

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON.
R.G. MENZIES, AT OPENING OF CO-AXIAL CABLE,
CANBERRA, 9TH APRIL, 1962.

Postmaster-General, and gentlemen:

This is really a very remarkable day because it represents the culmination of a very remarkable piece of teamwork. And I am very glad to know, from my colleague, that there are represented here today people who can speak, or think, for all the various groups who were responsible for this achievement.

We live in such turbulent and hurried times that we occasionally forget that history is still being made even though it is made a little more hastily than it used to be made. I daresay that if somebody were living today who could say, "Well my grandfather had a hand in the laying of the first trans-Atlantic cable" this would be a matter of great family pride, great family satisfaction. I hope that we will have enough imagination in future for those who have contributed to this enterprise to be able to hand down to their grandchildren this wonderful constructive tradition.

I'm very sorry Postmaster-General that Sir William Oliver can't be here. He is of course, as you know, in England. And I think perhaps I might be allowed to depart for one moment from the theme to tell you that I had a letter from him the other day. Those of you who know Sir William Oliver know that he couldn't be anything else but an Englishman: tall, straight, almost the Englishman of fiction. And he wrote in a letter to me that he had arrived in England, and when he hailed a taxi the taxi-driver said to him "Where do you come from?" with that charming familiar view that taxi-drivers take in London. He said "From Australia". To which the taxi-driver said "Ah! I knew you weren't an Englishman". To which Sir William Oliver replied "Too right".

Not very long ago I went down to the Olympic Company in Melbourne to open something and I looked at a section of co-axial cable being made and I gazed at it with awe, with wonder. I didn't know what it was about. This shows how out-of-date I am. My friends here could all explain what a co-axial cable is. I can't. All I know is that by some miracle 1200 wretched people can talk on it at the same time. Twelve hundred telephone conversations! Just think of it! I can look back on a time when people raised fine points about tapping telephone conversations. Now how do you tap 1200...? Well I won't go into it. (Laughter) All I know is that I have been told that there are 1200 and something people who will be able to talk simultaneously; and by the wizardry of the Post Office experts each will be speaking to the appointed person and not to somebody else. Now I am all for that - as long as they don't all ring me up at the same time.

I am also told that whereas there are now a million and a half calls per annum between Sydney and Melbourne, which shows that these two States are, after all, getting together, in 10 years' time there will be 5½ million calls. These, of course, are fabulous figures. But they all illustrate one of the miracles of our lifetime.

When I was a small boy in the bush nobody had ever seen a motor vehicle, nobody had ever heard of a telephone; a railway train arrived somewhat precariously once a week, in no great hurry, and it departed later on in the same day; communications were scanty; mail day was a great event. Since that time look at the things that have happened: partly, or mostly, in the field of communications; communications person to person.

Look at the enormous changes that have occurred in flight, in international travel, so that before I cease upon the midnight hour myself I have no doubt that my successor will be leaving Sydney at a certain time one day and arriving in San Francisco before he left Sydney. This is elementary. All these things have changed personal contact around the world.

Then we have communication in other ways so that a photograph taken in London this afternoon may very well be in a newspaper in Australia tomorrow afternoon; so we have the miracles of telex and the teleprinter systems which translate, somewhat roughly, what somebody has said here into what somebody reads at the other end.

Now we have this miracle of direct voice to voice communication. Sir, I have been told, and no doubt authoritatively, that the route of the co-axial cable from Sydney to Melbourne is approximately the route that was taken by Hume and Hovell so many years ago. This is a fascinating thought that in those days brave men, skilful men, had to set out on journeys into an unknown country and after months arrive at a destination and that today they should be memorialised by cairns of stones that "Hume and Hovell passed this way" on a certain date.

Today, with the almost incredible skill that has been developed, the magnificent co-operation that has existed from the most ordinary man sitting on the tail of a trench digger to the most skilled planner and engineer at the top, all this superb teamwork has produced a result so that already, if the spirit moved me, I could ring direct somebody in Sydney, and I am assured by my colleague that before we are much older there will be direct subscriber to subscriber calling between Melbourne and Sydney. And of course this is merely the beginning. This is not the end. In due course we will, in our country, not over rich in people, in numbers, but very rich in resources and spirit and enterprise, have a system of communication between the people of Australia which, I venture to say, will be the envy of most people in the world. This is not done just by some original decision. This is done by a combination of jolly hard work and immense skill. And today we are witnessing the first culmination of this magnificent combination.

Sir, it is a pretty difficult world. It is a world full of misunderstandings. It is a world in which one nation can quarrel so easily, and occasionally so blindly, with another. But I for one believe that the more we get together the happier we will be; that the more we can communicate direct with other people in this world, the more we can hear their voices and sense their feelings, the more disposed will we be to understand that the fellow, or the nation, that we rather disliked turns out to be rather a better fellow, or a better nation, than we had suspected. To me, living in this century of miracles, the greatest of all the miracles has been the development of communication in the flesh, in the voice, in the ear, in the eye.

And that, Sir, is why I am delighted to be here today and to do whatever it is you want me to do in connection with this remarkable development in Australia's communications history. (Applause)