

OFFICIAL OPENING OF MEDICAL BENEFITS BUILDING, SYDNEY

ON

7TH OCTOBER, 1961

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. R.G. MENZIES.

Sir, and ladies and gentlemen:

I speak here under very very great difficulty. I would like to take you into my confidence on that matter. First, they have these wretched lights, which, in my experience render only the rarest people like Sir Ronald Grieve capable of utterance. To me they have nothing but destruction in them. My second difficulty is that Sir Ronald Grieve, himself, having gone through the gesture of sending to my secretary all the things I ought to know in order to make a speech has now, for greater caution, produced them all in his own speech. (Laughter) This is the first "dirty" trick that he has ever played on me. My third disability is one that all laymen here can understand perfectly: I am sitting here under a battery of what I can only describe as "basilisk medical eyes". (Laughter) It is bad enough to consult your own physician and have him look at you, penetrating all the murky secrets of your carcass - I'm speaking only of myself - but to look along and see them all, all equally forthcoming, all looking at us up here, saying to themselves "a clear case of so-and-so", or "I think I would like a blood test", is very embarrassing. Therefore, subject to these disabilities I will proceed to declare the building open. But I suppose that having done that you would expect me to say a word or two about the occasion and what it stands for.

I have been in Parliament, man and boy, State and Federal, for 33 years. I don't want the obvious rejoinder - I get them up at Canberra. I think for most of that time one became accustomed to the problem of sickness, of people having to secure medical and hospital treatment almost as if it were one of the unalterable laws of life. There it was and perhaps nothing very much could be done about it. That is usually, historically, the way in which problems begin to evolve. Then somebody begins to say, "Well the right way to deal with these matters is to put them all in the hands of the Government". We have a great passion for that in Australia. I feel complimented, I do indeed, when so many people who disapprove of me personally, want to put everything in my hands. But that is rather one of our ideas. Well, the Government ought to provide medical treatment; and it ought to do it, of course, by having a great corps of medical people, and nurses, and all those who go with it, and attend to the people, whether they like it or not, willy-nilly. The Government is to do the lot. That is one extreme view. I would doubt whether anybody, today, seriously entertains it. As so frequently is the case, on the other hand you get the extreme view of doing nothing and saying, "Well this is one of those matters that happens and if you can raise the general standard of living then people can provide these things for themselves". So you get the extreme view on each side.

What has happened in connection with this scheme is that there has been a tremendous effort made to get a middle of the road course which will preserve the best aspects of both; a middle course which will retain the precious relationship between doctor and patient - not to be underestimated, I believe, even therapeutically - a tremendously important relationship of mutual confidence; and, of course, after a period of time, of great knowledge and understanding. Keep that; but at the same time do something to get rid of the horror that attached itself for so long to sickness in the house, the bread winner out of action, great financial liabilities incurred, financial assets, perhaps small, dissipated. These things could alter an entire life, destroy the entire family history. Therefore the middle of the line course had to be to make some arrangements which would leave people free from that kind of horror and at the same time not deprive them of that proper feeling of pride and independence which, thank God, characterises our community. Out of those ideas came this scheme.

I very well remember - it is very interesting that Sir Earl Page is here today - because I very well remember the first time he produced what I must tell him quite frankly was a rather hazy outline of this scheme, accompanied by

estimates which were conspicuous for their slight inaccuracy. They were optimistic, let me put it that way. This was his technique: don't make it too clear to these lawyers, or they will have the insides out of you - intellectually speaking - but make all your estimates optimistic and then people will be in a happy frame of mind. A perfect piece of medical work, it was. In the long run, as you very properly acknowledged, this scheme emerged. Of course like all schemes of this kind which don't please either the extreme of this side or the extreme of that side, it was under great criticism. But in spite of the fact that it was under great criticism it has been so seized upon by the people, it has so hit the mark in the social and individual consciousness, that today somewhere between 70 and 80% - I think I am right in saying - of the people of Australia are covered by these voluntary arrangements. Now this, I think, is a splendid thing. Government responsibility, self-help, justice and the preservation of the personal relationships which still remain so important.

Now of course it couldn't have succeeded unless there had been (a) people who believed in it and (b) people who would work, devotedly, about it. In the case of this one, well there is Ronald Grieve. The first time I ever heard of him he was unfailingly reported to us in Canberra as "a very difficult fellow", the sort of man, who, unlike myself, wanted to argue about things. (Laughter) I have no doubt that he argued, with great force, and fought his battles with great force, and when these things were concluded he has set a conspicuous example of devoting his energy to making it succeed. He has around him, as he has already told us himself, hundreds of people, with a spirit of devotion, who know that this is a very great social thing, this is one of the most significant social movements in our time, and who, accordingly, regard it, I've no doubt, as something rather more than a job. People who regard their work as a job achieve without difficulty a state of miserable mediocrity. The people who are going to do things properly must think that it is more than a job, that it is something that calls upon everything that they have in them.

The result of all this has been this fantastic development. I venture to say, ladies and gentlemen, that if, a few years ago, when Earl Page was dazzling us with science in the Cabinet room at Canberra, anybody had said that the day would come when a building like this would find itself, not only in existence, but necessary, housing active people and dealing with thousands and thousands of people, few would have believed it. It is one of the most tangible proofs that I have ever seen of the complete success of the medical benefit scheme, and of the matters associated with it.

I want to compliment you, Sir, I want to compliment all those who have been associated with you, and through you all the thousands of people around Australia who in this and comparable enterprises, are doing so much to make effective what I believe to be, and there are people who agree with me, the finest medical scheme in the world.

Sir, I declare this building open.

---