

OPENING OF CYRIL ROSENBAUM MEMORIAL
WING AT SIR MOSES MONTEFIORE JEWISH
HOME, HUNTERS HILL, N.S.W.
ON 19TH AUGUST, 1962.

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

Mr. Chairman, Rabbi Porush, Rabbi Brasch, Mr. Mayor,
Parliamentary Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen :

I think I ought to begin by going back to the beginning (there's something to be said for that) and thank the Mayor for his welcome to this old and famous municipality. I always knew that it was old; I read about it in the early history of Sydney, and I had no idea that it had been prosperous so long until I saw his Mayoral chain. (Laughter) I gathered that there were 65 affairs - whatever you call them - on it, all looking remarkably like gold.

But, Sir, it is very kind of you to come here to welcome my wife and myself to this municipality. We are delighted to be here. And, of course, we are particularly delighted to be here once more on an occasion like this. When I was thinking about it this morning, I said to my wife, "Well, it is only five years ago that I went out there - dragged out by John Cramer, practically by the hair of the head - and opened a wing of these great homes." And I said, "As it is only five years ago, there is a serious risk of having forgotten what I then said and I may say it all again, subconsciously, and people will be very gravely dissatisfied." However, that's a risk that one has to take. It is all right for my friend, Mr. Rosenberg, to say that he's a man of few words. That seemed to me to have all the charm of novelty, that remark. (Laughter) But, still, he said it and therefore let it stand. He's a man of few words. Nobody could ever say that about me. (Laughter) A man who makes as many speeches in the course of a year as I do probably repeats himself most intolerably.

But, Sir, reference has been made as to how this began and it is worth saying it again because when I was much younger, when I was a schoolboy in a city called Ballarat which, as some of you may know, is in the State of Victoria, there was a large and rather forbidding-looking, dreary building which occupied an entire block and it was called the Benevolent Asylum. Even then as a boy I realized what a shabby affair it was. How little it liked like a home for anybody, except "Home" as if it belonged, as it did, to a Government Department. And that had a depressing effect on me. If it depressed a high-spirited youngster, what it did to the people who lived in it I can only imagine. Therefore, this has always been a little bit in the back of my own mind.

In 1954, I was casting around for some new development in the social service field. My wife produced the key that ultimately opened the door because she said, "You know, I hear a lot of talk about pensions and about other forms of benefit, but do you know the great problem of people getting old? It is the problem of having a home to live in that is their own space where they can live with other people but still maintain their identity as individuals. I don't know how you can do it, but that is the thing you ought to try to do." And out of that emerged this scheme.

It began by a provision that where primarily religious and charitable organisations wanted to establish a Home for elderly people, we would subsidise to the extent of pound for pound. It was slow to get going. It is interesting to look back on it, but the first year I don't think that we laid out more than half of what we had anticipated, but it takes a little time for these ideas to gather weight. It takes a little time for people to realise that if you can get some generously-minded people to find a pound - a pound - a pound and have two pounds added each time, you develop a large sum of money and you can do things that you might not have thought of. But in the result - the scheme is now, I think, a little more than seven and a half years old - we have as a Government already made subsidies or arranged for subsidies to the tune of nearly £14M, and the amount is growing, and I want to tell you that every year at Budget time, Treasurers get paler and paler and their colleagues get paler and paler. Items of expenditure are investigated, allegations of extravagance fly quite freely around the room, but on this item not a penny off. It can double and we'll be happy. (Applause).

The second thing that it does, I believe, is to give an opportunity to generously-minded people, whether they are rich or not so rich or poor, to do something at a sacrifice to themselves with the knowledge that its effect will be trebled and therefore nothing that they do is quite small. This, I think, is a stimulating idea.

Of course, Sir, the Jewish community which, like the Scots, has occasionally been accused of being a little mean - you have heard that allegation, haven't you? - the two most charitable races in the world have always been accused of being a little close, or, as they would say in Scotland, a little near. But your community has a record of social responsibility, particularly to its own people which I think is unequalled in the modern history of the world. It always gives me great pride I have been to a number of openings of one kind or another for the Jewish community here and elsewhere and I must say that I always go with a high feeling of pride that I am the citizen of a country that produces people of such generosity and imagination. Of course here today you have it in a big way. There seems to be no limit to what Mr. Rosenbaum is prepared to do.

I have known a few people, haven't you - who became rich and mean and who seemed to have only one ambition and that to leave a vast fortune to their children who as a rule dissipate it within two generations. We have seen a lot of people like that. It's a wonderful thing to see a man going along in life who has money, who has worked for it, who has accumulated some money, who finds his highest pleasure in giving it away; and giving it away in circumstances that will produce the maximum of pleasure for as many people as possible. (Applause)

Just a quick glance around as I came in indicated that parsimonious fellow, Sir Adolph Basser, was here. (Applause) It isn't for nothing that your community has produced such people and when Rabbi Brach was speaking so eloquently, I thought he put his finger on the reason for it. I realised for the first time, as he quoted the text, that with you, charity is not just a kindness, it is in a true sense a duty. And this is the most illuminating exposition to my mind that I have heard. It explains so much.

He also referred - or was it Rabbi Porush? - to the element of dignity. Now this is it about these Homes... You know the old institutional idea of people just herded together, given the minimum of attention, with all the cold aura of officialdom about it, because officialdom has to be cold, that's the way it is built -- but today in Homes like this we have aimed at preserving the dignity of man, the dignity of woman, instead of herding them together as if they were now at the end of their run and could be forgotten or treated as numbers in a book. But human beings, living in a state of civilisation, living in a state of dignity, meeting their friends, living the same kind of lives as they have always wanted to live and doing this in circumstances of beauty and pleasure and social intercourse and dignity - this is it. When a man loses his dignity - I don't mean pomposity, that's a detestable thing - the moment a man loses his inner dignity, he loses much of his manhood. It's essential to preserve it. We may all thank God that we have in our community and you in yours people endowed with a divine understanding of these matters and a willingness to make powerful contributions to achieving the results.

Sir, it's a very great pleasure to be here again. I marvel more and more at what your community has been able to do and when I say your community, no-one knows better than I do that it has not made itself something apart in Australia, it has infused its influence throughout Australia. To go back a little time, there were not so many Jews in Australia in the early thirties, not so many, relatively few. The numbers have increased very considerably since then. Some, of course, have been here for so long and for so many generations that they know this is, in a true sense, their own country, and there are others who have arrived comparatively recently who feel strange, a little diffident, who may come from countries where their own race and their own religion have been abused, and sometimes tortured - all these things we have in mind. But to all of you I say, "Forget all about that. This is a wonderful country. A wonderful country." (Applause) It is only fools who nurture prejudices in a country like Australia. Somebody occasionally says to me, "Do you think there is any anti-Semitism in Australia?" My reply is, "Look, if I thought there were, I should have sleepless nights. I couldn't imagine anything more stupid." Because here we are, we are all Australians, whatever our religion may be, whatever our politics may be - we are all Australians. We all have a duty and a pleasure to live with each other. To live in happiness. There is nothing better for a non-Jew like myself, nothing better for me, than to come here and look around me and see what is being done and feel proud of my Jewish fellow-citizens.

Sir, my wife and I are both delighted to be here and for myself, though I think you do me too much honour by inviting me twice to the same place, for myself I want to tell you, with all sincerity, that it is a singular honour to be able to declare this Wing open.
