

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. R.G. MENZIES, AT OPENING OF NEW SCIENCE BLOCK AT CANBERRA BOYS' BOARDING SCHOOL, 19TH APRIL, 1962

My Lord Bishop, Headmaster, Mr. Robson and ladies and gentlemen:

I don't quite know in what capacity I am here. I know that in a precarious sense I am here as Prime Minister. (Laughter) I would also have the boys understand, so that they may treat me with proper respect, that purely in an honorary capacity I am a Doctor of Science of the University of New South Wales. Never was any degree less deserved than that one. But still there is a certain satisfaction to be got out of life in getting things you don't deserve because in my experience they are more than balanced by getting the abuse that you don't deserve. (Laughter)

Now Mr. Robson, I would remind the boys who are here, is himself not only connected, as he has described, with this highly imaginative fund, but he is also himself one of the most celebrated headmasters in the history of Australia. (Applause) So he understands both sides of the coin: knows far more about schoolboys than I do; and far more about the working of the fund than I do, though I appreciate both.

I was particularly interested to hear Mr. Robson's reminiscence about the time he was sitting for what was then called Senior Public, because he and I are more or less contemporaries and he told you what a tiny fraction of those who sat for what you now call Leaving were taking science. This is a very remarkable and interesting fact. And it is very interesting indeed, to find that in the Schools, taking them broadly today, such a vast increase has occurred in those who take some aspect of science.

But I want to say this to you because it is worth recording - it bears on this topic - that in spite of all the things that have happened in recent years, in spite of the enormous expansion in University activity and in the provision of funds for Universities, there is, relatively, today a smaller percentage of undergraduates taking Science - percentage of the population - than there was 10 years ago. Now that is a very remarkable fact. I call it a remarkable fact because I learnt it only a few days ago from the Chairman of the Universities Commission. Just let me state it quite plainly, that for every so many of the people in Australia, thousands or millions, a smaller percentage is now engaged in the study of science in the Universities than we had some years ago.

It is worth asking ourselves why this should be so. Because when the enormous post-war impact of scientific development occurred, when, if I may put it quite shortly, science became rather the fashionable topic of the day, my own fear was that perhaps we might become over-balanced on that side and that the great and vital studies of the humanities might fall into disrepair. But that was wrong. This is not so. And when one asks why this is not so the answer is, "well in ordinary professional courses there is, under today's circumstances, a prospect of immediately earning a substantial income". This, in an economic sense, is attractive to students; and attractive to their parents. Whereas science is a hard master in that sense. To become a notable scientist one must be completely devoted to the work, have a sense of mission in the work. Well of course it is people of devotion, and people with a sense of mission who keep this world going. These are the people who matter far more than the people who can return large income tax returns.

If we are to consider the material advancement of Australia, or indeed of any other country, we must have in mind that in this time in the world's history our material advancement will depend first and foremost on science and technology. I'm talking about material advancement, the raising of economic standards. I'm not talking about the development of other, and perhaps more important aspects of man.

But in economic terms a country that falls behind in science and in the application of science through technology is going to fall behind in the race to maintain its population and its living standards and make headway, economically, in the world.

Now, of course, fortunately for us there are many people who understand this perfectly well. The men who established this fund, some of whom are very close personal friends of mine, men of significance in the business world, in the productive world, have set to all their colleagues in that branch of life an example of imaginative industrial statesmanship. Imaginative because it sees clearly through the future years the enormous significance of science teaching, and science teaching in the schools from whence all the university students will come; and statesmanship because they are not taking the short view, which most people do, but the long view which must be taken by some and by many if the country is to go on and prosper.

Now, Sir, one other thing. It is quite clear - and this also was implicit in what Mr. Robson had to say - that to produce scientific undergraduates, to produce post-graduate scientific students, to produce research in science, to produce people in science upon whom our economic future depends, we must begin in the schools, particularly in the later stages by having the best possible equipment, the best possible lab. equipment. Modern science has gone far beyond what we used to regard as science when I was a boy. It now involves, in its higher branches particularly, enormously costly equipment. You are out of date, you are out of the race unless you can maintain the highest possible standard of equipment - and these things cost money. I dare say, Headmaster, that if you had had to depend solely on your own resources in equipping some of these new labs. you would have found yourself in considerable difficulty. It is an imaginative stroke - and I give my compliments to the fund upon it - to realise that you can't start too soon in developing not only a high level of achievement, but such an understanding of the future of your study that you will produce more and more people who will go on and not be satisfied to take a first degree, but want another one; not be satisfied until they have made their contribution to that scientific research which the technologists will take up and apply in industry - whether it is primary or secondary - to the great advancement of Australia.

So, Sir, this is a big day in the history of this School. You have reminded me that I was here to perform a Foundation Stone laying on an earlier occasion. I have, for years and years now, occasionally had myself driven past, or around, this School. I have, as many of you must have, marvelled at the rapidity of its growth. When I first came to Canberra in my more respectable days when I was Attorney-General the population of Canberra was 6,000 odd and you could walk around the whole place on Saturday afternoon without undue exhaustion. Now it is getting near to 60,000 and the statisticians tell us that it will be 100,000 by 1970; and it will be a quarter of a million by the end of the century - some of the boys might make a mental note of this: I won't be here. But that is what we are told. And that is a mere matter of size. But this city is developing character and it must develop character as a capital city if the national growth of Australia is to achieve national terms and a consciousness that we are a nation and not six independent communities. So the growth of Canberra is here; and it would be a poor growth if it were not for the fact that we are embracing in this city, increasingly, a great University, great schools, rapidly achieving great traditions. And this School may hold up its head among any of them. (Applause)