

OPENING OF THE HOWARD FLOREY LABORATORIES  
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE  
30TH AUGUST, 1963

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

Mr. Deputy Chancellor, Mr. Minister, Mr. Vice-Chancellor,  
Sir Howard and Ladies and Gentlemen :

I want to confess to you that I meet an initial difficulty. I came out here innocently, thinking that I was going to open this building. I see from the print that I am to dedicate it. Now this you may say is rather out of a politician's jurisdiction, although I do remember that on one occasion in suitable circumstances, I was introduced to an audience as the Right Reverend R. G. Menzies. (Laughter) Sir, in that capacity, I dedicate this building (Laughter). In my other capacity, I open it. But whichever way it goes doesn't matter very much because the hero of the day is Sir Howard Florey himself.

This is one of those occasions when we get together and can say quite truthfully, "Let us now praise famous men" because here is a famous man. I suppose he little thought when he was a mere stripling in 1921 that in the course of time he would be a Nobel Prizewinner and President of the Royal Society, two of many things in his life that have been referred to today. And I feel rather uncommonly conscious of the privilege you give me by allowing me to speak anything here today at all. I look around here - here they are, Fellows of the Royal Society, distinguished physicians, distinguished surgeons, distinguished chairmen of broadcasting commissions (Laughter) - et hoc genus omni - and what is worse, I must have made about five or six speeches at university events in the last six months and the first time, I did rather well. It was all fresh, but the second time I saw the same people (Laughter) and again and again and again I looked down and I saw - I won't name them but you know them. (Laughter) The same eminent audience. All I hope is that the next time I make a speech on some occasion, some Providence will intervene and I will be able to begin by saying, "All, all are gone, the old familiar faces." (Laughter)

Sir, you did well, if I may say so, to pay tribute to the remarkable facts financially associated with this establishment because they are remarkable. Australia has an honourable record in the field of private contribution to universities, but on this occasion, this little group of people of whom two distinguished citizens have been named, got together, found a great deal of money and then having established their bona fides much more satisfactorily than most people who come to me and ask for money (Laughter), they arrived, Dr. Denton with them (Applause) and I found myself so enthusiastic about the work that he was doing and the work that would be done in this laboratory that I avoided the steely eye of Sir Leslie Martin (Laughter), had a talk to the Treasurer instead, and we found £100,000 - not just tucked into the triennial payment - but an extra. Very useful extra. (Applause) I mention that to you in strict confidence (Laughter) here this afternoon because I wouldn't like other representatives of other universities to think that this constitutes a precedent. (Laughter) And then the Rockefeller Foundation, and the result is that this represents, in a sense, a tribute to the scientific work, the remarkable and brilliant scientific work that has been done and

a tribute to this great man, Sir Howard Florey, which represents a combination of private interest and contribution and Government interest and contribution which I think might well set a pattern in Australia.

Now Sir, I am not going to detain you very long because, like you, I want to hear from the fountainhead, I want to hear Sir Howard. You all know about him. You all know of the nature of the work that he has done - modestly, rather self-effacingly, actively, with tremendous imagination, with a willingness at all times to take up the most challenging problems and tackle them and try to solve them, and in the result, there will be many people who go down into history as having been responsible for great wars or matters of that kind, there will be some villains go down in history, there will be some wise men go down in history, but the people who read about the history will, if they have occasion to remember it, realise as to a considerable proportion of them, that they wouldn't be alive to read the history if it hadn't been for the work that has been done of the kind that Sir Howard Florey has done in this world. (Applause) So that his work and the work of others like him has been powerful, constructive work for humanity, and this engages the attention and gratitude of all of us.

There is just one other thing that I would like to say. I was recently in America, reminding myself for the purpose of another speech, of the American Declaration of Independence, with its fine resounding statement that all men are born equal - and that's true. In a human sense that's true. In terms of civic rights and human and divine responsibility, men are born equal, but it is a matter for gratitude that in terms of talent they are not born equal because what has contributed to the progress of the world, the progress of humanity, more than anything else perhaps, is that you get these peaks in the graph of ability, you get these distinguished people who not only do remarkable things themselves, but who gather around them other people who are all the better because they worked with a great man. And the result is that through the very inequality of talent that exists in human beings, the ordinary human being like most of us is able to go along better, happier, with a better future and a better understanding.

I always feel interested when I encounter some distinguished physicist, for example, who will say to me before our conversation ends, "You know, I did some work with Rutherford." This is a wonderful thing. I don't go as far as Carlyle, you know, about great men being the stuff of history, but I go to this extent that I believe that the influence of a remarkable person, of genius, of application, of tremendous drive, of force of mind, is not confined to what he does himself in his own right. It extends to the way that he perhaps stimulates an entire generation of people in the work that they do in his branch of knowledge. Really, of course, in Australia we are occasionally a bit odd, aren't we, to be quite frank about it. We occasionally think in Victoria that a man from South Australia can't be quite as good, (Laughter) though the people from Adelaide have for years and years been conscious of their superiority in all moral qualities to the rest of us. (Laughter) This is well understood.

But apart from that, we are a little bit inclined, aren't we, to think that everything unknown is to be taken as magnificent. Great people in any branch of life are people

who live at a distance, about whom we read in the newspapers or in the cables. We are not always prepared to recognise, in their own lifetime, these great men that we have produced, and today is a very happy proof that here, at any rate, you don't suffer from that complaint, because here we have a man famous all over the world, so modest that he has been having a most ungovernable fit of misery for the last half hour (Laughter), listening to his praises. But he is entitled to praise. He is entitled to gratitude because in due course of time when, as we believe optimistically, things get sorted out and fall into their proper perspective and proportions, the name of Howard Florey will be regarded as one of the absolutely outstanding names in Australian history.

I am delighted beyond words that this building which I am now authorised by the Deputy Chancellor to call a laboratory - I have never been too sure how you pronounce that word - but I am delighted beyond words that this laboratory should be set up here for all to see to carry out work of great distinction and utility in his name in my own university. This is something that gives me especial pleasure and therefore adds to my satisfaction in dedicating and/or opening this building.

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