

WESLEY COLLEGE CENTENARY BUILDING FUND
APPEAL DINNER, HELD AT MELBOURNE
ON 22ND FEBRUARY, 1963

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

Sir, and Ladies and Gentlemen :

It is very seldom that one encounters a Chairman who is a Professor in Theology in one of its branches and who possesses your gay sense of humour. He turns to me, after really loading me with undeserved praise and then he says, "Now, you are here as an old boy. I want you to relax. Please get up and make a speech." (Laughter)

Well, Sir, I don't propose to make a very long one because, in the first place, I acknowledge what you have been saying. Everything you said about my wife was right. Most of the things you said about me were not right. It was very decent of you to sympathise with people like myself for undergoing villainous and violent attacks from time to time. I want to make it quite clear that this represents no virtue on my part. I like them. (Laughter) The great secret of politics is to have a somewhat low blood pressure, and I've got it; and the result is that when somebody delivers an attack and I become very annoyed, my blood pressure becomes normal. (Laughter) I find this a singular advantage.

Sir, the great thing that always comes into my mind on one of these occasions is this; that back in 1945-46-47, just after the war, at a time before Menzies and Holt and when the income tax was very, very high in Australia (Laughter), I remember saying to myself, "How will these great public schools survive?" It seemed to me a fair question to put to oneself... High taxes inevitably.... "How will these schools which are bound to become more and more expensive as more and more justice is done to teachers and more demands are made upon the parents of children - how can they survive? Will we find ourselves losing, will we find ourselves practising that dreadful civic vice of uniformity, for which we have such a passion in Australia?" I hate uniformity. We must have individualism in our schools, in everything in our lives if we are to go on, and how are we going to continue. And the great thing that has struck me, year after year, has been that in spite of all the difficulties, every school I know of has gone on and on and has got bigger and stronger, year after year, with waiting lists, with parents anxious to accept the financial burdens in order to get the advantages for their children of what goes on in these schools. This, I think, is a modern revolution and I confess to you that fifteen years ago, I did not expect it for one moment, but I am delighted to have been wrong.

I remember when I was at Wesley, as obscure a child as ever went through it; we had a total population of about 250 - a few fellows like Gordon Hattam and Lampy Selleck, they can correct me, but I think I am right - about 250. And I remember that the then Headmaster, to whom I refer respectfully as Dicky Adanson, saying in that grumbling voice of his, not always easy to understand, except when it was saying something unpleasant, (Laughter) - I remember him saying, "I trust the school will never rise beyond 300. That's enough." And now, what am I told -

this way and that way - 960. And of course the price that you pay for developing a school within a limited area of ground to those enormous proportions is that you must divide, you must develop the junior school, you must develop various aspects of the school, you must move out and get new sites, you must erect new buildings and Sir, all this, as no doubt we will be told tonight, will represent a challenge in particular to every old boy of Wesley. A great challenge.

In fact, when I came in here tonight and looked around and my wife said to me, "Have you ever had to speak at as big a Dinner as this - in London or somewhere?" I said, "Well, I would doubt it. Maybe once, I don't know, but I would doubt it." But I do say now that the remarkable thing about this Dinner is that you have 1,000 people here who all came along quite willingly, no pressed men, all volunteers - you didn't come along to hear me, you came along to have it taken out of you. (Laughter) This I think is magnificent. Whoever is the Chairman of the Appeal financially, I say, "Look at them - willing and anxious." I think this is a great spectacle. I can understand it in the case of the Presbyterians like myself, but as for the rest of you (Laughter), it will remain a big mystery. A deep mystery.

Sir, I am not going to keep you, but I want to say this. Individuality - I referred to it a little while ago - is of the essence of our ideals of public schools and in particular for our own school. This business of daring to be wise, this business of setting out to achieve utter intellectual integrity and the development of human character and the individual character, this is not just a form of words. This is something that can be achieved by a great school and lost by a bad one, and we are very proud to say, looking back on the record of our school, that it can say, I think justly, that it has sent out into the world in Australia and abroad, many, many men who have really achieved intellectual integrity, who have really followed out the motto of the school, not in a priggish way; nothing could be more boring; not in a pompous way; nothing could be more detestable, but in a simple straightforward, manly fashion. And that is why Wesley is a great school, and that really is why 1,000 people have come here tonight to think about it, to talk about it, to be talked to about it, and I am delighted to have had the opportunity of being one of them.

I wonder what Harold Stewart thought when he was sitting in his Headmaster's study and the Nicholas brothers walked in. This must be an experience that comes to few headmasters. Fancy two men, simple, splendid people, coming in and saying, "Good morning, Headmaster, may we take a seat?" And then saying, "Well, just a little trifling matter - we would like to do something." And the Headmaster pricks up his ears - even Harold Stewart, that wonderful man who taught me three-quarters of what I know - even Harold Stewart must have thought to himself, "Ah, well, perhaps - you know - we might be able to build a wing." And out it comes. This was a marvellous thing. And every old Wesley collegian was delighted to hear about it.

But if I may say so, we have perhaps lived too long on the memory of it. They were two men - we are numbered in our thousands, and if we owe anything to this great school, as we do, then perhaps the time has come to discharge some part of the debt. That's how I feel about it. I haven't reduced my emotions into pounds, shillings and pence, however, but not doubt with your aid I will, (Laughter) in due course. But that's the real question - "What are we going to do about it?" and this is not just a matter of raising money for future development, it is a continuing matter of what I will call "practical pride" in the school that we handed on.

And, Sir, in that mood and with those words, I would like everybody to rise and drink the toast of the school.