody three rows back) but it wasn't clear to the umpire, who was a celebrated Chester, who had - as you know - lost an arm, and therefore had a sleeve flapping. He was ^apicturesque, rather dramatic character. And he went across in his long white coat - umpires in Australia use short ones, but they're cotton so it doesn't matter! He went across and conducted a coronial enquiry among the people in that section of the crowd - it was really wonderful. I think he called witnesses - and finally decided it was for 6. But he wasn't going to signal 6 from the boundary - not on your life - he went walking with great dignity right back to the umpire's position and then signalled his 6. It could only happen here! Don't know what would have happened to him in Melbourne, but I know what would have happened to him in Sydney!