

OPENING R.S.L. VILLAGE, CHELTENHAM,

2ND MARCH, 1962

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. R.G. Menzies

Sir George, and ladies and gentlemen,

I think I ought to begin by telling you that my appearance here today, and that of my wife, are the result of a long negotiation. Most of last year we were trying to find a date. When we found one that suited George Holland it turned out it didn't suit me; and when we found one that suited me it turned out that it didn't suit somebody else. We got to a point, finally, where we both began to wonder whether, if the event came off at the beginning of March, 1962, I would be here in my official capacity at all. (Laughter) But with his usual magnanimity Sir George took a chance - and I did too. Anyhow on a photo finish here we are - and very pleased I am to be able to be here.

Sir George's referring in generous terms to the Aged Persons' Homes Act is a very interesting conjunction of the planets I may tell you today, because this particular scheme originated in one of those rather abrupt remarks that one's wife makes occasionally at breakfast time. My wife put her finger on this years ago and said, "This is the great problem and why don't you do something about it, the problem of providing proper living accommodation, not in barracks, or institutions, but in an ordinary human way for people who are up in years?" I was stunned by this, but my mind, for once, was quite active, and out came the scheme as we now know it, which, of course, has since been improved. I'm interested to tell you that in her favour because, without any full realisation of it, when the date for today's function was fixed I forgot, you see, that it's her birthday today!

Now, Sir George, there are two or three reasons - I won't be long - why I'm delighted to be here and one of them, if I may start off with yourself, is because you are presiding here today, and have had a great deal to do with this achievement. You know, contrary to the public impression ladies and gentlemen, it isn't all beer and skittles being a Prime Minister. I know there are plenty of applicants for the job at any given moment, but it's really not all that fun, you see. I've been a Prime Minister, now, as anybody can tell you, for too long, for about 12 years, and a bit, on my recent term. During the great bulk of that, for the first 10 or 11 years of that, the Federal President of the League was George Holland. That means in the course of events that he and I, over a long period of time, have seen a lot of each other. It's been a very, very happy association - not because I found it easy to say "No" to him. I occasionally said "No", but quite frequently, as he'll agree, he got away with a certain amount of loot, rightly or wrongly, and we've had a very, very happy personal association.

Now no Government in Australia will be as effective in its work as anybody would expect unless it has representing great groups in the nation competent and responsible people. A Federal Government charged with responsibilities for repatriation, with responsibilities in relation to a mass of things affecting ex-servicemen, and ex-service women, would find it difficult to discharge these responsibilities on a merely departmental basis. So much depends on the quality of the service organisations and the responsibility or irresponsibility with which they put forward their case. I want to say about the League that in my protracted experience as a Prime Minister, and as a Minister, I know of no organisation which has so firmly and agreeably asserted what it believes to be the rights of its members and has so scrupulously refrained from being a mere pressure group.

This is a wonderful record. Of course, although I pay tribute to many many scores and hundreds and thousands of people for it, I would like to say that the people who are at the top themselves can do much to make or mar the relations between the League and the Government. That is my second reason for being delighted to be here.

The third reason is that I am really delighted, time after time, with what is being done in this field - not in creating gloomy institutions, not in giving people an idea that they are put away into a corner and as long as they can eat they are all right. The whole basis of this Village, the whole basis of so many of these Homes that have been referred to is that they reconcile a sort of community life of an agreeable kind, extremely agreeable here with the Bowling Green, with individual life, with a capacity for being private, with a capacity for being at home and visiting your friends, and being visited by your friends, but never just a number in an institution: human beings with every right in the world as all of us hope to have a home of their own as they go along past the active working years of their lives. This has created something that is completely new.

I remember - I'm never tired of saying this - I remember when I was a boy in Ballarat I lived with an old Scots grandmother in a little cottage opposite the Benevolent Asylum which we youngsters knew, irreverently, as "the Benev". From the Benevolent Asylum there came out a trickle of old men, chiefly, with corduroy trousers on, looking a little bit dejected, the whole thing rather sad, rather pitiful, because in those days people didn't understand that you don't cease to be a human being when you reach a certain number of years of life. On the contrary, you become more and more a human being, and you have your own requirements and interests, and you want to live your own life.

What has been going on in Australia I shall always be proud of having had anything to do with - and I have had a little to do with it. I'll never cease to be proud of the fact that we have taken all of that atmosphere away and we have now got to a point where, as this village demonstrates, fellow citizens, ourselves, those who are here, meet on normal human terms, and are able to live happily and enjoy the company of each other and the company of their friends, not feeling that they are a drug on the market, but feeling proudly independent individuals. It's very interesting to me. I've been to a few such places - well, fairly recently. At the last one I looked at I met a man I'd known many years before in Mildura. I didn't know that he was living in this particular place. He was always a cheerful chap, and he was still a cheerful chap: life and soul of the party, all his friends, comfortable home, comfortable circumstances. This to me was such a tremendous improvement on the old idea in which a man could grow old and unfortunate and just sort of disappear from sight.

So we have got rid of all the elements of condescension and of charity. We've substituted for these a feeling of goodwill and of individual responsibility, and of friendship, and of perpetuating a home atmosphere, and a home life. No Government can create those things - it can help to bring them about. But they can be created in physical terms only by the enthusiastic people of the kind who thought of this Village and who have brought it to construction and to completion. I am greatly indebted to them, as you are. I hope that for many, many generations to come this will be a centre of a happy life for, in the long run, hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of men and women.

Sir I have a very great sense of privilege in declaring the Village open.