

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER RT. HON. R.G. MENZIES  
AT THE OPENING OF THE JANET BIDDLECOMBE WING OF THE  
QUEEN ELIZABETH HOME, BALLARAT, 12TH SEPTEMBER 1959

Sir, I would like to make it quite clear that I am here today by the direct orders of a man called Dudley Erwin who had ascertained something of my past and who said I had to come. I claim no virtue for it, because when I said "Yes" I hadn't realised that the second semi-final was on, and perhaps I'm happier here than I would be there, having regard to the scores that have been announced.

This is quite an occasion. I am not going to spoil it by making a long speech to you, but the Queen Elizabeth Home, commemorates a great woman, and the Janet Biddlecomb Wing (and I have listened with fascination to what Major Russell has said about her) commemorates a great and kind-hearted woman. So this is an occasion, and a particularly interesting occasion for me, because from the outside I've known a good deal of the history of this place.

When I was a small boy, as you've been reminded, I was schooled for some years in Ballarat, sometimes very successfully and sometimes not. And I lived with an old Scots grandmother in Dana Street just over the road, and at that time this place was known as "The Benev" to us who were bouncing boys in the neighbourhood. And I must tell you it wasn't a very attractive place. I know that a lot of kind people took an interest in it but it was a depressing looking place; it depressed me, even when I was a boy, and a boy takes a lot of depressing. A corrugated iron fence on the other side of the road from my grandmother's house, had on it, even when I was a boy of 12, the last scrolled scores of the street cricket match engaged in by my father and by his brothers, so you see it goes back a pretty fair way.

The fence has gone and the old benevolent institution is not recognisable any longer. Now this seems to me to be a sort of microcosm of what's been going on in the world, because honestly in those days, and I don't think that a long memory exaggerates the facts, one felt, even as a child, a sense of pity for the people who lived there - the old men who sat on forms outside the old building, or walked somewhat precariously down Ascot Street to the corner for some purpose that I wasn't allowed to enquire into at that time. But everything was - well, I think the right word to use is this, that it did not seem to me, even as a child, to be consistent with human dignity, and what we have learned in these modern times, with these wonderful places, is the importance of individual human dignity - nobody looking down, but everybody looking across, meeting people in a perfectly normal, social sense; people living in quarters, not shabby quarters, not the poor things that one can remember, but living in bedrooms and using dining-rooms, and using sitting-rooms and sun balconies and so on, which are good and in which they can meet each other with pride and receive their friends with pride.

This is tremendously important. I'm perfectly certain that in the 19th Century a great deal of what they were pleased to call "charity" was almost a loss of dignity on the part of the recipient. We have, with all our blunders - and we've made many - at least realised that human dignity matters and we must never undermine it. And that is why I like these things that have developed, because people go on living, meeting their friends, living their own lives, not in an institutional atmosphere, but as they would like to have lived their own lives if they had been able to retain their own homes and maintained them. This is tremendously important; this, I venture to say,

is one of the great social revolutions of our time, and that is why I am here, and that is why my wife is here. We think this is one of the proudest things that we have been privileged to witness in our own public life.

I must tell you that the Commonwealth provision for Grants for Aged Persons' Homes which began only a few years ago, began with a conversation at a table in my own home in which my wife was the talker and I, for once was the listener. And she said something to me "Look" she said "Don't ask me to understand a lot of these things that you're doing, but I tell you one thing about aged people in Australia - a home to live in, a house to live in, a flat to live in, a roof to live under, their own vine and fig-tree, - this is the most important lot in Australia. Now why don't you do something about it?" Well I know there are a lot of men here who think they're ruling the roost when they're at home, but I've never suffered from that illusion. The moment I was told "Why don't you do something about it" I said "All right, dear, Yes", swallowed two or three times, went over to the Cabinet and propounded, having done a little thinking about it on the journey, propounded this idea of the Commonwealth granting £ for £ on Homes for Aged Persons. And such a success did it become that within two years I think it was - but Senator Wedgwood will recall - we made it £2. for a £. Never was money better spent. It didn't discourage individual effort. Nothing that the Government of Victoria does, or that the Commission does, or that the Commonwealth does, ought to discourage individual effort, because Government Departments, with all the wisdom of their outlook which they occasionally achieve, cannot build into the bricks and mortar of a place like this, that spirit of kindness which only individuals can produce. And every individual who does something for a place like this, every individual who comes to it, who sits and talks, not condescendingly, but on ordinary normal terms, distills a feeling of humanity which is of the very essence of this home. I hope it will go on like that.

I think we have shaken ourselves free of some of the old ideas of charity - "Now abideth faith, hope and charity" - I think that is a wonderful chapter in Corinthian - but I don't like the word "charity" because it has changed its meaning in the course of centuries, and therefore, I prefer the newer version "Now abideth faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love". It is so true. It is so easy to find a little money and think that we've done our duty to pay our taxes and say "Well, after all, I pay my taxes, let the Government look after it". I don't want somebody to say to me some day, nor to you, "Well we've paid our taxes, if you're in trouble let the Government look after you". I would like to think that a few human beings were interested in me, wouldn't you? And if we all think that way, and if everybody in Australia manages to think that way, then it won't be only Governments that find the money, though they will undoubtedly go on finding more and more, but it will be individual human beings who will feel, Sir - as they respond to your prospective appeal for £50,000 - "Well, at any rate I'm paying my little mite" towards a place, which, as I began with saying, and as I end with saying, embodies in itself a complete revolution that has occurred in our country in relation to social service, in relation to the care of elderly people. Perhaps I speak with perhaps some warmth on this matter, because I think the last remark I ought to make to you, Mr Nicholson, is that, by Christmas time I'll be qualified to enter.

So my wife and I are both delighted to be here; I have the greatest honour in the world in declaring this Wing open. I mention with honour the names of the two great ladies, one our Sovereign, and the other your benefactor, whose names are associated with this home. I shall now, having done that, step down, with all the comfortable feeling that a husband has when he knows that the things which remain to be done must be done by his wife.