

SPRINGVALE HIGH SCHOOL SPEECH NIGHT
HELD AT SPRINGVALE, VICTORIA, ON
12TH DECEMBER, 1962.

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

It seems to me that I have to make a personal explanation about what we say in Parliament when we pretend that somebody has misrepresented us. I ought to explain how I came to be here because this is quite a story.

Last week at four o'clock in the morning, on Friday (I remember it well because as I was going home to the Lodge, the birds were twittering in the trees (Laughter) and the dawn was coming in from the east, oddly enough (Laughter) - and I very seldom see the dawn break) but the reason for it was that at four o'clock in the morning on Friday we were just finishing the Parliamentary Session and I was wishing everybody a very, very Happy Christmas (Laughter) and hoping a little for one myself.

You know, Members of Parliament, let it be admitted, have a lot in common with schoolboys. I say nothing about schoolgirls. I have never dared to pretend that I understood what went on in their minds, but I know something about schoolboys (Laughter) and you fellows know perfectly well, don't you, how there is a temptation to leave it and leave it and leave it until the examinations are looming up and then work like mad to catch up the arrears. Now that is exactly what we do in Parliament. (Laughter) We go along fairly leisurely, week after week, week after week, and in the last week, the Minister in Charge of the House says, "Well, if we are going to get through by Friday morning, boys, we'd better have a few late ones." And we then proceed to sit up until all sorts of absurd hours. And so on Friday morning, at four o'clock in the morning, the Session ended and I went Home.

And yesterday, we had the last Cabinet Meeting - I hope - (Laughter) before Christmas and we finished at something after eleven o'clock last night, and when we had all wished each other a Merry Christmas and hoped that we wouldn't see each other again in the Cabinet room for quite a time, two or three of my colleagues said to me, "Well, I suppose you'll take a few days off now." "Well," I said, "I'm going to Springvale tomorrow night to a school speech night", and I don't mind admitting to you that they looked at me as if I needed some medical attention (Laughter). "But why?" they said, "Why must you go - what have you got to do with Springvale?" To which I replied, "Well, nothing yet but" (Laughter) I said, "I am going to Springvale, to the High School, for a variety of reasons, but perhaps the most compelling one is that I happen to be an old friend of the Headmaster, and the Headmaster is, in my opinion, not only a talented and devoted teacher, but he's a fine friend and a great citizen." (Applause) And I said, "I think that's not a bad reason for going out." But as he has been speaking tonight, I've thought of one or two additional matters.

After I had left a State school in Ballarat, I went to a little secondary school which disappeared many years ago, but was then just struggling towards its close. I don't suppose we had more than 32 or 35 boys at the school at that stage. There were six doing Intermediate or what was then called Junior Public. I notice, Sir, that you have got through 112 in Intermediate.

What a community of scholars you are - 112! - and fifty something in Leaving. We had six. You might say, "well, that's pretty poor. That must have been a miserable little school." But I want to remind you that the quality of a school depends on the quality of the people who go through it, and the success of a school, in the long run, won't depend just on numbers, it will depend upon you - a few dozen of you in this room tonight; and the kind of things you do in the world for the benefit of mankind - let's hope - for out of the six who were in that Junior Public class, four were Final Honours scholars in their courses at the University. Four out of six. I know that because I happen to be one of them. (Applause) And, Sir, that means that we must never be bemused by numbers.

I am talking to the boys and girls tonight. Being a parent, and a grandparent, myself, I know that most of us in that rank are beyond redemption. You know, we have settled into our habits of mind, whatever they may be. I am talking to the boys and girls. Never allow yourselves to think that something wonderful that has happened to somebody else can't happen to you. Never get into the frame of mind of thinking that there are some people in the world who are lucky enough to do things and that this is purely a matter of luck.

Here is a school of 1,000. This is a very big school and it will be bigger in future, I fear, because all schools tend to get a little bigger. One thousand! I want you to realize that in this very thousand, there are boys and girls who some day as men and women will be celebrated people - people of great significance, people of great influence, people of great quality; and that apart altogether from the ones who may get their names in the newspapers - which, I assure you, is not very hard to do - apart altogether from those, there will be hundreds who will never get their names into the newspapers, but who will be helping to keep the world moving and to keep it a good place to live in. Therefore, don't underestimate yourselves; don't underestimate your chances.

Now, having said that, I just want to offer a few homely observations about the things that we all disliked when I was at school and that, for all I know, many of you dislike today. For example, I always wanted to be a lawyer - a very decent ambition, I think. I wanted to be a lawyer. I wasn't interested in anything else. And I hated having mathematics drummed into me. I suppose some of you chaps do. I don't know - you might all be scientific geniuses, but I hated having mathematics drummed into me and I might have been heard to say, "Oh, what's the use of this. I want to be a lawyer. Lawyers don't have to work out sums. Lawyers don't have to engage in all the tricks of a mathematical trade. Why should I worry?" And, of course, it wasn't long after I became a lawyer that I realized how indebted I should feel to people who had made me study mathematics because there is no near enough about mathematics. You are right or you are wrong. You can't ride off by saying, "well, you know what I mean," or "You know, you get the general idea" to the examiner. You can't do that with maths. You are right or you are wrong. Your mind is working with precision or it isn't. And, believe me, if you are going to be a lawyer, for example, you will need to have a considerable amount of precision in your mind. The world is full of inaccurate thinkers. The world is full of people who have slovenly minds, who say "It's good enough. It's near enough." You take my tip. The day will come, whatever you do, when you will be very thankful that you were required under some form of compulsion to do some study which was in its nature exact.

And then I have heard people - I have seen them in my own home and elsewhere - who took great exception to having to learn poetry by heart. Any of you like that? I daresay. In my days at school in Melbourne, they had an examination of the Shakespeare Society. Perhaps, Headmaster, it still goes on, does it? But the play, the Shakespeare play for the year, was the set piece, so to speak, and if you wanted to enter for the Shakespeare's Society examination, you had to learn and be prepared to write down, on demand from the examiners, 3,000 lines of the play. And I had a pretty good memory, so I could learn my 3,000 lines. Do you know, I don't regard it, looking back on it, as a difficult thing, an unpleasant thing. I don't understand the point of view of people who say, "Well, why should I have to learn poetry by heart. I am not going to be an actor. I am not going to be a poet." Let me tell you that when you are as old as I am - you know, a white-haired old doddering fellow like me - you will be very grateful that you learnt a lot of things by heart. You will find them coming back into your mind. You will find that they are tremendous company.

You know, Sir Archibald Wavell - later Lord Wavell, the great soldier in the Middle East in the last war - published an anthology of poetry, a fairly considerable one, a beautiful selection of English verse and he included in it nothing that he didn't know by heart. Here's a great soldier, heavily concerned with matters of war, going through many dark periods in the Middle East, well before El Alamein in the last war, and yet that man refreshed his mind and cheered up his spirit by the recollection in quietness of the poetry he had learnt by heart. And I repeat, the only ones in the book are the ones that he could set out by heart. Therefore don't regret what you do in that field.

And then, thirdly, might I say some thing about this. Good speech is unduly neglected, I think today. There are too many people who think it is good enough to talk out of the corner of their mouths and to offer up something that sounds like Hottentot and who, on being questioned will say, "Well, you know what I mean" out of the corner of their mouth. This is no good. Our language is, I believe, somewhat dogmatically, the greatest and most flexible language in the world. It is a marvellous language, and whatever you do in life, you will find that you can do it better and achieve better results in the doing of it if you can explain yourself to other people, if you convey your ideas to other people. And if you are going to do that, then you must have some respect for the language. Don't be one of those silly fellows - I'm still talking to the boys - who thinks that if he speaks correct English, he'll be regarded as a bit odd, because correct English is the smallest debt that we owe to the language that has been bequeathed to us by our forefathers.

I wonder, Sir, if I could just illustrate that a little without taking too long. Over here there is a University - Monash University - named after Sir John Monash. Sir John Monash was a magnificent engineer. He was a great authority on patent law. He was a very great soldier, many would say one of the greatest soldiers in the English-speaking world in this century. A very remarkable man. I was among the perhaps limited number of people who knew that on top of all these things he was a magnificent advocate. He could put a case, he could explain himself with such clarity, with such persuasiveness that if you went into a little audience and listened to Monash, doubting him, you always

came out completely convinced that he knew what he was talking about and that he was right. This is an aspect of his life that is not very commonly known. I would venture to say, speaking without authority, that Monash's enormous achievements in war would not have been possible unless he had developed his capacity for speech and expression to the point that he ultimately reached. Worth remembering that because there are other things about him that are better known.

I mentioned Lord Wavell just now. Wavell was a wonderful example of a strange mixture because by word of mouth he couldn't explain himself at all. To have a conversation with him, as I had many times early in 1941, was a trying experience because you would say something, earnestly invoking a reply and Wavell would just look at you and say, "Oh," or "Mm" or something like that. But when he sat down in front of a piece of paper to write a despatch or to write anything, he wrote like an angel. Here again, a man who understood the enormous importance of our language.

And then, of course boys and girls, the greatest example of the lot - Winston Churchill. There may have been many men who knew as much about running a war as Winston Churchill. There may have been many men who knew as much as he did or more about running a Parliament. Yet there was nobody on earth who, when it came to the point of crisis, who could stand up in Parliament or behind a microphone and talk to the entire world with such moving and yet simple eloquence. If Winston Churchill had not, when he was your age, set out to make himself a master of his own language and a master of the literary resources of his own language, I don't think he could have done what he did in the last war, and if he couldn't have done what he did in the last war, then the whole history of the world today might have been grievously changed.

Now, Sir, I won't labour that matter. I will just end up where I began by saying to you, "Don't make up your minds that you are just going to be the same as everybody else." There are plenty of people in the world who are just the same as everybody else. Make up your mind down inside your heart that you are going to be a bit different, that you are going to do something different, and when people say, "Oh, he's different", forget about it. It will be a very good thing to be. What we want in this country, what the world wants is a lot of people who are different, who are individual human beings, who have their own character and their own quality and their own ambition. You will have a lot of older people who will say to you about yourself or about some friend of yours, "Oh, he's very ambitious," as if that word was something disreputable. Believe me, ambition is a great thing in the world. Not conceit, not silly vanity, but ambition - a belief down inside yourself that there are some things that you can do and you are determined to do them; these are the things that make the world move on, and in due course when this school is seventy years old and not seven or eight or whatever it may be, there will be another Headmaster addressing another audience with other sets of parents. I believe that if you do what I have been rather prosily advising you to do, that Headmaster will be able to say in his report that in the last seventy years of its history, this school has produced A, B, C, D, E - immense achievements, great contribution to social life, a great contribution to political life, but above all a great contribution to human life, the principles of justice which can only be preserved if you all set out to be individuals, to be yourselves and not to be afraid.
