

MELBOURNE HIGH SCHOOL OLD BOYS' ASSOCIATION DINNER  
IN HONOUR OF RETIRING HEADMASTER, W.M. WOODFULL,  
HELD IN MELBOURNE ON 21ST MAY, 1962

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

Mr. Chairman, My Lord Bishop and gentlemen: (Or perhaps I should have said Lindsay Hassett and gentlemen) (Laughter)

Look, if I don't speak up half your luck! (Laughter)

Sir, with very great respect to you I don't think I very much approve of being described in this honorific fashion as a "Guest Speaker" because, really, this is not my night. This is Bill Woodfull's night, Heaven be praised. (Applause). I don't mind telling you that the only reason I had an invitation to come here to propose Bill's health was that they thought it was very desirable that I should do it while I was Prime Minister. (Laughter, applause). So, although I am setting out into what you might call foreign parts in about three days' time, I said "I must be there".

But my real job tonight is to say something about Woodfull and if I stray a little, and to references to anybody else, you will understand that these are mere decorations on the true motive of my speech, which is William Maldon Woodfull.

Now you see at once I strike a note in your minds: Why is he christened William Maldon Woodfull? The answer is quite simple: Because he was born in Maldon. (Laughter) And when I was coming here tonight I thought how lucky that my parents didn't christen me "Robert Jeparit Menzies". (Laughter, applause)

Now your very distinguished guest tonight, William Maldon Woodfull, has been a very versatile person. I am sure that quite a lot of people seeing him only on the cricket ground, and then, as a rule, for inordinate periods of time, little thought that he was a teacher of mathematics, the most depressing occupation I would have thought (Laughter) that beset any man. And he taught mathematics, either so well or so badly, one never knows about these things, that they decided to make him a Headmaster. (Laughter) And for a time he coruscated in my electorate. I'm not going to embarrass him by suggesting that he voted for me, or any of those rather eccentric things (Laughter) but he was there. Then he succeeded, in this very famous School, two very famous Headmasters, Ramsay, Langley, Woodfull. This is a wonderful trio to contemplate isn't it? (Applause) And it is worth contemplating them, because, though we never feel like admitting it when we are at school, headmasters are tremendously important. I'm surprised - and perhaps some of you who are as venerable as I am and who have got the years of wisdom may agree - I'm always astonished to find how a Headmaster I didn't like very much became a legendary figure years after. (Laughter) You find yourself in the company of old boys and you look back 30 years, 40 years, or whatever it may be, and you say, "By Jove, the old man was wonderful wasn't he?" At the time you didn't say that. (Laughter) But the truth is, of course, that a great Headmaster will do more to make a great school than any other single factor. He will do more than bricks or mortar, or a benevolent department, or a kind and charitable Government. (Laughter)

When I looked around tonight and I saw the relatively high percentage of dinner jackets I thought that this talk about depression might have been over-estimated. (Laughter) But anyhow I hope you will agree with me on this - I'm sure you will - that a notable Headmaster helps to make, and indeed in some ways makes, a notable school. And in the case of this school you

have had a remarkable succession of people of consequence, of substance, of personal authority and of personal example. And they have all helped to make you come along and sing that inspiring song which you sang a little earlier, and feel proud of the school through which you passed. Therefore, here's William Maldon Woodfull, a Headmaster, and, I venture to say, a great Headmaster.

If I make a glancing reference to his immediate predecessor, George Langley, I hope you will understand me because this man, Langley, between you and me - I wouldn't wish it to go any further (Laughter) - served me a very ill turn once. He was nominally in charge of a school at Warrnambool (Laughter) and he had enough spare time to take a little interest in politics, fortunately, as I thought at the time, on my side. I went down to Warrnambool to make a speech - it was in a State Election: this was when I occupied a really dignified position and was a State politician (Laughter) - and there was a big meeting at the Warrnambool Town Hall. I was down there, allegedly, to support the candidature of the late J.G. Fairbairn, serum et venerabile nomen, and George Langley met me. He looked very busy. He sounded very busy. And he said to me - "A wonderful meeting tonight! It will be packed and all the other side are going to be here and you'll have a lively meeting." Well, I've never had any feeling of reluctance about a lively meeting (Laughter) and so I said, "Thank you very much, George. This sounds most promising."

I went to the Warrnambool Town Hall. It was full, there's no doubt about that, and I spoke, there's no doubt about that (Laughter) and there was an unbroken silence right through the Hall. I thought "This is no good. What about this fellow Langley who promised me a bit of life in this meeting?" So I then resorted to all - I hope you won't use this against me - all the tricks of the trade to stir them up. I thought I must get some hostility in this meeting. No. It was just like going out and making a speech on a Thursday afternoon in the Kew Cemetery. (Laughter). Well, of course, they had decided that that didn't pay off, so they were silent. But I think that it set George Langley back, in my mind, for a long time. But I recovered; as I have now recovered long enough to realise that George Langley is one of the great enthusiasts in education in Australia and Victoria, and a great master of your own school. (Applause).

Now they tell me that Bill Woodfull is retiring by effluxion of time - the retiring age - in August. You know there is no retiring age to Prime Ministers. (Laughter) In August I will have been, man and boy, at one time or another, Prime Minister of Australia for fifteen years (Applause) and this old friend of mine will retire and sit under his own vine and fig tree while I'm still being chased up and down the entire country. It isn't right. (Laughter) I wish some of you chaps who write those silly letters to the newspapers would start a campaign for the compulsory retirement of Prime Ministers at the age of (Laughter) 65, with a provision for retrospective double pay (Laughter) if their retirement has to be dated back from 67 to 65 (Laughter).

But Bill, all this is good fun and games. I just want to say to you - and I'm saying it not only for myself but for everybody here tonight and, indeed, for hundreds of thousands of people in Australia - that you are being honoured at this dinner tonight because of your character, clear marvellous character so well known to everybody whoever has anything to do with you, your immense skill, your great wisdom and, above all, your warm, simple humanity. (Applause)

Now, gentlemen, if I had as much sense as I had fifteen years ago, I would pause and stop at that point because that is really what I wanted to say about Bill Woodfull. But my attention was drawn to the fact that a certain number of his contemporaries in the cricketing world have been dredged up (Laughter) and placed here tonight - Fleetwood-Smith has been smoking the biggest bent-stem pipe I've ever seen in my life; Vic. Richardson smoking one of my cigars. (Laughter) Therefore, perhaps, I ought just to say a word about that aspect of your life.

This is a little mixed up with politics. You young fellows don't realise how far old fellows like myself go back in the political scene. I can remember a time when, in the Victorian Parliament, I was asked whether I would go up and make a powerful speech somewhere in the Goulburn Valley. And that was at a time when there was a Test Match on. (Laughter) Oh, not here, otherwise I wouldn't have been in the Goulburn Valley, but in England somewhere. And my host on this occasion was a keen cricket lover. We went down to the local hall, we had all the local citizenry there, and in a little anteroom my friend, the chairman who was a solicitor, had installed his clerk to listen in to the broadcast and to send in progress reports. Well, before we got a chance of having one progress report, I had only uttered the first four or five sentences - when the local firebell went. You know what happens in a little country town when the firebell rings: everybody leaves at once hoping that it's the neighbour's house that is being burnt down. (Laughter) And the hall completely emptied. They just disappeared. And I said to the Chairman - "Do you think they will come back?" And he said, "Oh, yes, they'll come back; I've arranged to have the cricket scores." (Laughter) So they came back. Well we got going. At the end of about a quarter of an hour, I was just warming up to point one, you know, this powerful, unanswerable argument, this was it, this was to demolish the Opposition. (I've forgotten whether there was one (Laughter) (Applause) Anyhow this was going to demolish the opposition. When in came my chairman who had "nicked out", as we say, held up a hand like a traffic cop signal, you know, and said - "Excuse me," - I was half way through a sentence. This happened four times: I almost applied for a job as a member of the Indeterminate Sentences Board. (Laughter) (Applause) "Excuse me," he said, "ladies and gentlemen: Australia won the toss, Australia batting, Woodfull 15 not out, Ponsford, naturally, 5 not out". (Laughter) Well this cheered me up immensely, because of course I knew that Bill must have had a couple of "no balls" delivered to him. (Laughter) Then we went on for another fifteen minutes, and there was another interruption, right in the middle of a sentence, and this time it was "Ponsford 27 not out, Woodfull 25 not out". This was a bit awkward. Anyhow when we got along to a stage when this Bill was leading that Bill by 1 the strain was too great; we declared the meeting closed, somebody carried a unanimous vote of confidence in me (Laughter) and we went back to my host's house.

In those days, you had to catch a very early train from this place to get back to Melbourne and I said to this wretched fellow, "Have you any teetotal drink that I might apply myself to?" (Laughter) And with some difficulty he said "No" (Laughter) (Applause) So then I said "Well I must break my principles" (Laughter) and he said "Yes". And we sat there for the rest of the night loosening the laces in our shoes and we heard the whole thing through. I don't think, as a matter of fact, either of them got out that night. I was only surprised next morning to have somebody say to me - "Extraordinary thing, you know, in England, they play cricket in the dark". (Laughter) Anyhow most of that story is quite true. (Laughter)

I wouldn't like to say too much about some of these other characters who are here tonight, I wouldn't. Oh, yes, I must say, yes. Would you forgive me? I am delighted to find tonight my old friend, Mr. Ironmonger, for some obscure reason called "Dainty". Do you know that when Larwood was bowling at his fiercest on the Melbourne Cricket Ground, Ironmonger, always under-rated as a batsman, delivered a clout at one ball which went to the boundary so fast that the eye could hardly follow it. And it was only about eight years ago that I looked over the Committee Box at the Melbourne Ground where I go occasionally by courtesy of Ian Johnson (Laughter) and down below I saw Dainty Ironmonger - I won't say in conversation with Jack Ellis - listening to Jack Ellis (Laughter) so I went down at once. I thought "This is a splendid gathering. I must be in this". And I said to Bert Ironmonger "I've always wanted to ask you: you remember that superb four that you hit off Larwood?" He said "I'll never forget it, never forget it". "Tell me am I right in thinking that your eyes were shut at the moment of impact?" (Laughter) To which he made the classical Australian reply "Too right". (Applause) It is a wonderful thing to see him here tonight. Somebody told me how old he was and I don't believe it. All I know is that he was a great cricketer; and the greatest bowler never to have a visit to Great Britain. (Applause)

Oh, I mustn't take up too much time. But, oh yes, Hassett. Do you know about this fellow Hassett? I've been pretty friendly with this fellow Hassett. He has been a guest in my house in Canberra several times and by and large he has behaved very well (Laughter) His hours have not always been of the most appropriate, but they have always been regular. (Laughter) The other day he went up, keeping an eye on the business, I suppose, to Canberra to the golf tournament and with my usual courtesy and generosity I spoke to him on the telephone - in fact I think he rang me up - (Laughter) and I said, "Lindsay, come round and have a drink before lunch." You know we always keep a bit of Coca-Cola in the refrigerator. And he said - you don't mind Lindsay if I quote this, it deserves to be immortal - he said 'Look I'm terribly sorry, Sir' - he always calls me 'Sir' in public (Laughter) - 'but I'm woman-bound'. I said, "Heaven help me, what does that mean?" 'Well', he said, 'I've got six women with me'. Some of them turned out to be children. So I said "Bring them all old boy" (Laughter) You know it's a wonderful thing, if you get even a modest entertainment allowance, it's wonderful how generous you can be. (Laughter) So I said "bring them round". And he brought them around. There were eight of them if I remember correctly. It was very good. All I know is we had lunch three quarters of an hour late that day.

Ian Johnson,  
 Look, I could go through all these people. I see them: /  
 Vic. Richardson, fielding at silly mid-on. Fabulous! These men have given me the most tremendous pleasure in the world; and they have given it to you too. (Applause). The only remarkable thing is that if you happen to be a fanatic about cricket, as I am, you are occasionally a little put out by the non-cricketing onlooker, with a serious mind. These people oughtn't to be allowed to go to a cricket match. It ought to be confined to the Houses of Parliament. (Laughter) I have a match each time there's a visiting team and Lindsay Hassett, on the last occasion, when the M.C.C. were here was, having received my hospitality and generosity, you know at the Lodge, and all that kind of thing, he was fielding a little ahead of square leg and fairly short, and Colin Cowdrey was batting and Colin had made enough runs (Laughter) - that's a remarkable fact - he had made enough runs and so he decided to go out so he cocked one up about ten yards past Lindsay and Lindsay felt

that this was carrying friendship too far so he let it fall on to the ground and somebody else fielded it and then the next time Colin, not to be outdone in generosity, hit it very high and very short, Lindsay stepped across to the square leg umpire, took his white hat off, caught the ball in his white hat over his shoulder, then appeared to tear the hat to pieces and throw it on the ground and walked off. And one of these humourists you encounter at a cricket match sitting next to me said, "But Mr. Prime Minister, that's not out, that's against the rules of cricket." (Laughter)

Well, of course, you could get me going forever on this because I happen to be one of those fellows who have, believe it or not, a lot of very heavy, serious and responsible matters to attend to in my own life and to me cricket, and the cricketers have been the great joy of life.

And that brings me back to this great captain of Australia. (Applause) Most people in the course of their lives manage to make some enemies, manage to have some knowledgeable critics, manage one way or another to be involved in what they are pleased to call, I believe, "incidents". I venture to say there is no captain of Australia, no captain of Australia ever went out of the game leaving behind him a more untouched reputation, a greater affection, a greater respect than William Maldon Woodfull. (Applause)

Sir, having bored everybody stiff, may I now have the privilege of proposing his toast. Bill Woodfull, Headmaster, scholar, cricketer and friend.

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