

OPENING OF THE MARGARITA WOOL FESTIVAL,
HELD AT MARGARITA, VICTORIA,
ON 30th MARCH, 1963

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

Sir,

I am very much indebted to my good friend, Mac Holten, for having twisted the truth a little in my favour (Laughter) because there are plenty of people who will, quite cheerfully, twist it to my disadvantage, and therefore I am very grateful to him. The one quarrel I have with his statement is that my wife and I are both rather, by derivation, political people.

Could I just refer to that because John Leckie was the Member for Benambra (Laughter) and then he was the Member for Indi (a seat with which you have some acquaintance) (Laughter) and then a Senator. And my father was the Member for Levan in the State Parliament, and then, of course, I drifted into this arena, in both State and Commonwealth, myself. Indeed, my wife, if she were in the mood to write my biography or some snatches of it, would tell you that I used to look at her across the aisle of the Cairns Memorial Church in East Melbourne when I was an old fellow of about 15 and she was a junior boarder at the Presbyterian Ladies College (Laughter) at the ripe age of 11, and, I assure you, quite lovely.

Years went on and my family went to live at Camberwell and she went to Pintona and once more we met under the aegis of the Reverend Patrick Murdoch at the Trinity Church, Camberwell. There I was, well stricken in years by this time (Laughter) at the age of about 17 or 18 and she was a boarder at Pintona. In due course, believe it or not, years afterwards, I met her somewhere at a party and I said, "I must take you home" and I took her home (Laughter) and she always reminds me that as I delivered her at the entrance to her house where there was a pittosporum hedge which smelt most gloriously, (Laughter) I said, "We ought to know each other because your father is a Member of Parliament and so was mine." And, you know, this created a bond between us - a bond from which she has been suffering now, poor dear, (Laughter)

Oh, yes, she has reminded me that when I was - what is the old-fashioned expression - courting? - her father, who was the most genial of men, understood my eddities and said to me the first time I arrived, "Would you like a cigar?" Well, you know, many people have said that to me but very few people have produced a good one. (Laughter) He produced a magnificent box of cigars which had been given to him, I think, by Stanley Bruce (Laughter) when John Leckie was looking after Stanley Bruce's electorate during his absences. Let's assume that there were 50 first-class Havana cigars - pre-Castro - (Laughter) and I am free to say that in due course, with regular visits, I smoked the lot (Laughter), and at the end of that time, there was only one thing left to be done, so I married his daughter. (Laughter, applause). And I am bound to say that I have never regretted it. (Laughter, applause).

I have been put down tonight to be the guest speaker and when we sat down, I looked at the place card and I saw the finest portrait of me. x I think I ought to send a copy of

x Drawing of a merino

this to Bill Debell. (Laughter) It really is rather remarkable. Have you noticed that the nose looks a little odd and all that I can tell you is that last night, in that state of excitement that arrives when one has to go to Wangaratta the next day (Laughter), I went into the bathroom. Over the washbowl, as usual, there were a couple of taps, and strangely enough I wanted to clean my teeth, so I turned the tap. It is one of those things where there is a green bit and a red bit and they come up to a sort of semi-circular pipe to come down into the bowl. Full of the joy of living, I turned the green tap. There must have been an airlock of some kind because the whole of the tap structure blew off (Laughter) and hit me on the nose (Laughter) and then fell on to the floor. I don't mind telling you, my nose is still very sore (Laughter), and of course I didn't know what to do. I confess that of all people I am the most incompetent on the subject of plumbing (Laughter), so I called out loudly to my wife, who came in and knew which tap to turn off. (Laughter) And so instead of being here with one eye out (Laughter), I am just here with a faintly sore nose. My friend, Holton, who is, as you realise, a man a little coarsened by his Collingwood experiences (Laughter), said to me, "I thought you looked a bit red." Well, I overlooked that and told him the story. Anyhow, that's a jolly good portrait. (Laughter) And in my experience, I think that if it were just slightly developed, it could easily win the Archibald Prize. (Laughter)

Tonight I am the guest speaker and this is the Wild Colonial I still don't understand what this means all in black ties "The Wild Colonial Wool Festival" and Miss Sanders who masquerades here tonight as "Miss" (Laughter) but who turns out to be a "Mrs", has made a powerful speech and told you all about it.

I don't want to keep you up here all night but I would like to say perhaps a couple of things about the occasion of our meeting. I am, and I hasten to admit this, so that nobody may put it to my disadvantage, the guest today and this evening of a manufacturer of synthetic fibres (Laughter), a rather civilised chap. The moment I discovered this, when we arrived and we went into the simple shanty that he occupies (Laughter), I thought to myself, "Well, now, is this really one of those classical contests between man-made fibres and wool? Perhaps I ought to rearrange my ideas and decide whether I would allow the claim and the counter-claim, each party paying his own costs," (Laughter) or what should I do, until I realised that one of the great things that we have been busy learning in Australia and that I hope we will go on learning is that there is great merit in the competitive idea. I know that this is not always popular because there are many people who believe in competitive free enterprise who don't necessarily believe in competition. (Laughter) (Applause) And therefore I said to myself, "Well, now, this is a very interesting state of affairs." Here is a considerable city in the north-east of Victoria which, in itself, represents two forms of competitive enterprise, each of them good, each of them, properly considered, stinkated by the competition of the other.

I could remember, when I was a boy in the bush in the north-west of Victoria, life was extraordinarily simplified. You either had a drought or a good harvest. Well, you know, that's a pretty grim choice, but those things happen; and the first words of politics that dropped into my innocent ear - still innocent (Laughter) and still perceptive - were the words that concerned the argument between free trade and protection and even when I grew up, relatively - I've never quite grown up -

people were still arguing about what they regarded as the inevitable and immortal conflict between primary industry and manufacturing industry. I've lived long enough to know that in this wonderful and growing country of ours, we need both. We are not put to a grim choice, we are not to say we want all this and none of that, because the longer we go, the more we realize that we want a good deal of both. Therefore, we find ourselves living in a country in which the primary industries and, above all things, the wool industry, and secondary industry, competitive as it may be, must co-exist to make us a firm, well-balanced, powerful nation. (Applause) And so I hope I am right in saying that the old ideas of the inevitable conflict between A and B have disappeared.

Now just let me develop that a little. The primary industries of Australia for many, many years - and still - are the great producers of export income for Australia (hear, hear) and Australia is one of the first ten trading nations in the world for that sole and simple reason. We are tremendous exporters of the products of the soil - Pastoral, agricultural, whatever it may be. This has put us in a position in the world which has given us a significance that we might never otherwise have achieved. This is tremendously important. A very, very great trading nation. After all, we are not a big nation, except geographically. We are 11 million people, and there are many, many countries in the world three times that population, four times or ten times, and yet if anybody worked out the list of the international trading nations in the world, he would find that Australia was in the first ten, perhaps in the first eight - in intrinsic terms, not per capita, but in globe. Now this of course is not only a great source of pride for us but a great source of responsibility and for some years now, many of us - all of us here, I imagine - have said, "Well, now, we can't go on forever confining our exports to wool and wheat and butter and sugar and meat and the rest of it, we must really try to balance our economy. We must encourage the exports of manufactured items."

Believe it or not, this has had a considerable success. It will be many, many years before the exports of manufactured or processed goods achieve anything like the proportion of our exports of wool and wheat and meat and butter and whatever it may be. But all this is a movement in the right direction, and we talk a good deal about it, very properly. But you are not to believe that because you hear us talking about these things we have lost our understanding of the vital importance of the primary industries and of what they produce. Indeed, year after year, I have found myself, you might not believe this, but I have found myself involved in arguments about the economic problems of the country (Laughter). These things happen from time to time and I don't mind at all being involved in these things, but I always come back to this; that it is a very good thing to preserve the stability of our costs and we have, strangely enough, because for the last three years, there has been no movement in the cost level - no material movement - or in the wage structure of Australia on the basic wage level. On the consumer price index, we have managed, rightly or wrongly, (I think rightly) to achieve a high degree of stability. But this, of course, is merely the foundation for the development of our country.

I happen to be one of those people who think that if you have a stable basis, you can build a vast structure on it. And I happen to be one of those people who believe that one of the joyous things in Australian life has been that in these recent years, we have attracted from outside Australia

hundreds of millions of pounds of investment in money and skill (hear, hear) for the development of our own country. We would be foolish people to resist this. We would be ungrateful people if we were not to realise that this is part of the foundation of a future structure which, after my time, but not outside the time of some of the younger people here, will see Australia with twenty million people, with a rich burgeoning economy, with a growing international trade, with an increasing capacity to maintain itself and to support itself. But whatever things we think or say about these matters, we are never to lose sight of the fact that the primary industries - and I will now for this purpose embody that expression in the form of wool - that we can't go on producing wool and selling wool, successfully, if our local costs have risen against us all the time. That is why it is so important to preserve economic stability if you are going to preserve the superb strength of our primary exports and of our primary industries, and I have no doubt about that at all.

But there is a second aspect that I would like to say something to you about. How are we to go on producing wool, producing wheat, producing whatever it is and selling these things to the rest of the world, and providing the enormously powerful basis of our economy - how long can we do that unless we regard the problems of increased efficiency in these industries as vital to their future?

There are two ways of checking costs of production. One is an artificial and impracticable thing: to prevent wages from rising, to prevent costs from rising. Well, we have battled rather successfully to do that for a few years, but can't go on forever. How then are you to improve the competitive position in the world of wool and of wheat and of meat and of all these other commodities? There is one straightforward answer and that is by increasing the efficiency of the industries themselves, by increasing their productivity so that their unit costs tend to fall and not to rise.

Well, now, you may say to me, "It's easy enough to say that, but it's not so easy to do it." Well, on that, let me tell you that we have in this country, some of the most celebrated scientific investigators in the world. In the C.S.I.R.O., in the great universities, the research work that is being done, particularly in the primary industry field is enormous. But are we making use of it? Does the work of the scientist reach the man on the farm?

Now this, to me is one of the great problems of my time and if I can help to solve it while I still remain Prime Minister - which, as you know, is a dubious question (Laughter) - if I can help to solve it in the rest of my time, I would be as proud as Lucifer. Because, really, we do have the most colossal work being done in Australia. We are a little bit inclined to knock our own people aren't we? A little bit like that. Would you admit that? We are. And yet, at the National University, at C.S.I.R.O., at the various universities, at the various research institutes around Australia, the most tremendous work is being done and each time I speak to one of the big men in these fields, I say, "Now, is the result of your work reaching out to the station, to the farm?" The answer is, "No, we're not too certain that it is." In other words, the great problem of the next few years is to convert pure research work by a process of extension services to the man on the land. (Hear, hear) If this is done, the

great vital primary industries - tonight I speak in particular of wool - will be able to resist certain pressures which might otherwise be difficult or even dangerous, by being able to bring to bear increased efficiency and scientific methods, to produce immeasurably better results.

I wonder if I might, for a moment, be just a little autobiographical on this matter. When I was a boy of twelve, thirteen, fourteen up in the north-west of Victoria in an area which was then called the Mallee - it used to be referred to in the Melbourne newspapers under the heading "Is the Mallee worth saving?" (laughter) -- I told you it was going back before the time of most of you -- but at that time, I remember stealing around at the back of a bunch of farmers when an agricultural scientist had come up from Melbourne to talk about the use of superphosphates. Now of course this is today a commonplace, but as a small boy I sat at the back of the ring and heard this man explaining that a hundredweight of super on an acre of wheat land in that particular area might give certain results. With the acute hearing of acute youth, I could hear them saying to each other, "Oh, I don't know". "The old man didn't use this. What's he talking about, Bill?" And about three frightfully good farmers in the area followed this a bit; but prudently they decided they wouldn't use a hundredweight, they'd use half a hundredweight, and when they got another three bushels to an acre compared with their colleagues, everybody woke up and in about five years, they were all using super. But it took all that time and that was a perfect example of what I now call extension services.

Then when the great Farrer - the first of our wheat researchers - got to work, not far out of Canberra as it happens - at Tharwa - got to work, studying in particular the problem of rust in wheat, and produced finally a rust-resistant wheat (many of you will remember it, if you are as old as I am - Darke's Imperial and Federation and so on), up went the wheat yield by four or five bushels to the acre, because rust was eliminated in these crops.

This business of extension services is not just a business for the scientist, not just a business for the C.S.I.R.O., not just a business for the Government, but for the man on the land himself if he wants to secure the advantages, all free, of the work that is being done. In the long run - and I hope very much in the short run - the work of the scientist will be translated into practical terms on the farm and the sheep station and if it is, we will more than ever be able to look the world in the eye and face competition.

The only other thing I want to say to you is this. We have just been establishing a Conference and then a Wool Board. I hope everybody realises what has happened on these matters. What wool requires, and we have been told this in the most eloquent terms tonight, is research, research, research in order to solve the problem of the use of wool. It requires promotion around the world, it requires something to be done which will make it compete more effectively with the artificial fibres which are splendid but which have a degree of stability of cost and price which wool has not, over the last fifteen years, been able to equal.

Therefore, what is needed for wool is not resentment of the competition of man-made fibres because they

are here and they are here to stay and they all have a great function to perform. What wool needs is a system of promotion on top of research which will, in a business-like way, make it constantly in demand - as it should be - all around the world. If you will allow me to make a personal reference, I don't think anything better has happened to the wool industry than the appointment a year or two ago of W. J. Vines to be the man who is in charge as an executive of these matters. This has been a tremendously good thing for the wool industry and all the great wool men I know realise it.

Now, this new Board, concentrating its mind on research and promotion, will do more for wool than all the fancy bureaucratic ideas that anybody might invent and I firmly hope and I strongly believe that the wool people of Australia will realise this. In other words, don't let us regard wool as something which fades in the face of competition; let's regard wool as something which grows stronger in the face of competition, which by research and promotion and all these other means, will establish its essential quality as the finest fibre in the world (hear, hear) and something which grows stronger in the face of competition, which by research and promotion and all these other means, will establish its essential quality as the finest fibre in the world (hear, hear) and something that this country can produce better than any other country in the world.

Don't worry about competition. Competition is essential in the kind of society in which we want to live, but what I object to is people who say, "Well, you are either A or B," the people who don't believe in competition, who think it all ought to be this way or that way. Now, speaking as an old political sweet (Laughter), I want to tell you that I am a great approver of competition because if I am involved in a competition and I lose, then I don't blame you, I blame myself.
