

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. R.G.
MENZIES, AT JEWISH WAR MEMORIAL, CANBERRA, ON
26TH FEBRUARY, 1962

Sir, ladies and gentlemen,

There are a couple of aspects of today's proceedings that I would like to mention right away. The first is that I was told yesterday that my friend, Mr. Smith, had devoted a fortnight to preparing a magnificent speech and that Mr. Hoffman was coming back from abroad just in time to deliver it. Well that turned out to be a gloomy prophesy.

The second fact that I want to mention to you is that this morning, into my office, came, among others, the Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Brodie, who has, I regret to tell you, a formidable memory because he reminded me that 10 years ago I made a speech in his presence on an occasion not entirely dissimilar to this and, what's worse, he remembered what I had said. Now this, of course, is most embarrassing because no doubt on that occasion I said all that I had to say; and the trouble is that he remembers it and therefore, perhaps, I can't say it again. That was an occasion when we were celebrating a very notable event in the history of the Australian Jewish community in Melbourne. My old friend Baron Snider will no doubt remember it very well. I had a few words to say on that occasion, as I have today.

Here we are on a splendid site - we're going to have a Synagogue, a community centre - strategically placed next door to the Presbyterians. That's very satisfactory to me, very satisfactory. (laughter) But when I looked at the book of the words that I was given I was really surprised to find that the total Jewish community in Canberra numbered 160 people, something around 100 adult persons. Now that is a very small number in a city of 56,000 or 57,000. And in those circumstances one might not have been surprised to find that this relative handful of people, anxious though they might be - and properly so - to preserve the symbols and practice of their ancient faith, anxious though they might be to provide for their children a training, a bringing-up in that faith and in its educational methods, said, "well, sorry, but it can't be done; there are so few of us". But they weren't deterred by the fact that they were so few. They made, what I will always believe to be one of the most imaginative decisions made in recent years in this place. They said, "This is the capital of Australia. This will go on growing and growing in numbers and in importance, and we must set out to impress upon the conscience of the Jewish community all over Australia how important it is that there should be, in this place, a shrine and a school and a place of meeting".

Now this was a magnificent and imaginative conception. It is a matter of great satisfaction to me, and I'm sure to all of you, to realise how it was seized upon as an imaginative idea by people of the Jewish community all over Australia. The result is that today we have the privilege of being present at the laying of a stone, at the beginning of a building, at the beginning of a centre, which will some day cater for the needs, not of 160 people but, I imagine, of thousands of people in a great, forward-looking, national capital.

Now, Sir, I think that that is a splendid idea. And because it is a splendid idea I hope that all over Australia people of your community will rally to it, and be proud of it, and do something for it; and that people not of your community will have enough imagination to see the significance of it, and, in their turn, lend their aid, lend their recognition, lend their encouragement for something that has such great spiritual and educational significance in Australia.

There is just one other thing that I would like to say to you and it is this. The fact that here we are at the beginning of the construction of a Synagogue, a school, a centre, is not to be taken as meaning that the Jewish community in Australia feels that it is something apart. That is not true; any more than the existence over the road here of the Burns Club means that the Scottish community feel they are something apart. Now as a man of Scots origin I have never thought that we were something apart; I've just thought that we were in the business, but rather better. (Laughter) And that is the whole approach.

Here is a community not, I'm happy to say, torn asunder by racial dispute, by disputes of religion. Here is a community in which I'm happy to say I find, overwhelmingly, a broad tolerance, a broad sense of the common aim that we all have to leave a better country than we found. In such a country it isn't right to suppose that some of these old things that occur in an old world, and in a worse world, are being perpetuated. If a Jew in Australia devoted himself entirely to the retrospective study of ancient history and medieval history he could find much to sorrow about, much persecution, much deprivation of rights, much deprivation of liberty. All those things are part of history; but they are not part of Australia. We have the great pleasure, the great honour, the privilege that puts responsibility upon us to live in a country in which all that history is forgotten, a country in which we are not anti anybody, but pro somebody: torn asunder politically by parties engaging every now and then in the luxury, if you care to look at it that way, of elections. This is very spirited; this divides all churches, all schools of thought. But when it comes to the basic element there is no decent Australian who worries about somebody's else's derivation of race, somebody else's religious adherence; on the whole, he prefers to have a man of faith, even though it be not his faith, to a man of scepticism and unbelief. Therefore we can all meet here whoever we may be, to whatever church we may subscribe, happy and proud to think that once more in the history of Canberra we are attending the setting up of a symbol of faith, of hope, and, as I believe, of charity.

Sir, it is a very great privilege for me, and for my wife, to be present here this afternoon. It has been a particular pleasure for me to renew my acquaintance with the Chief Rabbi. And if I am still around somewhere in another 10 years' time I shall look forward to meeting him and we can put our feet up and, on that occasion, recall with great advantage the speeches that we have never made. (Applause)
