

CONFERENCE OF AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

at Sydney, 17th August, 1961

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. R.G. Menzies

Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Chairman, gentlemen:

It is quite true that today is for me, or this few minutes will be for me, an interlude. Last night I was engaged in the complexities of the European Common Market, and when I get back to Canberra after lunch I will no doubt resume those complexities; only to find that before the Test Match is completed I will be involved in the complexities of the Budget Debate. So you can imagine that it is something to come away from it all and to see such a distinguished collection of people gathered together for so magnificent a purpose, a purpose of which I will say something in a moment.

I should explain to you that these unearned increments of mine, these Honorary Doctorates that I seem to have been collecting around the world involve one embarrassment. Whenever I attend something and they say "Academic Dress" of course I must be glorious and wear a Doctor's gown. But in what capacity shall I masquerade? Well that problem has been solved for me because although 12 or 13 Universities around the world have made me a Doctor, and I had occasionally got away with a hood, the only time I ever got away with a gown was in Queensland. (Laughter, applause) And even then when the gown was delivered to me, and finally unpacked in Canberra, it had the bill for it at the bottom of the box! (Laughter) But I am bound to say to my friend, Dr. Schonell, that I haven't taken the bill seriously. (Laughter) I am waiting to see whether in due course a rather curt little communication arrives, named Account Rendered. If that happens I shall have to do something about it.

But when I come here the Vice-Chancellor of the Sydney University is good enough to lend me his Bristol gown, which I am just as much entitled to wear as he is; but which he happens to own. This is a matter of contention between the two of us. I always say to him, "How did you get away with a gown?" After all the great Winston Churchill invested me, and then took it back". But he got away with it. And the result is that when I come down here I just have a message sent forward "Bristol please". And of course he is shrewd enough to know that I am referring to the gown and not to sherry.

This Conference is, I think, one of enormous significance. All of us who have been concerned about tertiary education - you, intimately from the inside of University affairs; and I, as a very friendly outsider - have all been exercised in our minds, I think, about the future. In one sense, in a very important sense, it is a great thing that in Australia there should be so many more thousands, year by year, anxious to have University experience, and to achieve a university training. That is a very, very good thing. But from the point of view of practical administrators, and even from the point of view of practical politicians, the prospect of coping, decade after decade, with so many more thousands, and thereby incurring all the responsibility in the completing of present universities, and the creating of new ones, is a tremendous problem.

I may tell you that I have heard it said in political circles, even in the purlicus of the Cabinet, that the Universities will need to make more effective use of what they have if these numbers are to be coped with within the reasonable limits of Budgets and materials. That, I think, is very true. The day has gone by when we can go along quietly; the day has certainly, I am proud to say, gone by when universities have to

live from day to day - or if not from day to day at any rate from year to year.

In my own university days I am perfectly certain that the authorities of the University of Melbourne had no idea as to how much money they might have next year; it was enough to cope with the problems of this year. From time to time they went along to the Premier of the day and did their best to extract from him another £10,000, £20,000. I remember one Premier who said, "Yes, I'll give you £X,000 more on the grant provided you make a certain appointment." Well that is not a very satisfactory state of affairs. But it merely illustrates how two things coincided: the major dependence of universities on Governments; and their inability to know, in any one year, what they could plan for in the following year. Because of this, because of the enormous post-war demand for university training, and after a few years of special grants worked out on a fairly arbitrary basis, which I began in 1950, I myself came to the conclusion that there ought to be something more forward looking, taking a longer view, taking a broader view. And so we established the Murray Commission.

Some of you before today have heard me say that the Murray Commission appointment represented a certain amount of sleight of hand on my own part. I don't think anybody else realised that you couldn't have a powerful committee investigating the condition of the Universities in Australia without having recommendations that would involve very large sums of money. My experience has been that when something is going to involve a very large sum of money, you want to deal with it on the highest possible level, and get people to accept a certain number of really first-class ideas before you come down to the sordid question of cash. That is what happened. I saw Sir Keith Murray in London and asked him to come. He said he would if the Chancellor of the Exchequer would allow him. I saw the then Chancellor, who was Mr. Harold Macmillan, and he agreed. Then I knew that all that was needed was for the committee that he presided over to make an investigation, and make a report and something would happen provided the Australian Chancellor of the Exchequer proved to be agreeable.

As I don't need to remind you, the first result, one of the results that perhaps the outsider doesn't appreciate to the full, was that it looked at the problem in relation to a 3-year term; it wanted to create a financial state of affairs in which people could plan forward. Now you may not realise as clearly as I do myself that this is in the teeth of all traditional Budget practices. The Budget is an annual Budget; the Treasury very properly and very spiritedly takes the greatest possible exception to committing future Budgets and as for getting a 3-year term, or a 5-year term in which people are guaranteed certain amounts of money, this is almost anathema. But in this case we got away with it and the first triennium went into operation. It involved a tremendous increase in the Commonwealth financial responsibility. From 1950 to 1957 - 1950 being the first year in which there was a State Grants (Universities) Bill - we found a total of £11.6 millions. The first triennium of the Murray Report which was, of course, adopted by us, meant that in 3 years the amount was to be just under £22m. Now compared to the total cost of maintaining a proper university structure in Australia that perhaps is no very great sum because the State Governments themselves have been called on to find larger amounts of money in their turn.

Then we appointed the Commission under Sir Leslie Martin. He is, I have no doubt, regarded by the Universities as a little bit on the cheese-paring side, a little bit niggly over a mere matter of a million or two. I can assure you that when he comes to see me at Canberra he looks three ways to see that there are no Treasury officials about because he knows that they regard him as

the most extravagant man we ever had attached to a Commonwealth instrumentality. Therefore I think I might say that while he has no hope of unbridled popularity, he has, in his present position, a marvellous opportunity for reconciling demand and supply, for constantly reminding the political arm of the immense importance of university training and, at the same time, occasionally reminding professors, particularly professors of science, that there is such a thing as a Budget, that money has to be brought from somewhere. So I regard him as performing a very great public service.

When his Commission sat it produced its recommendations totalling very nearly £4lm. for a second triennium.

Now there is one other fact that is worth having in mind. Before the war the university populations in Australia were not very great. After the war there was a sudden burgeoning of demand for higher education: the universities became crowded; probably because of the shortage of facilities, the excessive size of classes and so on, the failure rate, particularly in first year, became very disturbing. But the population continued to grow. Sir Keith Murray thought that he was being a little extravagant when he estimated in 1957 when the university population was 30,000 odd, that it would rise to 48,000 by 1960 and to 71,000 by 1965. This was an enormous prospect. The fact of course was that in 1960 the population wasn't 48,000; it was 53,000. And the estimate now made - and I don't think it is at all extravagant - for 1965 is 90,000. This has produced a problem which I believe is one of your great purposes here to consider.

Is it reasonably to be supposed that we can go on the well-trodden paths, maintain our original and somewhat orthodox conception of a university, and at the same time cope with university populations of this kind? Because this, of course, will mean enormous expenditures. It doesn't follow that Governments in future will necessarily take the same view of these matters as my own Government. You can't gamble on that. There will be, we know, tremendous demands. Consequently we began to discuss - I did myself with Sir Leslie and with his Commission - whether there was a possibility, in fact a demand, for a review of the structure of tertiary education, to see whether it can be made more diversified, whether every university, every tertiary establishment called a university ought to be pursuing the same lines of study, and doing the same kind of things, and achieving the same results. This is an enormously difficult problem.

They have, as you know, established in England a Committee to investigate this, having regard to the needs and resources of the nation. I expect within a day or two now to announce the appointment of a Committee in Australia which will perform a similar function. I was delighted when I found that you were having this Conference, this unique Conference, because it seemed to me that the subjects that you had taken for discussion - and indeed the paper is already distributed - had a profound bearing on this very matter, and that the Committee that will come into existence ought to achieve immense benefit from the results of your work.

But if you will allow me to say so, there are two things I would suggest to you. A Conference occasionally attracts a distinguished collection of minds: it has the most valuable discussions; it has its records prepared and it dissolves. Somebody reads the report; somebody reads the record; somebody else doesn't. It all tends then, to sag a little. I believe that you are meeting to discuss matters which must produce a genuine impetus and a continuing impetus if these

problems are to be solved with wisdom all over Australia. So I would like to think that after this great Conference finishes you would think fit, perhaps, to establish a few working parties to follow up some of the things that you will have discussed, to develop them, to be in a position to bring before the Committee that is going to be appointed, the results of your study.

I firmly believe that you are going to discuss a problem, that this Committee is going to examine a problem of the utmost complexity. It is one not to be solved by any casual onlooker but only by having people who know this business from the inside and who have a sense of responsibility for the future, putting their brains to it and continuing by some such method as I have suggested, to pursue their examinations and to push forward their results.

Agin, of course - and it is unnecessary to say this to you, but I say it because there are Vice-Chancellors present - the Universities themselves have an immense responsibility in this field. They can't leave this just to a Committee; they can't leave this just to a body of advisers. I know perfectly well that they realise that there is a great problem of organisation in front of them, the constant search for more efficiency, the better use of resources.

There is another aspect of all this - and it is the only other matter that I wanted to say something to you about. There is a great disposition in our country to think of everything, evaluate everything in terms of money. 'All you need to do' - and "you" always means the Commonwealth I suppose - 'is to find £X millions and the problem is over'. That, of course, as you all know, is not true. I can't commit my successors but I believe myself that the social conscience of Australia will require Governments to go on finding physical resources, money and otherwise, for the development of tertiary education. I haven't the slightest doubt that that is so. But the problem that concerns my mind much more is whether these universities of the future, commanding these resources, will be able to maintain the academic standards that have hitherto obtained. This is a tremendous problem.

In 1959 the total academic staff in the Universities of the States was 3,392. It is now estimated that by 1966, which is not far off, that number will have to be increased by 3,613. In other words here, in a period of five or six years we will need more than to double the existing numbers of academic staffs in tertiary education. This is not easy. Even to me, a layman, it seems to present the most formidable difficulties.

Because here you are, University people, teachers, researchers, people who have found your vocation in this great occupation and every one of you, from time to time, in the still watches of the night, must ponder over the future of the University that you are attached to; its future standards, the maintenance of the highest possible quality in the teacher so that the highest possible product may be obtained in graduating students. You don't get that result just by having enough money.

It is well for us to remember that we are living in a world, the population of which will more than double between now and the turn of the century and that as the standards of living rise, particularly in the great new countries, there is going to be a greater and greater demand for universities and for university teaching. So our prospects of, so to speak, buying additional people from the rest of the world is not a very rich one. Some people will be attracted here. I hope so. I believe

so. But in the long run we will be thrown on our own resources to a major extent. That means that our universities themselves must produce these teachers, these professors and lecturers of the future. And if they are second class, then before long the university itself will be third class. Deliver us from having in Australia a series of second-rate homes of learning.

It will be a tragedy for Australia if, as a result of university development, we don't produce, year by year, out of our universities people who are not just qualified to earn a good income, but people who have the heart of learning in their minds, who go on learning, who have the scholar's habit even though they may be engaged in some highly practical undertaking as the world would see it. The standard must go up. We must not have a sort of Gresham's law applying. That means not just that we want 3,600 more academic staff; it means that we want 3,600 first-class people for the academic staffs; people of individuality and learning and enthusiasm and who will, therefore, produce their own kind out of their class rooms in due course.

So, Sir, these are great and difficult problems. I believe that they will all be solved. But the first thing to do is for all of us to recognise that the problems exist. We must make better use of what we have. We must see that whatever we can get in future is related properly to our basic conception of what the particular students need to get. Above all things, we need to make it quite plain that for the universities of the future, and for the old ones as they continue, the standard must be nothing lower than the best.

You know every one of you has been an undergraduate; every one of you can look back on some professor you sat under, some teacher you sat under. I find the greatest pleasure in looking back on some of the men who helped to fashion me, to realise that they were not only men of learning, but men of great character and quality. They are the people who make a university; they are the people who maintain in the community, increasingly, a sense of pride in the university. If people have that pride, and are determined that it is to be maintained during their lifetimes, I believe that you needn't worry about the community reaction to what may need to be done. The great things to be done, the kind of thing that you are here to discuss is to see that the quality is upheld, that ways and means are discovered of not wasting talent, but of employing it to the highest possible extent for what I believe to be the greatest educational task that this country confronts.

Sir I declare the Conference open. (Applause)

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