

OPENING OF NEW SCIENCE BUILDING AT GEELONG COLLEGE

GEELONG, VICTORIA

12th February, 1964

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies

Sir Arthur, Moderator and Ladies and Gentlemen :

This seems to be my golden opportunity for making a record short speech before the rain comes down heavily. I was told just now by Sir Arthur Coles - I was questioned by him - did I believe in miracles? He then began to describe a few of which he was aware. How ridiculous to ask me whether I believed in miracles. When I look back on the last seven Federal elections, I know that they happen. (Laughter) I am a convinced believer. (Applause)

Now, just in case we get washed out, I must recall at once that it is my duty to open the building in the name of Sir Arthur Coles, to open one of the two labs. in it, to name it after the late Mr. Roper and to name the other one after a celebrated character of whom I used to hear a great deal when my boys were here - Tammy Henderson. (Applause) I think it is a concession to Presbyterian respectability that the lab. to be named after him is the "T. Henderson Laboratory". It should have been "Tammy Henderson Laboratory." However, I merely throw that suggestion out.

Now, I want to tell my old friend and competitor, Mr. Robson, something. I called him a competitor because this is about the seventh or eighth time that I have attended the opening of a science lab. partly built by the funds of the Industrial Fund. Each time he listens carefully to what I say, the next time he uses it all himself. (Laughter) This man has literally left me with not a feather to fly with time after time and yet I forgive him because if it is any comfort to him and to the gentlemen with whom he works in this imaginative Industrial Fund, I would like to say that the idea put forward by me and now in course of being carried out owes not a little to the existence of the Industrial Fund and its imaginative suggestions which entered my mind and the minds of my colleagues. And so I would like to say an additional "thankyou" to him for this.

Now, it is quite right that this building is partly the Fund, but it is also, in a very large degree, the result of two remarkable private benefactions - from Sir Arthur Coles and Mrs. Roper. (Applause) And you know, ladies and gentlemen, there is a certain symbolism about this. I hope that whatever governments may do - and my own does what it can in these fields - we will never reach the point at which private citizens feel that their own obligations end with the payment of their taxes. That, I think, would be the defeat of humanity. I don't want governments to be responsible for all those things in a school like this or elsewhere which appear to be good things. And that is why it is a splendid thing for our country that we should have people like the two to whom I have made reference, and there are many others here whom I recall in other fields who have shown that they have a sense of personal obligation achieving personal satisfaction in doing something of this kind and I hope that that will go on whatever may be done by governments.

Now perhaps I might say something about what is being done. I have no idea how much money the Industrial Fund has raised or spends. All I know is it seemed to me as I went from one place to another to amount to a very great deal, but when I announced our proposals that we would take what is, in terms of a Federal Government, a revolutionary step of providing £5M a year in aid of buildings and equipment for scientific teaching in secondary schools, I don't know that everybody realised how enormous a thing this was - £5M. a year, not £5M. spread over some long period - and if one estimates that the independent schools represent a quarter, contain a quarter of those who are engaged in secondary education which I think is a fairly accurate estimate, this means that a million and a quarter a year will find its way into purposes of this kind. And I hope that in the doing of this work, we will take the fullest advantage of the enormous experience that Mr. Robson has had and those associated with him have had. We do want to feel that all this money will go to the right spots at the right time and to achieve the right purpose.

Now there is one other thing that I would like to say to you. I have had the great pleasure of being associated with an enormous development in the university world in Australia, but one of the things that disturbs me, and I think disturbs other people, is the relatively high failure rate in the universities in their first year. Great experts have commented on this and many have been prepared to say, and no doubt with some truth, that something ought to be done to improve the standard of qualification the student has before he is thrown into the waters of the university. Well, you can do that, we thought, in two ways. It is very important to do it.

One is so to improve the scientific equipment in the secondary schools as to give every boy or girl who has a scientific bent an opportunity to be much better trained, much further forward, much more accustomed to the handling of new techniques and new equipment than ever before and I am sure that this is going to pay enormous dividends in the development of the universities, in the development of science and, therefore, in the development of Australia.

And, of course, associated with that, let me remind you, we have in hand proposals for the creation of a very large number of special scholarships - not from primary schools to secondary; not from secondary to the university; we already have a lot of those - but in the secondary schools themselves, to enable a student to have an extra year or two years so as to improve his sixth form, his honours standing. I am perfectly certain that Mr. Robson will agree that this is a splendid idea. It isn't always easy to say to a boy or girl, "Well, you ought to have another year at school; you ought to take another year of honours." In this mercantile world, we are all a little bit inclined to think, "No, no. The sooner they are out the better. The sooner they are earning some money the better." I think myself that if we could bring about a state of affairs in which a few thousand students at secondary schools, who otherwise would have left school, stay on and do an honours course, stay on for a year, for two years, so that they then develop the urge for learning and go to a university not as prospective failures but as prospective successes, this would be a wonderful thing for Australia.

We are a rather comfortable democracy. We are a well-paid democracy. We must become a highly-trained and intelligent democracy. We must make learning fashionable. We must make it rather the correct thing to be tremendously good at some branch of knowledge and, of course, I, as you have been reminded, have had a couple of entirely unscientific sons at this school. I don't

think they ever learned anything about physics. Sorry. I know that they were well taught. All I remember about it is that action and reaction are equal and opposite - a principle that has guided me in politics for a long time. (Laughter)

But, really, ladies and gentlemen, when I was a schoolboy - if you can imagine so remote a period of time - the scientific equipment was deplorable; a few bunsen burners, a few scales, a few test tubes. Nothing. And this was regarded as a rather depraved form of witchcraft which healthy schoolboys would hardly be associated with. Now, each time I go through one of these new school wings, I, the most unscientific of people, find myself fully persuaded that if they had had that in my time, I would now be a scientist, and that would have, of course, given immense credit to one of your most distinguished old boys, a very famous scientist, who was unkind enough to say, only a year or two ago in my presence on some public occasion that he thought it essential that every Cabinet Minister should have a scientific degree, to which I hasten to assure you I replied that if that ever happened, that would be the end of the world for the scientists. No scientists in a department would ever have any hope of survival if his Minister thought that he knew more than his expert adviser. So on the whole, it is a good thing to have as Ministers ordinary fellows like me who are not scientists, but who have our lucid intervals in which we are perfectly capable of understanding what other people are saying to us.

I musn't ramble on. I have really talked the rain away - you must concede that point. I am delighted about all this. I am sorry that Frank Rolland can't be here. This would be a great vision for him, but I am delighted. I have seen this school grow over a long period of years, grow in strength and grow in beauty and now adding to itself something which I hope will make a powerful contribution to scientific training.

Might I just say one thing before I conclude. I thought, what with all the sputniks and what-have-you, that there would be a complete run on science courses in the universities. This happens not to be true. The Monash University was created and expressly stated to be one that would have a bent in the direction of engineering and science. It is their engineering and science faculties that are half filled; it is the humanities side that is overcrowded. Maybe therefore, that with all these improved facilities in this rapidly-changing world of science teaching and experiment, that with all this, we will find that we are helping to solve that problem by producing a much higher percentage of those who look on science not just as a possible job but as something that they can't live without. And you know, ladies and gentlemen, that is true of anything you are to do. Unless you feel you couldn't live without doing that particular thing, then you won't be very much good at it. But give me the man who is enthusiastic, who has a devotion, who has a sense of vocation in any occupation and I will show you the man or woman who is going to make easily the most effective contribution.

And so, Sir, I have great pleasure, great honour in naming this building after Sir Arthur Coles and in naming the two labs in the sense I have described. I want to say that my pleasure on this occasion is equalled only by the pleasure of my wife who got to know this place very well over a period of years and who is delighted like me to see what great strides the school made when the Menzies left.

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