

ADDRESS TO CONVOCATION

BY THE PRIME MINISTER (THE RT. HON. R.G. MENZIES, C.H., Q.C., M.P.)
AT A GRADUATES' EVENING IN THE GREAT HALL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY, FRIDAY, AUGUST 28, 1959.

I am much honoured by your invitation to deliver what you are pleased to describe as the Annual "Oration" to Graduates of this great and famous University.

I was flattered some little time back to be made one of your graduates causa honoris, an agreeable expression which in one blow gets rid of the obligation to pass examinations and adorns one with unearned but delightful academic splendour. I wish that I could repay your courtesy by offering to you an address profound but engaging, the product of weeks of quiet reflection in the company of my books and my thoughts. But for a Prime Minister in a vigorously political community this does not prove possible. Some of you may recall that in one of his speeches during the war, Winston Churchill made a glancing reference to Australia, where, he said, "politics seemed to be carried on with a fine 18th century vigour".

There are certainly, for me, other problems to be wrestled with, and preparations to be made for much less academic controversies. What I have to say to you, therefore, will be somewhat discursive and occasional. But here and there, I hope there may emerge some ideas which represent the views of a man, himself a University graduate by examination, who has been privileged to have something to do with Universities and the attitude of Governments towards them.

In Australia, the intense interest of Governments and Parliaments in universities is comparatively modern. When I was a student at the University of Melbourne, I once heard a Member of Parliament refer to it as "a bear-garden of the idle rich", a quaint expression which even then, as I contemplated myself and my fellow students, seemed both strange and wonderful.

When I was Attorney-General of the State of Victoria, I introduced into Parliament the legislation which, for the first time, created the office of Vice-Chancellor of the Melbourne University. Many years later, as Prime Minister, I had the great privilege of setting up the Murray Committee, of securing the assent of Cabinet to the adoption of its recommendations, and of seeing them put into legislative and administrative effect. As I extract some personal pride from these later developments, I propose to say something about them.

In 1956, having conceived the idea of an authoritative committee of investigation, I saw Sir Keith Murray in London. He was and is the Chairman of the University Grants Committee in Great Britain. I pointed out to him that while the Commonwealth had, except in respect of its direct Territories, no comprehensive legislative authority with respect to education, it did have power to make grants to the States, and that such grants might be made for specific purposes and subject to such conditions as the Commonwealth Parliament might think proper. With the co-operation of Mr. Harold Macmillan, who was then Chancellor of the Exchequer, and was therefore the Minister to whom the University Grants Committee was responsible, Sir Keith Murray made himself available. We associated with him a strong group, consisting of the late Sir Ian Clunies Ross, Professor Charles Morris from Great Britain, Sir Alexander Reid of Western Australia, and Mr. J.C. Richards, a university graduate on the staff of the Broken Hill Pty. Co.

The Committee was given a very broad charter. It conducted the most intensive investigations and it made recommendations, the adoption of which, I venture to say, has opened up a new era in the history of the Australian Universities.

In the course of its report upon the role of the Universities in the community, the Committee drew attention to certain important considerations which are, I believe, at the root of any proper examination of the place and functions of university training.

A few of these aspects deserve particular mention, since we must constantly have them in mind if we are to keep the problem in proper perspective.

The first is that the modern complexity of life and the increasingly complex nature of Australian economic development require a very large increase in the supply of highly educated people. It is only in comparatively recent years that commerce and industry have felt the need for more university graduates. Public administration calls for more graduates. The pressure for a greater concentration upon research calls for more graduates. The growing need for more and more precision of thought and analysis requires the trained minds which it is the function of universities to produce. If all these needs are to be satisfied then it becomes essential that our universities should be able to provide accommodation and instruction and facilities for a rapidly increasing number of students.

In the second place, as the Committee pointed out, "It is the function of the University to offer not merely a technical or specialised training but a full and true education befitting a free man, a citizen of a free country".

I have had a good deal to say about this on other occasions, but I take the opportunity of reiterating that there is danger for the world if technologists and scientists should be too narrowly trained, so that they become less fitted to accept their enormous social responsibilities. It is one of the marks of the current century that while magnificent skill and a degree of scientific investigation amounting almost to genius have presented us year by year with more and more material miracles, there is no evidence that we understand human beings any better, or that wisdom has marched with knowledge. Indeed it is the greatest paradox of the 20th century that with all its superb cleverness it has been marked by more violence and hatred and barbarism than any other century since the Middle Ages.

The third principle is that while education by teaching must be one of the great objects of a great university, it has an equal responsibility for research. This, of course, means that the universities must attract and encourage brilliant men and women to whom the function of discovery is a vocation of an absorbing kind, limited neither by the clock nor by undue concentration upon material rewards.

The fourth principle is that a good university should be a guardian of intellectual standards and intellectual integrity. This, of course, involves a consideration of what has been called "academic freedom". There may be some who think that this expression connotes a freedom from all restraints or from the normal rules which govern ordinary people. This is a misconception. "Academic freedom" connotes the absence of external or political compulsion upon the mind. It means that the search for truth must not be controlled by any authority other than the integrity of the mind and spirit of the searcher.

I have no particular respect for university teachers or researchers who think it good that they should accommodate their work and ideas to their previously formed political alignments; because, if they do so, they will introduce a tendentious character into their work which will deprive it of objectivity or authority and will tend to distract them from the unobstructed investigation of the scientific or other facts.

By the adoption of the Murray report and the provision of the very large sums of money involved in this adoption, we have at any rate put the universities in the way of having better paid staffs, more adequate accommodation, more up-to-date technical equipment and greater general capacity for improving the essential contact between teacher and student which has been increasingly sketchy in recent years. One process of improving has, however, been going on for some time. I can myself remember the heated debates which used to occur about whether university graduates ought to be given some special admission to the Civil Service instead of having to start at the bottom rung of the ladder, with no further intellectual training than is afforded by the passing of the Leaving Examinations at the schools.

Slighting references used to be made about the "academic" mind, as if a University degree, hard-earned in most cases, detached its possessor from the realities of ordinary life. Relatively few graduates reached high administrative posts; comparatively few entered Parliament. The position in these respects has materially improved. Great organisations are eagerly looking for graduates. Many of the leading men in the Civil Service are graduates. In my own Ministry, there are no less than 12 Ministers, including myself, who have university degrees.

All this means that the universities have come closer to the community and that the community is getting increasing benefit, even in the most practical terms, from their existence and their work.

There is another aspect of University training to which I should interpolate a brief reference. When I established an earlier committee to make a quick report which gave rise to the system of Commonwealth university grants, now so enormously expanded as a result of the Murray recommendations, I made a special point to the Committee that I wished some portion of their recommendations to be in relation to residential colleges. Ever since then, we have made increasing provision for these colleges. For some strange reason, there was a certain resistance to these ideas, based upon the fact that many of the residential colleges are Church foundations and therefore have a religious background. "Why," it was said, "should the State subsidise any Church activity?"

Without endeavouring to open up the much wider question, which has been so hotly debated for a long time in respect of church schools, I would like to say that in the case of the universities, the whole criticism seemed and seems to me to be based upon a misconception of the true nature of university training. A student in a residential college has a great advantage, if he has the right point of view. He lives constantly in a community of scholars and of students. In addition to the normal attendance at class or in the laboratories, he has right through the days and the weeks and the months, the opportunity of discussion, of informal talk, with men much better informed than himself. He thus has the opportunity of securing an education "in the round". And it is exactly this broad and humane education which the world lacks most, and the comparative absence of which has so marred the history of the century.

Before I leave the Murray Committee I should say something of a recommended but most significant development.

In their report, Sir Keith Murray and his colleagues took a long range look at the future. Realising as they did that their financial recommendations (which were very substantial) would cover a limited period of time, they came to the conclusion that there should be appointed a permanent Australian University Grants Committee.

As this Committee (under another name - to which I will refer a little later) has now been appointed under Statute, and much of the future of our Universities will, I hope, be influenced by its advice, I will at once remind you of the reasons which led the Murray Committee to recommend its creation.

In effect, there were six reasons -

1. The Murray Committee had concentrated its work into a few months. I accept responsibility. Art is long, but political life is normally short; and I was keen for results. The Committee knew that it had not completely covered the ground. It felt, therefore, that there was need for further study, and continuing study, of aspects which there had been insufficient time to consider fully.
2. The university problem is not static, but highly dynamic. Demand is growing much more rapidly than resources. "The moving finger writes; and having writ, moves on." "The degree of the required expansion," as the Committee said, "and the ways in which provision should be made to cater for this additional need will vary from institution to institution and from State to State; the problem is far from being a simple mathematical one and will call for close and continuous consideration on a national basis."
3. Having regard to modern events, they concluded, as I think most of us would, that an increasing percentage of students would be attracted to the pure or applied sciences. They recognised that, in terms of accommodation, and technical equipment, science teaching costs more. They saw that the provision of post-graduate and research facilities is of particular importance in the scientific field. All of this argued an urgent need for the existence of some body which could continuously re-assess the financial needs of the universities. "These needs," as the Committee said, "cannot be determined once and for all."
4. There is the problem of university academic salaries, which the committee found to be "the largest single item of the universities' annual current expenditure", and which is not likely, in a world competing for skill, to remain static. The Committee therefore thought that periodic consideration of salaries should be undertaken on a national basis, and by a permanent Commonwealth Committee.
5. The Murray Committee further thought, and I think we would all most heartily agree, that there is a standing need for co-ordinating the work of the universities so as to get the best value from limited resources, not only of money but of trained manpower. (That is a horrible economists expression, "manpower", but you know what I mean.) This, they thought, applied with particular force to specialist branches of undergraduate teaching, and to post-graduate and research activities. They made pointed mention, which it is timely to recall, of the need for consultation on the setting up of new institutions of university status. There may be a temptation to regard the creation of a new university, for example, primarily in terms of money and buildings. The provision of staffs of high quality is even more difficult, and will be doubly

difficult if we endeavour to spread what we have over too wide an area. Of course there will be new universities; notable beginnings are already being made; but great care will have to be exercised to avoid duplication and waste. To achieve this, the proposed new body will be of immense value.

6. The projected committee will need to secure the confidence, not only of the Commonwealth, but of the States, in the hope that its advice will be acceptable, and accepted, all round. It would be a calamity if the States, who have done so much to create and nourish their universities, came to think that the Commonwealth was invading their proper autonomy in these matters. My own policy has been to assist, not to invade.

We accepted this compelling reasoning, and therefore decided to act upon it. We rejected the suggested name, the Australian Universities Grants Committee, because we thought it contained a suggestion of a limited function - the recommending of payments. As every Commonwealth Treasurer has known, no particular encouragement in this field is ever needed! We therefore adopted the name "Australian Universities Commission", and set it up under the Act of that name, passed this year.

It may be helpful if I remind you of the main provisions of what will, I hope, turn out to be one of the landmarks in the educational history of Australia.

The Commission has a full-time Chairman, that notable scientist, Sir Leslie Martin, formerly of the University of Melbourne, and is authorised to have 2, 3 or 4 part-time members. We have in fact appointed four:- Professor Bayliss, Professor of Chemistry in the University of Western Australia; Professor Trendall of the Australian National University, and Emeritus Professor of Classics at Sydney; Mr. K.A. Wills, Managing Director of G. & R. Wills, Adelaide, and Chairmand of the Finance Committee of the University of Adelaide; and Dr. Vernon, the General Manager of the Colonial Sugar Refining Co. Ltd. This, as you will agree, is a highly qualified and most powerful committee which should inspire confidence in all quarters.

The statutory functions of the Committee are:

- (a) to furnish information and advice to the Minister (at present myself) "on matters in connexion with the grant by the Commonwealth of financial assistance to universities established by the Commonwealth and of financial assistance to the States in relation to Universities";
- (b) to perform its functions with a view to promoting the balanced development of universities so that their resources can be used to the greatest possible advantage of Australia;
- (c) to consult with universities and with the States upon the matters on which it is empowered to furnish information and advice;
- (d) to recommend the conditions upon which financial assistance should be granted.

I might, with advantage, add a little gloss, since words like "balanced development" are not necessarily self-explanatory:

- (i) The Commission will be expected to see the universities' picture as a whole; to make its overall financial recommendations not so as to satisfy everybody's demands everywhere, but so as to arrive at figures which have a sensible relation to government budgets and, in

particular, to government revenues, which the taxpayers provide. We cannot do or have everything at once (in spite of some not unpopular misconceptions to the contrary) nor can we have all that we need quite so quickly as we would like.

- (ii) "Balanced development" does not mean that any established University, old or new, should be prevented indefinitely or for very long from establishing those usual faculties and disciplines which are the main function of a University. The teaching of history in Perth does not duplicate the teaching of history in Sydney. The teaching of biology in Melbourne does not duplicate the teaching of biology in Adelaide. If a university is to be true to its name, there are certain things it must teach, and certain studies which it must pursue.

But there are highly specialised studies of a more uncommon kind which may need to be pursued in one place in which our limited resources may need to be concentrated. For example, oriental studies, including oriental languages, which we have sadly neglected, and for which we have so few qualified instructors, cannot, or so it seems to me, be sensibly pursued in, or in connexion with, more than one University or centre - or perhaps two.

In all these considerations, let us always remember that the greatest shortage in Australia is of trained and disciplined minds; we cannot afford to waste the efforts of any one of them.

I have high hopes of the Commission. Perhaps my greatest reason is this: The more the advice of the Commission comes to be regarded by both Parliament and people as careful, sensible and authoritative, the less will the advance of University education and of the universities themselves depend upon the enthusiasm and encouragement of some Minister or Ministers who is or are University-minded. The Universities will become, by common acceptance, a great and recognised instrument of national progress and of rising standards of mental, spiritual and material living.

I have spoken with some pride about the increasing provision made by governments for universities. This is, I suppose, largely inevitable since if we are to train the many thousands of graduates whom the community needs, the fees of perhaps most of them will need to be met from other than family resources, as will the cost of buildings, equipment and staff.

But at the same time, I would think it a misfortune if universities in Australia came to be too heavily or even completely dependent upon the goodwill and money of governments. True, in Australia, there are relatively few great individual fortunes. It is, as I have pointed out, only recently that the controllers of great businesses have looked to the universities for recruits and have, therefore, found themselves deeply interested in the success of those universities. There have, of course, been some splendid benefactions to universities, but I would take leave to doubt whether of all the thousands who graduate each year, more than a few regard themselves as having any debt to their university which they might hope thereafter to recognise or repay in some degree.

The Americans have, I think, set a great example in this respect. In that country, universities have been on a great scale beneficiaries of those who have passed through their doors and have become financially successful, with a pride in building up the university from which they graduated.

There are, after all, obvious disabilities which attach to an over-dependence of universities on governments. It may not, in our time, be possible to avoid this over-dependence; but at least we can become aware of the dangers and seek to avoid them. The greatest danger is, of course, that he who pays the piper will always be permitted to call the tune. We politicians are, in spite of rumours to the contrary, human beings, and we are perhaps not averse from obtaining or exercising power. There will, therefore, always be a considerable temptation for politicians, who by their votes provide the universities with funds, to seek to dictate or influence lines of study and occasionally to concern themselves unnecessarily with staff appointments. This kind of thing can, unless it is sturdily resisted, lead to a lowering of standards and a debasing of the academic currency. It is, I fear, a fact that Members of Parliament are themselves in receipt of more advocacy to reduce expert qualifications than to raise them. If the advocacy comes from a sufficient number of constituents, there will be a temptation to yield to it. There is always somebody to be found to complain by correspondence or in the press that examinations are too difficult or that they ought to be abolished. Such anguished complaints are usually based upon the fact that "Little Willie" has been ploughed in an examination in spite of what his parents know him to be - an extremely clever boy. Yet the truth is that if we are to hold our place and make it a better place in a growing and complex competitive world, the greatest thing is to have rising standards of expert qualification.

We can always get increased numbers by lowering the tests. We will never get increased quality, which is the thing we need, without raising them.

From time to time there emerges what I believe is called a "modern" approach to the process of education. This approach is based upon a somewhat pedantic interpretation of the word "education". It concentrates upon the "leading out" of the individual. It emphasises individual self-expression. It dislikes the idea of discipline. One hears it said that the child must be given the opportunity of following his own bent. This, I venture to say, is a soft and escapist approach to education. It is, oddly enough, never applied to athletes! We have not yet unduly suffered from it in Australia, and I hope we won't. The fallacy of such ideas is that they ignore the basic truth that before any student can just "follow his own bent" he must have achieved by concentrated work certain fundamentals. It is clear that his mind must have acquired a degree of self-discipline before it can venture freely into fresh fields of its own choosing. He may find the study of mathematics a terrible drudgery. His parents may say "how will this wretched algebra help my son to earn a living?". But if the son's bent of mind is towards the sciences, he will slur his mathematics at his peril.

It is the modern fashion to despise and reject Latin, which is for most of us difficult, as being both dead and irrelevant, but the neglect of the foundations of our wonderful language is already bearing its fruit in slovenly speech and writing. It is an odd thing that in a community in which we are all given to self-expression, the niceties and precision of speech have come to be somewhat disregarded. The average boys' school appears to be completely indifferent as to how boys speak; so that they may go through the school curriculum with satisfaction but at the same time speak a species of obscure vernacular which appears to take some pride in illiteracy and to regard good speech as "sissy". A great number of girls' schools seem to me to do much better than this. Yet good plain clear speech is of increasing importance in the world.

Sir John Monash was, by common consent, a very great soldier. He was a notable engineer. His success in both of these fields was largely attributable to the superb clarity of his mind. He was a magnificent and persuasive speaker, one of the best advocates I ever heard.

Sir Brudenell White, his outstanding staff officer, was, I think, the most lucid and graceful of after-dinner speakers.

Sir Thomas Blamey, blunt man of action as he was in many respects, had a complete command of pointed and persuasive speech.

I am no scientist, but the greatest scientists I have met have been men thoroughly educated in the use of their own language and with a rare capacity for exposition.

You may say to me - "What has all this to do with a university?" Well, it has a great deal to do with it. The whole point I am making is, if I may put it in this way, that at our peril we should not attempt to divorce the study of the physical sciences from the study of the humanities. We should not aim at the production of the narrow specialist, since his narrowness will put deadly limits to his social usefulness. We should, in all our seats of learning, endeavour to provide courses of instruction and facilities for daily contact which will brighten the minds of both the scientists and the humanists, making each of them want to know something of the other man's work, and producing for all of them a broad education which will not impair the acquisition of the highest technical skill, but will actually improve that skill by giving its owner a deeper perception and a clearer understanding of its use and of its consequences.

To sum up, centuries ago, students at the few universities were, so to speak, withdrawn from the world, walking and talking in the groves of Academe, furnishing their minds.

They were not particularly concerned about whether their studies qualified them for the earning of a living, except, perhaps, in the Church. They pursued humane letters. Science, in the modern sense, was largely unknown. Greek and Latin, philosophy, history, were the chief materials of scholarship. The universities were not professional schools; they aimed at the general training of the mind, largely by reading and discussion. They were ancient and autonomous bodies, neither the servants of government nor, in any real sense, maintained by them.

Today, the whole scene has changed. The university is predominantly, but I hope not definitively, a professional school. True, research is more and more encouraged, in the great tradition of true learning. But increasingly, universities are maintained by governments in the discharge of what is seen to be a social responsibility. Classical studies have declined until they have come to be regarded as a minority eccentricity. There is a great drive for the production of more and more practising scientists, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers.

There have been other changes. Even as recently as in my own youth, most students were attending their classes by the aid of hard-won scholarship or (and in many cases, and) by a real self-sacrifice on the part of their parents. Today, that has already changed. We have come to regard a university training, for those qualified and willing, as a social right. Not only are fees paid for many thousands every year, but in many cases living allowances are provided. I remember saying to Sir Keith Murray that I had great doubts as to whether enough winners of Commonwealth Scholarships were of genuine scholarship standing. His reply was "You are looking back to your own time, when scholarships were scarce and only a student well above the average could hope to win one. But today most scholarships are government grants in aid. Without them, far fewer people would be attending universities." No doubt this great expert was right; there have been fundamental changes.

But though people of average intelligence and skill are essential to the world's work (which is a great comfort to me), there is still a growing and incessant need for something better. A great university scientist said to me recently that while the average capacity of to-day's students was very good, and probably better than ever, he doubted whether we were producing enough "peaks". This was, to me, an arresting remark. I know that in Australia we have a curious passion for "uniformity" - whether in taxes or otherwise - but we must realise that this passion can become destructive. The great forward movements in civilised history have been commenced or led by uncommon men and women. The great scientific discoveries have not been the product of routine minds. The whole process of development and improvement in Australia will slow down unless we succeed in producing more and more people of superior talent, training and devotion.

That last word "devotion" needs some emphasis. The purely monetary test of professional success is now increasingly popular. "Which profession offers the greatest monetary rewards? That's the one of me!"

Such an attitude of mind will, of course, never produce a great doctor or lawyer or scientist. It never has. Take the law, my first and true love. To one who finds his vocation in the law, its study and practice have almost infinite satisfaction. Protracted hours of work become a pleasure. To one who has no vocation for the law, but has adopted it solely as a means of living, it must, I imagine, forever remain a thing of dust and drudgery.

I know next door to nothing about science. True, I recall that the first law of physics is that "action and reaction are equal and opposite", but this is so true of politics that its scientific origin has become dulled in my mind. But I do most clearly understand that the great scientific discoveries have been made by men of vision with a passion for research; not the slaves of the clock, but of the elusive truth.

These reflections may help to convey to you my conception of the ultimate task of the Universities, which is not to be content to be professional schools - though this is bound to be their primary function - but to aim at contributing to the nation, and to mankind, minds which are at once disciplined and imaginative, reflective and productive.
