

OPENING OF THE ORD RIVER DAM AT KUNUNURRA,
NORTHERN TERRITORY ON 20TH JULY, 1963

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

Mr. Acting Premier, Parliamentary Colleagues and Ladies and Gentlemen :

In my family, we have a little family joke. I have to open things occasionally and every now and then I get up and make a powerful speech, of course, and forget to perform the opening ceremony. So I am now under firm instructions by my wife to get the job over and talk afterwards. So I declare the Ord River Diversion Dam open. (Laughter) (Applause)

So you see, ladies and gentlemen, from this moment, nobody will be able to look at this Dam and say, "What a pity it was never opened." Everything is now in order.

The next thing I want to say to you is that I have received a message from Her Majesty The Queen who came up here some little time ago on, I believe, a very hot day and enjoyed it, and has frequently told me since how much she enjoyed it. This is the message from her, addressed to myself :-

"I am so much interested to know that you are opening the Ord River Diversion Dam today. Both my husband and I have the happiest memories of our visit to Kununurra last March and we send our good wishes to all assembled on this occasion which is so important for the future economy of Western Australia and for that of the Commonwealth of Australia.

(Signed) Elizabeth R."

It's a strange kind of world that we live in. Today I am credibly informed is Saturday and on Saturday morning a week ago, we came pie-eyed out of an aircraft that had just arrived from the United States of America. And on Sunday afternoon, I had a press and television interview, than which, I warn you young fellows there, there can be nothing more terrifying in the world. Then we sat down in the Cabinet room and have been discussing financial matters, and of course whenever we discuss financial matters, West Australia is never very far away. (Laughter)

We stopped on Thursday exhausted by ill-doing, no doubt, and declared a simple adjournment so that some of us could come over here and then go back and resume our iniquitous tasks, so far as I am concerned on Monday. I don't mind telling you for a while I rather felt inclined to grumble and say, "Oh, dear me, we've just got back from a tiring journey. Fancy having to go all that distance." What I said under my breath about Dave Brand and Charlie Court was really not quite polite, but we have arrived and we've been driving around or been driven around this morning and I don't mind telling you, speaking of myself and I know even more so for my wife, there's no weariness left in us. This is the most exciting place in Australia at this moment. (Applause)

For years and years - what, seventeen years, I think - you've had this experimental station, a combination of the talents of your own officers and those of the C.S.I.R.O. It couldn't have been very easy for men of learning and qualifications to come and, as they might think, lose themselves in what was comparatively a desert, none of the amenities of life, isolated, sustained only by their tremendous skill and their burning enthusiasm. You know, all round the world, there is a disposition to think of the Australian as a rather cynical fellow - you know, agin everybody, agin everything. Well, true enough in politics of course, temporarily. (Laughter) But whenever I go to where things are being done in Australia, I am reminded that this country can produce more concentrated enthusiasm and skill and devotion to the appropriate task than any other country that I know, and I want to make my bow in the direction of those people who started the experimental station and who did work, without which we wouldn't be here today and there would be no Ord Scheme at all.

The application of science, combined with enthusiasm, based upon careful research work - we have today a demonstration of one stage of what can be done when these things come together. It's been a very great privilege, I think, for the Commonwealth and in particular my own Government, to be associated with this work, but I don't hesitate to say that the work could not have been done except for enthusiasts far far removed from the Cabinet room at Canberra. The work has been done by your people and with immense skill.

The other day I was at Washington and then two days before that - or three days before that - I was at Monticello, the home of the great Thomas Jefferson, and I there made a speech. I'm not going to repeat it to you, so be at ease on that point. But one remark I venture to repeat today. When the United States of America was established and, when in the early part of the nineteenth century, Thomas Jefferson became President and served as President for two terms, he presided over a nation of 5½ million people. We today have 11 million. We know what has happened in the case of the United States. We know that there you have a country roughly with our area which, within a measurable term of years, will have 200 million people and which will be, as it is now, the greatest physical power in the world. All I want to say to you is that there is nothing that has happened there that can't happen here. Eleven million people. Twice the population we had forty years ago, with the clear prospect of having 20 million people in the lifetime of quite a few of those present today.

We can look forward with confidence to our future provided, of course, that we keep in our minds that nothing is impossible. In my own grown-up lifetime, in my own time in public life, which now grows, as anybody can tell you, very lengthy, I have seen things that were regarded as impossible brought to fruition. If anybody had by some process gone through this country thirty years ago and had talked confidently about having this great irrigation scheme, this enormous vista of the future, beginning in an established way by 1963, he would have been told not to talk nonsense - "That's quite impossible." But the whole history of Australia is the history of the impossible becoming the possible and of the possible becoming the probable and of the probable becoming the certainty, the living fact. This, indeed, is the challenge to all of us who are Australians and it is a challenge which ought to give us great pride.

It isn't a challenge, ladies and gentlemen, that can be postponed indefinitely. If there is one thing that we have all learnt it is that in this country of ours, the future hurries in upon us. What we thought of as something that might be looked at in ten years, all of a sudden becomes something that we ought to look at in five years because the future is pressing in on us. One of the reasons for that is that our population is growing, growing at an unprecedented rate, and the moment that you begin to increase your population in a country like this at the rate of say, 250,000 a year, you begin to feel the pressure upon resources so that we may sustain that population and so that we may attract more, so that we may become a bigger and a stronger country, more and more rapidly. Therefore, the pressure is on all of us to attract our minds to works of development which will be the foundation for future economic and population growth.

Now there is just one aspect of that that I would like to say something to you about - not that I want to keep you here too long. Australia, we don't need to remind ourselves, is a large place. We have our population concentrated to an enormous extent in a relatively narrow stretch of country from Brisbane to Adelaide - probably at least 80 per cent. of the people of Australia in that area - and every now and then we do attract our minds to the problem of getting over this, of decentralising. In every State you will hear State Premiers, State Ministers discussing the problem of decentralisation, of doing something to prevent the movement of people, the aggregation of people in the big cities, so that the country may live and prosper, so that the nation may live and prosper. Well, that's a very powerful problem, but viewed nationally, there is another aspect of it and that is that we must cease to regard Victoria, New South Wales, for example, as highly-developed States affording a great field for future growth. We are not to think of it simply in those terms. What we must think of increasingly is how in the larger States we can secure a development which will lend strength to the nation as a whole.

There are two outstanding examples of this, of course, in West Australia and in Queensland, the largest States, States whose resources are not yet fully known, States in which development may occur which will alter the entire economic balance of the Australian nation. Now this is not going to be done overnight. I don't profess to say nor does anybody else, that what has been done here solves the problem. It doesn't. It begins to solve the problem. It is an indication of what may be done in the future. We are not at the end of something here today; we are at the beginning of something, just as the experimental station is not at the end of its work but at the beginning of its work. We must go on and on and on if these great areas in Australia are to grow and become effective contributors to Australian life. Now that is a broad statement but it is a true statement. I hope that it is one that we will all have in mind.

In Queensland, for example, the discoveries in the mineral world, including some oil, have been such as were not dreamed about twenty years ago, and in mineral development in particular, that State may have the whole of its character changed and the whole of its contribution to Australia increased. In Western Australia, of course, you also have mineral development; only at the beginning of it, I venture to say but year after year after year, this area associated with great names among the early settlers - I say nothing about the best-known ones because I don't need to mention them, but even a man

named Kelly put his name on a knob of rock somewhere here. Alexander Forrest investigated this place many years ago and wrote hopefully about its future, but for the most part it has remained as a sort of vague dream. Rainfall, yes. Water, yes. Soil..... but what do you do about it? And that's why it was a masterstroke, in my opinion, for somebody to conceive the idea that investigation might develop an agricultural industry in this part of the world on a quite remarkable scale.

Well, of course, this has been taken up with immense enthusiasm; the work has been done - as far as I have been able to see it - quite magnificently. I have had a close look at things I have never looked at closely before. I saw a cotton harvester at work this morning. It looked as if it had been designed by the late Heath Robinson. It does all sorts of things like this under cover and brings in the cotton. Those in charge of the cotton work here, of course, are so enthusiastic that they have already persuaded me (a) that it is the best cotton in the world (b) that in due course, and with occasional interruptions it will be practically immune from pests (c) that it will command the world's price and (d) well, I don't know.... I got so excited about it I began to think that the Commonwealth might be raising heavy revenues out of the cotton industry up here. But that it can be done is clear. I greatly enjoyed seeing these marvellous green stands of safflower until a very distinguished representative of the CSIRO took occasion to say to me - "You ought to be interested in that. You know, after all, it's just a thistle." (Laughter) (Applause)

Sir, the only other thing I want to say to you is this. If this were just a matter of opening a dam of this particular size, if this were just a matter of opening something that deals with a relatively few thousand acres of land, somebody might say, "Well, intrinsically, that's a matter of no great moment. That kind of thing must be duplicated many places in the world." But it is more than that. This is a most symbolic occasion. Man has here conquered nature in the most spectacular fashion; has done it in a part of Australia in which it was needed and needed desperately for the future of our country. And it has happened, and having happened, it will go on and as it goes on, more and more people living 1,500 miles - 2,000 miles - away from here will become interested in it, will come to realise that what's going on up here is on the whole rather more important than what's going on in Toorak or Bellevue Hill. And it is.

This is a memorable occasion. This is a symbolic occasion. It is a very great honour for me to have been invited to come here and open it. I congratulate everybody associated with it. More than that, I thank everybody associated with it. This has been no mere clock job. This has been a work of the heart, a work of devotion, as well as a work of the mind and of the hands.

Sir, I repeat myself. I declare it open.
