SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. R.G. MENZIES AT THE OPENING OF THE ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION BUILDING, LUCAS HEIGHTS, ON FRIDAY, 18TH NOVEMBER, 1960

Mr. Chairman, Parliamentary colleagues, ladies and gentlemen:

I didn't make a specific reference to Senator Spooner because he, in these parts of the world, is an abiding presence. If he gives you as much trouble as he gives me about this place, then he is active on both fronts.

I don't know why they invite a miserable politician to open a place, the work of which he doesn't understand, unless it is on the cynical principle that politicians are always dealing with things that they don't understand, and this is good enough practice anyhow.

But when I heard the ominous words about some presentation, I remembered at once that two and a half years ago, I think, I went through the motions of opening the Reactor which is now known, I gather, familiarly as "Hifar", though what "Hifar" means I have yet to understand.

And in order that I might have a souvenir of this event they presented me with a beautiful little model of "Hifar", and I keep it in my study at The Lodge. So each time I want a change from meeting, and encountering the eccentricities of Her Majesty's Opposition I go up and I have a look at the model of "Hifar". And I look at it, north, south, east and est, and at the end of that looking, I say to myself: "Menzies, how ignorant you are" - which I believe is very good for the soul - and on the whole very good for the Atomic Energy Commission. (Laughter)

Because on the old principle which the Latins described as 'Omne ignotum pro magnifico' this mystery, this insoluble mystery, as it is to me, induces in my mind such a respect for the work of the scientists, that Spooner gets another half million out of us before we know what has happened. (Laughter)

Still there may be something in common between these scientific people and the politicians. Because just before I came in I was being told by a very distinguished scientist, not far from me, that one of the jobs in the metallurgical section of this building, which I am opening this afternoon, is to try to discover how, when you have an assemblage of matter it falls apart; and how to discover the ways and means of preventing it from falling apart, and making it last for a couple of years.

This is precisely the full-time duty of a Prime Minister dealing with a Cabinet. (Laughter)

I mention that fact to you because it shows that I and my colleagues here are engaged in, really, a scientific undertaking!

A few years ago, not so many years ago, a very distinguished Australian scientist offered a sentiment in public, which was of course, published, that he looked forward to the time when every member of a Commonwealth Government would have a Science Degree. I thought, "What a terrible prospect that would be". I think that the scientists ought to be very thankful to the Federal Government for not including scientists. One or two we might get by with; but twenty scientists, sitting around a Cabinet Table, each of them knowing full well that he knew far more about it than these

homely, and lowly bodies who conduct these actual operations, this would be the very definition, I think, of disaster.

I think that we arrive at a very happy compromise when, as in the case of this Commission, we find assembled together a remarkable team of scientific and technical people who are so persuasive, through their spokesman, Professor Baxter, and through my benighted colleague, Senator Spooner, that they can induce ignorant politicians to do the right thing by them, and to encourage the scientific work that they are engaged in.

Now about that work I just want to say one thing. I may not say it in just two or three words, but one thing.

It is not so many years ago that we were accustomed to reading about the work being done, for example, by Rutherford. These great men who were then piercing the mysteries of nature - and those were the days, in my own time as a student, when the idea of splitting the atom was regarded as a rather rhetorical idea on which a couple of rather amiable people, or many more, were engaged.

Cynical people, unacquainted with science, and unendowed with imagination would say, "Well, what is the point of it? Suppose they do split the atom? What then? How will that affect my standard of living? How will that affect my life? Will that grow me more vegetables? Will that do this or that for me?"- a not uncommon attitude of mind.

And then our attention, the attention of laymen at least having been distracted from this matter, all of a sudden towards the end of the last war came the nuclear bomb; and all this projection into the public mind was a projection of horror. This was the great, ultimate instrument of destruction.

I'm afraid, Sir, that even now, too many people think of research in nuclear physics and all its allied activities, as having something to do with increasing the capacity of man to destroy man. Just as in the earlier days of the war, when we discovered that a thing called "Radar" had been devised, it was thought of, and thought of for years, as an instrument aptly fitted for use in war. It is only since the war that we have discovered the enormous variety of civil and useful purposes to which it can be put.

So I just want to say to you that I think that while war quickens things, while war induces an enormous concentration of resources that may move forward the boundaries of scientific knowledge most dramatically, we are not to think of those things that have been moved forward, primarily in terms of war. We can't forget that aspect of it; but today the work that has to be done in this field is overwhelmingly directed to the betterment of human life and the strengthening of the human future.

When scientists and their helpers in this wonderful enterprise, which has developed so magnificently, and has been so splendidly conducted, are working here, they are concentrating their minds, not so much on how to produce something that might be used to destroy somebody, as they are to fashioning an instrument which will give industrial power to places that now no longer have adequate supplies of material for industrial power. They are concentrating on something that may revolutionise the whole industrial history of the country.

Who knows? - The by-products of these enterprises, in the field of medicine, and engineering, and agriculture, may reach points of revolutionary effect to compare with the tremendous work of the bio-chemists in the course of this century.

It is one of the odd things about us in our generation, that we have fed full on revolutions. There have been more revolutions in our time than perhaps in any other period in history; and some of them revolutions of blood and misery.

But there have been other revolutions in human life which we yet perhaps don't fully appreciate. I remain a little cynical, myself, about satellites in the sky - just a little. I know I'm wrong. I ought to be fascinated by them; but I confess that I am very much more fascinated with the constructive work of the scientists, the enormous revolutions that have occurred in medicine, and engineering, and transport, and in the production of power, and the increase of resources in the world.

For these things the scientists, the devoted scientists, working principally in the dark, so far as the public are concerned, anonymously, relatively unknown, with no headlines, these are the people who constantly lay us under a debt of gratitude that it does us good to remember from time to time.

It isn't very long since this site, where we are, was just a vacant hill-top. It was selected for what I know we thought in the political field, was a rather bold and rather speculative enterprise, to establish an experimental re-actor at Lucas Heights.

Well, what did this involve? What was it for? And I once more want to say that this Commission owes a great deal to my colleague Senator Spooner who has literally never let up on this matter. Finally we became interested. Then finally we said: "Right, this seems a good thing to do". And even two or three years ago it was a mere fraction of what it is today.

I believe that the development here, with over 700 people engaged in their work in this area, is one of the most significant things in recent Australian history. It will not only give us a place in the field of research in these matters, a respectable position in the world, but it will also do and continue to do what has already been happening. It will lead to exchanges of highly trained people, to contributions of knowledge, outward and inward, to a growing association with the Universities, and growing facilities for the ultimate post-graduate and research activities at Universities. This will become a nucleus of advancement in physical science, the limits of which I believe no one can see.

And if anybody supposes that all that kind of progress is not practical - what dividends does it pay? - I make two replies: It will in fact, in the most vulgar sense of the word, pay dividends, because it is going to produce immense practical results in Australia. But if it produced no practical dividends in that sense at all, it would produce an addition to knowledge in this country, and in the world as a whole which would do great honour to this country, and be a source of strength to it in the scientific councils of the nations.

I am very happy to say, before I finish, that this Commission, the executive member of which has been my former humble obedient servant, Mr. Alan McKnight, has been complimented on its work through this thing, that Mr. McKnight goes off next year to be the Chairman of the International Atomic Energy authority sitting in Vienna - a compliment to Mr. McKnight which he well deserves. But a very great compliment to the Atomic Energy Commission of Australia, and to the enormous constructive contribution that it is making to this branch of knowledge, and to the solution of this great modern problem in the world.

Sir, I may tell you that I was given a lot of notes for a speech this afternoon, and following my usual habit of obedience to those who advise me, I read the notes: I didn't understand them, and therefore I've just given you a bit of my own.

I have very great pleasure, indeed, in declaring the building open. (Applause)
