

OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE N.R.M.A. NEW HEAD OFFICE  
BUILDING, SYDNEY, N.S.W.

12TH FEBRUARY, 1965

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

Sir Norman, Parliamentary colleagues and ladies and gentlemen :

I am very happy to be here, because Norman Nock is happy to have me here, and I tell you that this took doing. He first of all started on me back in about September, I think, or somewhere around there, or earlier. I found every excuse in the world for saying no. He then had another go at me and I found an equally valid excuse for saying no. But he's like the character in "Alice in Wonderland" - what he says three times is right. And when he said it the third time it was right - I surrendered. And so I am here to perform a very, very pleasant duty.

I am very glad to say that my pleasure is added to by the fact that when I was sitting down there just now, I turned around to the right and I saw, in one blow of the eye, Dan Minogue, M.P., and the Post Office clock. And this is worth mentioning, because this is a perfect further proof of the virtue of persistence; because the first five times that Dan Minogue got up and made a powerful speech - even if a trifle Hibernian - about the Post Office clock, I was heard to say by my colleagues: "Lot of nonsense! Lot of nonsense! Thing looks better without the tower." But he won, in the long run.

Now the virtue of persistence is, of course, a great one - one of the great virtues. Enthusiasm - and persistence - have done great things in this country, and I'd like to take this opportunity of telling you that I regard the N.R.M.A. as an outstanding example of what can be done by this combination.

It is very hard to believe - in fact I would not have believed it unless I had seen it in print, in the annual report - that you began really at the end of 1923, early 1924 - at about the time I was buying my first motor vehicle. Now it is not a long time ago, and to think that within that period of time you're beginning to talk soberly and seriously of having a million members within another eight or nine years is, I think, an almost phenomenal story, summarised as it is in those figures.

Norman Nock said that he hoped that I - or some miserable successor at Canberra - would be able to attend the opening of a building there, having regard to the growth of Canberra. Well, the growth of Canberra, just like the growth of the N.R.M.A., is a tremendous proof of what goes on in Australia - something that we ought to be more proud of, perhaps, than we are.

When I first went to Canberra and became - as I was, I assure you - an eminently respectable Attorney-General, the population of Canberra was 6,000; you could stroll around it in an afternoon. Now it is 80,000; before you can say "knife", it will be a hundred thousand. They tell me it will be a quarter of a million - not long after my time - about the turn of the century. So there's plenty of scope, Mr. Chairman, plenty of scope for your work.

Now I like, for the reasons that I have mentioned, I like the symbolism of this great Association. Because it does symbolise an Australian spirit and Australian growth. We are a little bit inclined, aren't we, in Australia - I seem to have observed it myself a few times - to "knock" our own country or to "knock" our own Government (well that, I think, is legitimate and sometimes justified). But we mustn't think that our country is always wrong, or that some other countries have some magnificent splendour about them that has been denied to ours, because I affirm that this is the most exciting country in the world. No country that wasn't exciting could have, in your own fashion, produced the results that you see about you when you contemplate the record and achievements of your own Association.

There is another thing about it. We have some tendency, haven't we, to think that the Government is the universal provider. I have even had deputations from distinguished bodies - including motorists' bodies - who had something to say to me on that point, and I won't revive these arguments because I'm sure that before I'm much older, somebody else will revive them for me. That's right. But there is a disposition, isn't there, to say, "Well, we pay our taxes, the Government should - whatever the Government may be, Federal or State or Municipal - it ought to attend to the business." That is only true up to a point.

Governments and Government Departments are not, in their nature, creators. They are regulators. They can come in aid of what private citizens do, they can hinder what private citizens do, but they are not in their own nature equipped for the creative arts or the creative activities in a community. These proceed from individuals. It is man and woman who are the creative force in a community. It is the imagination of the individual which, warming the imagination of a community, or of a state, or of a nation, can do such things for the nation. And therefore, while Governments and Government Departments have their proper place, we must always be on guard against thinking that they are the be-all and the end-all, the port of first call and the port of last call, in all our difficulties.

Now the founders of N.R.M.A. understood this perfectly, because if I were asked to define an organisation which exemplifies the benefits of private responsibility, of a sense of community, of a sense of independence and of self-help, I would say this is an outstanding example of it. Now this is something to be proud of.

I have just been through this lovely building. It is a good deal better than Parliament House at Canberra, and, as my wife has pointed out, the Board Room here is very much better and more civilised than the Cabinet Room at Canberra. But I have been through this lovely building and I share your pride in it.

But to go through it is to discover through the eye, actually, what one has otherwise read on pieces of paper - the enormous variety of services that you provide. I even revisited the glimpses of the moon by visiting your solicitor in his office, and there were briefs on the table, tied up with red tape! Retrospectively my mouth watered. Oh, for the dear dead days. But when they were on my table, they had all come in, but on his table they were all ready to go out, ready to gladden the hearts of some Junior Counsel. I felt for them. It was lovely.

But to have all these people engaged in providing a service to members in what may seem a rather dull occupation but what, in my experience as a Junior, presented the most infinite variety of activities..... And all being provided for members by this great Association, and with great shrewdness - if I may still stick to my last like a good cobbler - or with great skill, because I noticed in the report that, of the many thousands of occasions when appearances were made in court, it was only on a certain number that defences were entered. And in those cases in which defences were entered, 77% of the defences succeeded. Now this is either a proof of the immense skill and judgment exercised in this building, or of the immense skill and judgment of the Counsel who have been appearing in these cases, or a new and genteel outlook on the part of magistrates. Because I confess that in my time, which is now, as you all know, many years ago, when I was appearing a little in the Courts of Petty Sessions in Victoria, to appear for a motorist charged with an offence was a mere formality. You got your fee and he got his fine!

Well, things have changed. Here's one example, to say nothing of the tremendous services that you give in the field. This Association is an almost constant presence all over the State. This is something to be thankful for. And it is not done because an Act of Parliament said it had to be done. It is not done because some Department was established to do it. It is done because thousands of wise men and women got together on this matter and said, "We must have something of this kind and we are prepared to establish it, and we are prepared to maintain it." And the result is this tremendous achievement that you are all thinking about today.

Now it would be a very poor show indeed if I spoilt the opening of this building by rambling on, and I don't propose to ramble on. All I want to say is that Norman Nock spoke quite truly when he said that he and I have been good friends for very many years. I even listened to Norman make speeches when he was Lord Mayor, and that is the highest test of friendship. But it is because of that, as well as all these other reasons of substance that I have been referring to, that it has given me very great pleasure to come here.

I would just like to say - as she may not have an opportunity of saying it for herself - how deeply my wife appreciates this rare compliment that you have paid her this afternoon. I don't imagine there are many life members of this Association of either sex. She is the first and she, of course, is delighted. And delighted for an extra reason, and that is that all our married life, or all our motoring life, I have been heard occasionally to say, "Humph! Woman driver!" (This is, mind you, a private admission; it is not to go any further, you know.) And she has, in recent years, particularly, said, "Nonsense. The women drivers are the best. Don't talk such rubbish." You see? And now it turns out that she's right. Now that's a wonderful thing. Here she is, demonstrated clearly in the report, on the graph, overwhelmingly, to be right. The only comfort that I can take out of the same graph is that I notice that the accident rate among the lads from 17 to 20 is the highest on the chart - and I daresay some of my grandsons will be entering that bracket disastrously in due course - and the fellows of 70 have the best record of the lot.

Sir, I thank you very much for the opportunity of coming here in a brief way to declare this building open. I assure you that it is a very great privilege and deeply appreciated by me.

I wish the Association all success. I hope and believe that in another thirty years - which will be, I shrewdly suspect, after my time but not after the time of some of you now present - you'll have two million, and you'll have three times the size of this building occupied in Sydney. And as long as you do, this will be living proof to the people of what a great country we live in and what magnificent people we have in it.

Sir, I have great pleasure in declaring the building open.

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