

OPENING OF NEW SCIENCE BUILDING AT SCOTCH COLLEGE,  
MELBOURNE.

21ST MARCH, 1964

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

Sir and Ladies and Gentlemen :

I think there is a considerable amount of Scots caution in the fact that the benediction was pronounced before I spoke. (Laughter) This has never happened to me before. I think it very prudent because in my long Presbyterian experience when the benediction is pronounced, the congregation is free to leave. (Laughter) So it is very kind of you to remain.

Now I am at a disadvantage today. As a rule, the speakers, according to an unwritten Australian practice, stand or sit in the shade while the audience sits in the sun and gets roasted. (Laughter) This is a splendid idea. It is essential that the speaker should have command over the audience and therefore that the audience should be a little uncomfortable. Today you are all sitting in the shade and the position is reversed but it is worse for me because this, I think, is the eighth occasion on which I have opened or helped to open one of these science blocks, the subject of aid from this well-known Industrial Fund and on each occasion in the past and again today, Mr. L.C. Robson, the chief executive of that concern has been present. On all other occasions, he has made a speech and he has spoken before me and I have picked up a few crumbs that have fallen from his scientific table. Today he is here the wretched man, great and good man as he is, sitting in the shade, smirking a little, and saying, "Well, it's Menzies who has to speak this time, all by himself." (Laughter)

Now, Sir, it is a very wonderful occasion and it is an occasion that should not be allowed to pass, even so far as I am concerned, without me paying my tribute to the imaginative work of the Industrial Fund. This doesn't account for all these science blocks that are being built, but it has meant that over the last year or two or three, hundreds of thousands of pounds have been raised and disbursed in order to improve scientific teaching in the independent schools, as we call them, of Australia.

Now, this is imaginative. Just indeed, as I am prepared to admit, that our own proposal as a government, which is now going into effect, to find £5M. a year for science laboratories and equipment in secondary schools is itself imaginative, stimulated not a little by the work of the Industrial Fund. And it means, as you have been told, that so far as the independent schools are concerned, one-quarter of the £5M. - because that is about the proportion - £1¼M. every year will be devoted to these purposes. Now that doesn't mean, of course, that every secondary school that wants, and deserves, a science block will get one in a year. That is, of course, manifestly impossible. But when you look forward over a term of years and imagine what this can do, then I think it will be agreed that there will be little reason why the great schools, secondary schools - independent or State - should not be able to improve the standard of their science teaching, improve the qualifications of those going on to the universities or any other tertiary institution and thereby add to the total scientific knowledge and facilities of the country.

Now I am not a scientist. Somebody some years ago invented a subject, a rather grisly subject, called political science. I know nothing about it. I am not a scientist but I know something about politics and something about the responsibility

of politics and something about the political history of the world in our time, and there are two things that emerge from that consideration. The first is - and I say this without denigrating the scientists - that the failures of civilisation in this century have been failures of the human spirit, failures in the great and important art of knowing about people, of understanding people, of tolerating people, and these failures - moral failures, intellectual failures - have been brought about, I think, because we have underestimated the importance of humane studies and of human understanding. If we are going to avoid wars, if we are going to avoid catastrophes, internationally, then we must never lose sight of the fact that the business of education is every bit as much moral as it is intellectual, every bit as much a matter of training character and quality as it is of training people in the accumulation of facts.

But there is another aspect. It is going on now. We have become rather accustomed haven't we, of learning about new weapons, new explorations into space. More and more, a lot of people have begun to think that the sole business of science is propulsion and that we must explore outer space and that all this is of necessity a very good thing. Well, it may be. I notice that a few people from time to time, and a few nations from time to time, contemplate spending a few thousand million pounds or dollars on trying to strike a blow at the moon, and I have nothing against the moon at all. I have an affection for the moon. The moon has always struck me as being a highly handsome civil and reflective lady and why we should be wanting to hit her, I don't know. I leave this to the scientists to explain. But putting on one side this silly ignorant prejudice of mine, I see in the current world such a scope for scientific development, such an irresistible demand for science, for the application of science in this very earth of ours that I marvel how we can survive or how the world can survive this century unless we produce far more scientific workers and thinkers and explorers than we do now.

Consider, ladies and gentlemen, where we are - it's a very pleasant place, a very comfortable city; it's a very comfortable country. We are by no means overcrowded. We could have many many more people and hardly notice them. But the population of the world may almost double itself by the turn of the century, may almost double itself in the lifetime of most of the boys of this great school who are here today. And people, if they are to live in this world, if they are to have some chance of advancement in this world, if they are not to be consumed by a diet of starvation and hatred, must be fed, must be clothed, must go on developing their own activities in life and this will be done not by doing with the soil or the elements what grandfather did with them. This will be done only by people forcing their boundaries of knowledge further and further so that land will produce far more, so that elements now existent can be used effectively and properly, so that the world will undo, release its elements to sustain a population twice as great as we have now.

This pressure of population on resources is, I believe, the greatest genuine social problem that confronts us today in this world and it will not be solved - with great respect to my particular union - by politicians as such. It won't be solved by legislators as such. It will be solved by thousands and millions of people who are discovering and applying new things and that is where the scientist comes in. And some of the scientists may go to the moon if they want to, but I do hope that the vast majority of them won't think, that the vast majority of boys at school won't think that it is no use taking science or being interested

in it unless you want to be a nuclear physicist. Every aspect of science is under demand in the world - humanity requires it. Therefore, I would think that apart altogether from the tremendous advantage that is got by having a new building with proper light, with proper facilities, something to attract the student instead of the dark thing of old days with a solitary bunsen burner flickering in the corner, that apart altogether from the inherent attractiveness of this new building, it would increasingly be felt that there is here a great vocation which will serve mankind all over the world. We are an advanced country. We ought to produce far more people of this kind per thousand than another country just across the water, and we will need to. The Western countries will need to if they are to bring to the crowded Eastern countries of the world, emerging into independence, emerging into higher standards of life, if they are to bring to them a real hope of a happy future.

Now there are three Presbyterian parsons on this platform and they have corrupted me because, you see, what I have been saying to you sounds singularly like a sermon. But it is a matter that I believe in, it has deeply affected my own outlook as the head of the Government on what ought to be done about science teaching and, therefore, it gives me particular pleasure to be here and to be about to declare the building open. But before I do, I would like to tell you, just in general, that my colleague, Senator Gorton and I have had a very great deal of interest in evolving the particular ways and means of solving this problem of giving scientific aid to schools, particularly to the independent schools. The others can be dealt with through the State Governments without difficulty.

One thing about which Senator Gorton will be making a statement next week is the setting up of a Committee to advise us, of competent people. I am happy to say that we have been able to persuade Mr. L.C. Robson to become associated with us in this great venture. This is worth untold thousands in efficiency in the administration of this scheme. But we also have established a Committee - or my colleague has and will be announcing it but I think I might be permitted to say that one of this small but very representative, authoritative Committee to advise us in relation to the independent schools on an Australian basis is Mr. Selby Smith himself, and we are deeply grateful to him. (Applause) How he is going to deal with his successor and become a Professor of Education and at the same time devote some time to coping with people like me, I don't know, but I am grateful to him and I wish him well.

And, Sir, having said that, I am happy to say that it is a pleasure for both my wife and myself to be here. It is a pleasure on such a lovely day, in such a lovely setting and for the benefit of such a famous school, to declare this building open.

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