

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. R.G.
MENZIES, AT THE MASTER BUILDERS FEDERATION OF
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Sir, and ladies and gentlemen, I was very interested to be reminded that I was the number one ticket holder. I am the number one ticket holder of the Carlton Football Club. I hope I bring more luck to the builders.

Now I want to begin with a complaint. We have a practice in Parliament of having questions without notice, and if anybody has a complaint to make about having been misrepresented he may get up and utter it. Well I am uttering mine. I received two or three days ago, - some time ago - a mass of most informative notes about the Federation, its fusion for this purpose with the Asian group; the history of it, together with a few rather encouraging points about the building industry as a whole. The Secretary sent these to me. It is quite obvious to me that he also sent them to the President, and the President has used them first. So everything that I have to say to you is really a rehash, but before I say it, might I tell you that it is a great experience for me to come here and be in this hall, believe it or not for the first time. I knew a great deal about the old one from the inside, having sat many anxious hours writing violently on pads of paper when I was doing my law course. But I am not at all sure that there is not one thing that I miss. I do not know where you are going to hang the portraits Sir George of the Chancellors. We used to look at them in my examination days and try to extract some inspiration from them. As a source of inspiration they were hopeless, and therefore I suppose that explains why the architects, egged on by the Council, decided that they would have no room left to hang any of these worthy gentlemen again.

Now, Sir, I am a great believer in the master builders of this country, and really very largely for reasons that you have already mentioned. This organisation, as one realises by contact with it, by reading its papers, its constitution and its proceedings, has a most helpful and constructive purpose. I really believe that this organisation does not exist in order to prefer the interests of builders to the interests of the community, but to improve the contribution that builders make to the community. And that is of course a tremendous contribution. Right through the piece I have been struck by the fact that - so long as I have known it, and that has been over a fair number of years now, though not back to 1890 - this Federation has set out to raise the standards of performance and the standards of community service. If we could all do just that thing, all of us, whatever our occupations may be, it would be a pretty remarkable country, even more remarkable than it is now. We have, of course, in Australia and I say this, not that it is news to Australians here, but that it may be to some of our notable visitors whom we are so glad to see here - we have been passing through an era, a very remarkable era of prosperity in Australia, prosperity and advance. We have been able to protract investable funds. We have had, on the whole, good prices for our exports. We have had a large movement into this country of migrant people. Population has risen in the most remarkable fashion. All of these things have been in themselves, good. They have produced some of dangers, one of the dangers of course being that in a period of expansion we live under the constant threat of inflation, as one of the by-products of an expansion which occasionally may move too fast. But these things are, one hopes, manageable, and on the whole they have been managed. But in spite of the fact that we have been going through this remarkable period of expansion we have also had remarkable stability in Australia. We have been able to conduct our affairs successfully because of the existence of confidence in this country, and of course all of these things, stability, good sense, confidence, high prices for

the things that we grow and sell - all of these things ultimately have been translated into what I believe is the greatest period of development which we have had in Australia.

Development: when one thinks of development what does one think of? I regret to say not of lawyers, though we are a very useful commodity. I can remember vividly when in my very young days at the bar, being greatly pleased to get into a few cases which involved building disputes, because they always lasted such a long time. But having said that kind word for the lawyers, I turn to say that development in Australia is associated, essentially, primarily and in fact in some respects, almost exclusively, with the industries that are represented here this morning: engineers, buildings, contractors. These are the people through whom the urge and capacity to expand in a country like this expresses itself. We go to the country and we look at great works of development. What are they? Irrigation, hydro-electric schemes, great road works, great works of agricultural improvement of a physical kind. All of these things express themselves in terms of engineers and contractors. We look back over the enormous increase that we have had in our population, and we say that that must have presented a remarkable problem, not only in housing but in business construction, because we sometimes forget that it is a balanced ration that you need in these things and that great office blocks and great factories are in their place as essential as housing is. And what do we find? This Federation, as the Secretary reminded me, conducted a spirited interchange of ideas with my colleague, the Minister for Development, early in 1958 and I read of it with great interest; very carefully prepared views of the Federation, and the very carefully prepared replies and comments by my colleague. But there was at that time a feeling that some particular stimulus ought to be given to housing, because a year or two before, for a variety of circumstances, there had been a slight falling off in the rate of construction. And I therefore really interrupt myself to say that whether it was the result of your vigorous prodding or not, I do not know Mr President, but in 1957-58 there were 74,000 houses and flats completed in Australia. That is a very remarkable number I think. And in 1958-59, not 74,000 but 84,000: a most remarkable increase which all the indications are will continue in the rate of construction, and one which, related to the population of Australia, must be regarded, I think, as a very satisfactory one.

Now, Sir, I have just said in general that the building industry, the constructional industry, are at the very heart of the material progress of the country. And they are, not only because they build dams or houses or factories or office blocks or whatever they may be, but also because the building industry, using that expression comprehensively, is at one and the same time the index of social prosperity and the cause of social prosperity. In other words this is a crucial industry. You may use it as a measuring stick. You say: "Well let us consider whether we have circumstances of depression in the country. Do not let us look at a few little single instances - you get nowhere by that - but take an industry like the building industry, in all its ramifications and say: 'How do things go here? How is employment here? What is the volume of business here?'" If they are both high, you may be certain that the country is prosperous. They are the very index of prosperity or depression. And, at the same time, because of their very nature, they are one of the cardinal causes of prosperity because a great success in building and construction grows on itself. It employs more people; it enables more people to come here and live; it enables more people to establish themselves in well-paid work; it enables more people to set out to get their own homes, and therefore a great movement in the building industry tends to perpetuate itself for the benefit of ordinary people and is one of the causes of economic advance. And therefore building, Sir, thoroughly deserves

to attract the attention of anybody you care to invite to come here, because it is an index of prosperity; it is one of the main causes of continued prosperity and it is certainly in calm, clear, physical terms, the main instrument in national development.

Now, Sir, having said that, which after all you have already yourself said this morning, though I have endeavoured to put it in my own way, just let me add one thing which is put into the mind by the fact that this convention is, as it has been described, a fusion between the Master Builders' Federation, for this purpose, and the Federation of Asian and Western Pacific Contractors Associations. Now that is a rather arresting conjunction of the planet. You know one so readily thinks of building as essentially local - I remember many years ago it was weightily argued, if I remember correctly, in the High Court of Australia, that you could not have an inter-State industrial dispute in building because no building was in more than one State - a purely local form of activity, building, and that of course is something that we can very easily get stuck into our minds, that it is a purely local matter and no connection with the firm next door. Each of us has his own knowledge, his own methods. What does it matter about what goes on elsewhere. And therefore, it is, to me, a most imaginative thing that there should have been this Association between builders, constructional people in Australia, and those in nearby, or comparatively nearby, Asian countries. It is at once a demonstration of the fact that building and construction are not to be looked at solely in local terms, and of the even greater truth that however clever we may think we are, we always have something to learn from our neighbour.

This is a move calculated to stimulate thought, to stimulate an emulation of each other in our various countries, and to stimulate a rise in technical and technological standards. And this is a good thing for everybody; it is a good thing for us in Australia. We must not detach the problems of life into water-tight compartments and say: "Well, we'll just deal with one". You think of it. What is it that does so much social good in a country like ours, that produces so much of that sturdy fibre which has already made Australia and which must be preserved and encouraged? That note of independence in the mind and in the heart. What is it that does it? Nothing more remarkable, in my opinion, than the creation of homes for ownership and for pride. It is a wonderful thing for me to look back over the last ten years and to realise that the percentage of houses built for ownership in Australia has, in that period, increased enormously and that we should have a population living under its own vine and fig-tree, proud of its home, earning its home, its place in the world. This is one of the greatest things that can happen to a country. And if we are to have ownership and pride, with all the solid citizenship that goes with these things, then it is for the building industries constantly to strive to become more and more efficient; to pursue every advance in quality and economy, because you cannot have a home, you cannot have its ownership or its pride unless the cost of it and the quality of it are able to attract you, having regard to your income and your prospects in life. Cost and quality, and both of these things depend upon an almost religious fervour in the pursuit of more and more efficient methods. After all, a house, a bridge, a great office block, some great works, may be and will be the visible and enduring memorial of the builder, the engineer, the contractor. That is one of the great advantages that he has. His memorial is visible, it is enduring, but the greatest memorial that the Building Federation can have is to know that year by year it is not only by using its own resources, but by cultivating the knowledge and friendship of people from the other countries around the world, that it is improving standards, that it is building better, that it is putting quality into the work and that efficiency has meant that the cost of a home is not prohibited for the very man himself, who works on the job.

I am a great believer myself, in the constant battle for the raising of standards. There is a great temptation in every democracy to lower them, on the ground that to lower the standard is democratic because more people can achieve it. This must be resisted. This Federation, and its allies for this purpose this morning, exists, I venture to say, primarily to raise standards. I believe that it has worked in that sense with great vigor and with great honesty. I have a very profound respect for this work and for the people who are engaged in it. I wish it well. I declare this Convention opened.
