

OPENING OF THE T. & G. BUILDING, HOBART  
PLACE, CANBERRA, ON 20TH MARCH, 1963.

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

Mr. Brain and Gentlemen:

For a long time now I have regarded Hugh Brain as a good friend. Whether I can still put him in that category will depend entirely on the close study that I will give to the full text of his speech (Laughter) when it is available to me.

Anyhow, I am free to admit that this is a good day for him; it's a good day for Canberra; it's a good day for life assurance; it's a good day all round. He, obviously, has been cramming up part of the history of Canberra. I came here myself, a relatively new boy, in 1934, so that you can realise that having been here, engaged very actively in national political affairs for twenty-nine years, you will understand perfectly why so many people refer to me in the venerable sense. (Laughter)

At that time there were a few thousand people here. There were a few shops. The residential areas were quite small; the great development in Canberra has in fact occurred since the war. And what a marvellous development it is. I know that only twelve years ago - I think I am right in saying - there hadn't been a new shop, for example, a new place of business built in Canberra for a long, long time, for obvious reasons. Now, I find that if I go away for the weekend, which I do occasionally to visit one of the more degenerate capitals like Melbourne or Sydney, when I come back there is another incipient skyscraper beginning to show up on the landscape. The development in this place has been phenomenal. That is to a very large measure due to the wisdom of the Government in appointing John Overall to conduct a Commission and its equal wisdom in giving him what I might describe, with apologies to the Treasurer, as adequate financial backing. (Laughter)

And one thing leads to another, and the result is we have these great office buildings, we have these great establishments rising up in Canberra, so that more and more people are beginning to understand that this is not just some funny little village, tucked away in the country rather to be resented by the existing States, but that it is increasingly a national capital and will take its place in the life of the nation so that as soon as we become accustomed to thinking nationally rather than parochially, which is very important, it will take its place in the life of Australia just as Washington does in the United States and, indeed, just as London does in the life of the United Kingdom.

And I think that it is a marvellous thing that this great movement in Canberra should have been powerfully assisted by imaginative men of affairs conducting great existing institutions. And the T. & G. is one of them. The T. & G. not only makes its own mark in Canberra, but it helps to make a mark for Canberra. This is a real contribution to the history of the capital city of what will be in due course one of the great nations of the world. (Hear, hear) And so this is, in that sense, an historic event.

It is also, I imagine, quite historic in the individual history of the T. & G., because whenever I have to perform one of these rather agreeable tasks, somebody is bound to send me what they call some documentation on the matter, beginning in this case with the list of the Directors. I read that list and I recoiled a little because I knew most, if not all, of them. (Laughter) I said to myself, "Well, he's got on. Yes, that's right." (Laughter) But in particular, I was fascinated to get, for the first time, a clear explanation of how this became to be known as the "Temperance and General" - the T. & G., and I found to my intense satisfaction that at the time I was born, the total funds were roughly a quarter of a million and that membership was confined to total abstainers. Well, of course, at that time, let me see .... I would be a couple of years old ..... I was a total abstainer; (Laughter) therefore well qualified for membership. But then I looked back at the list of the Board of Directors (Laughter) and I thought, "Ha, ha. Changes have come about in the world." And so, quite true at a certain stage in the history of the Society, those who drink fermented, malt or spirituous liquors were admitted to the benefits of the T. & G. Whether that is the cause or not, I would hate to say, because I don't want to become involved in more arguments than I am already involved in, but I do notice that whereas the funds were a quarter of a million, they are now to be counted in hundreds of millions. The growth of this Society has been phenomenal. That I think is a matter for great satisfaction.

The third thing that pleases me is that this is not the only Society of its kind in Australia. There are others, some of the great ones exhibiting similar growth in modern times. That makes one say to oneself, "What is the great advantage of this?" And, of course, you are quite right, Sir. The great advantage of this is that, as the practice of assurance of this kind grows, so does the stability of the community grow, and I am old-fashioned enough to believe that the foundation for future tremendous national growth is a good stable foundation, and the stability of this country, the stability of families, the stability of individuals, the stability of governments is intimately wrapped up with the widespread acceptance in Australia of the practice of life assurance. I don't think it exists in other countries. I don't know, I have no statistics. I have always had a feeling it doesn't exist in many other countries to the extent that it does here; because I know, to take myself as an example, most of us of my generation in the twenties were taking out some life assurance, as much as we could afford to take, knowing in the back of our minds that some day that would give us a feeling of security and stability that might set us free for other more enterprising activities in our own lives.

Therefore, I think that this country, this society of people owes a tremendous debt to the imaginative people who, in the last century, set about creating life assurance practices in Australia. They must have been regarded as rather odd fellows, in a sense adventurers - "Well how are you going to get people to pay you premiums?" "How do you know you will ever be able to meet the sum assured?" "Until you have developed a large volume of business how do you suppose you are going to get the confidence of individuals?" I know this is true, looking back over the history of life assurance societies. But the people who began them, they had some imagination, they had courage and their courage has been rewarded in the hands of their descendants and in the pockets and lives of the people of Australia.

The only other thing I want to say is this. It is perhaps something that perfectly illustrates the kind of theme that I have been talking about. I am a great believer in continuity. Some people may say, "Oh, well, he's a great traditionalist." Yes, I am, if you like. It doesn't mean to say that I don't recognise change. I have been responsible for quite a few myself in my own time. But I am a traditionalist in this sense that I believe that a sense of continuity in the minds of men and women is one of the great assets of life. We didn't suddenly pop up and will disappear tomorrow. We are not here today and gone tomorrow. We are in a continuous procession of people, and we can look back on fathers and grandfathers and mothers and grandmothers and look forward to what our own grandchildren or great-grandchildren may be doing and like to feel that they are all in something that they are determined to carry on. This, I think, is of the essence of sanity.

I have said before today that anybody who cares to read the great speeches of Winston Churchill in 1940 and 1941, 1942 and cares to go back and read the great speeches of the younger Pitt at the time of the Napoleonic threat of the invasion of Great Britain will find the same thing in them, differently expressed, each garnishing it with his own eloquence; the same principles, the same things, the same courage, this sense of continuity that has been the greatest thing in our race and in our history. And it is illustrated in an individual sense here because one of the very first directors of this Society was a Stewart and he was succeeded by his son who was a great friend of mine, I am happy to say, and he by his son who is here today. How many years of Stewarts? I don't want to raise questions about the '15 or the '45 now that I am mixed up with the Thistle (Laughter) but a fair span of decades of one family, and that's a jolly good thing. It's a splendid thing to think that a Society of this kind now so tremendously strong, so able to be vigorously enterprising, has been the result of work and devotion and courage on the part of generation after generation.

Sir, I am delighted to be here. I compliment the Society on this remarkable achievement and I wish you the greatest possible success.

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