

OPENING OF THE VASEY HOUSING AUXILIARY
HOMES AT MANNINGTREE ROAD, HAWTHORN,
VICTORIA, ON 17TH MARCH, 1963.

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies

Mrs. Vasey and Ladies and Gentlemen :

I don't really have to make a speech to you this afternoon, because I have a variety of very good reasons for being delighted to be here. After all, this is in Manningtree Road and about two doors along, many years ago, I used to be found hanging around with a rather sheepish look - you know - because my wife lived there. (Laughter) Between her charms and the smell of the pittosporum hedge, I was a "goner". (Laughter) Well, that I think, is a very interesting thing to remember.

And then I have been fascinated to feel that I was coming here this afternoon because something was going to be done on behalf of war widows, strongly promoted by a very famous war widow, Mrs. Vasey herself. (Applause) I had the singular good fortune to be a friend of her late husband, one of the most famous fighting soldiers in the history of Australia. (Applause) I always remember with some satisfaction, when I first went out of office - I know you are all looking forward to the second occasion (Laughter) - but when I first went out of office, I met George Vasey who was known as "Air" when we were at school together - "Air" Vasey - Allan. He addressed me in a public place in language that would have done credit to Mr. Rose at Alice Springs. (Laughter) And he wanted to know why I wasn't still Prime Minister. I remember this vividly because he was the only man who thought that way at that time.

But Mrs. Vasey, I would hate this occasion to go by without me saying on behalf of everybody here, and hundreds and thousands of people who are not here, that your spirited and splendid work for war widows is one of the great things in the contemporary history of Australia. (Applause) I am sure that you very frequently disagree with me, but I never disagree with you. (Laughter)

Now the third thing I want to say is that the pretty girl I was - what's the old-fashioned expression? - courting - is that out of date now? - in Manningtree Road made the great error of marrying me and then in due course I became a politician and she survived that and so it went on. And one morning, years and years ago, she said to me, "You know, you talk about social services, but the one thing that really matters is housing for old people. This is, I think, a great social problem." And for once in my life I listened to my wife - husbands don't always, you know - and so I gave it a little thought, and I finally went to my Cabinet and said, "Let's have some scheme under which housing can be provided - not institutional housing, not these great barracks of places in which people feel they are numbers and not human beings - but let's have some system under which houses can be built or flats or whatever it may be, so that people live as individuals and mingle socially as they would in their ordinary private days."

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And so we began this scheme and whatever ugly things may be stated in my obituary (and I can well imagine them), I am hoping that even in some of the obituaries this great scheme may find a place; because we began by saying, with that almost mechanised reaction that governments have - "pound for pound". It is like saying, "one man one vote." You know - "pound for pound" and "we'll find a pound for a pound" and since then, as you know, we've improved on it. It is very interesting to realise that although this was a highly experimental matter - when? - 5, 6, 7 years ago, somewhere around there, we have at present, committed ourselves as a Government of £16M. And that means, if I am rightly informed by the learned clerks in my office, that when the present approved grants have been expended, there will have been accommodation provided for 15,000 people. (Applause).

Well, of course, I can hardly refer lightly to the Vasey Housing Incorporated, because to tell you the truth, I was always more frightened of Mrs. Vasey than I was of George (Laughter), and she has a habit of getting her own way, and quite rightly. She is a charming pirate when it comes to dealing with governments. But the best proof of this is that when the current project is completed, Commonwealth grants in favour of this auxiliary will have totalled just on a quarter of a million pounds. Now this, I think, does some trifling credit to the Commonwealth, which usually gets so little that it might as well claim some, but above all things, it demonstrates the enormous energy and enthusiasm and imagination that has been put into this scheme. And this, of course, is quite right.

I am getting along in years myself. I read in one of the Melbourne papers the other day when I was honoured by Her Majesty that perhaps this would be a good opportunity to make way for a younger man. (Laughter) I think it is. Bring him along, please. But, anyhow, we are all not any younger than we were, but I have felt for years now that I would hate, towards the end of my own life, whatever my circumstances might be, to be regarded as one of a regiment of people.

I wonder if I might say something to you that I have said before, but not to you. When I was a schoolboy in Ballarat, I lived with an old Scots grandmother who had restricted views, being a good Scots grandmother, about life and about what I ought to do and all this kind of thing, but over the road from the cottage in which she lived, was the benevolent asylum, curtly known in those days as "The Benev." Corrugated iron fence, horrible-looking old building, everything rather musty, horrible as I now know, institutionalised - all that has gone - and nothing has done more to dispose of it than this great scheme and the work that people have done.

Nobody in this place will feel obliged or institutional in any way. This is the answer to it, that people should live in their own homes, whether those homes are houses or flats or whatever they may be, that they should live, as Mrs. Vasey beautifully put it, in dignity and not

in dependence, living their own lives, living among their own friends, feeling that this is something which continues their citizenship of the country and which doesn't bring it to an end. Now this, to me, is a marvellous thing. It has every human appeal in the world. And it is for that reason, above all things, that I am delighted to be here. Of course, I would be here if I were not delighted even, because I am a little nervous about Mrs. Vasey and so if she had said, "Now, come on, my boy," I would have "come on, my boy," you see. (Laughter)

But putting all that on one side, I am delighted to be here, because the great social problem of our times, the great social problem of the last ten years, fifteen years, has been to create in our social services an abiding and warm sense of humanity - not of charity, but of loving kindness in the true sense, of friendliness. So that everybody, whether he's living or she's living in a great mansion on inherited riches or living here or living somewhere else, will feel that there is an atmosphere of human kindness and that we, the people of Australia, are not being charitable or condescending, but that we are friends together. Now this, to me, is the great secret of this matter and it stands to the credit of Mrs. Vasey and all those who have worked with her that instead of regarding themselves as people who exercise pressure on governments - which they do occasionally very courteously - they have primarily regarded themselves as concerned with the continuing good life and good living of the women for whom they speak.

The last thing I want to say to you is every now and then I hear arguments about widows and trying to classify widows - I am not going into this business of classifying widows - but for myself there is a very special place in my heart for women who are widows because their husbands served this country to the last extremity of death. This is something not to be forgotten. And it is because in my own imperfect way I have been remembering it that I was proud and honoured to come here today to declare this new group of buildings open and to observe the command of my old friend, Mrs. Vasey.
