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

Mr. President and Gentlemen :

I think I ought to begin by making an apology. I have in fact been away in New Guinea and Papua for five days - a lot of travelling, and with the knowledge that steadily, day by day, the files have been accumulating on my desk at Canberra. A very depressing feeling that, all the time you are travelling, and therefore, after I have said a few words and declared this Symposium open, I will have to beat a retreat to the office. I apologise to you, Sir, because I am very ill-informed on these matters as I noticed when I looked at the programme, and I would have enjoyed sitting here for a few days to listen in. But that's not what they pay me for, so I can't stay.

Interestingly enough, I had some reason to think about water only two nights ago when I was up north and staying overnight at a rubber plantation, and without any warning, a cloud came across and the rain fell down. I've never seen anything like it. It fell straight down and it went on for a couple of hours and the host in the morning had to use his Land-Rover to get out of the premises and it turned out we had had two and a half inches of rain, just as we were listening to it. I thought then how much I would like to transfer some of that from time to time to some parts of Australia.

I became conscious of this problem of water - conscious of it, not frightfully well-informed about it - at a very youthful age. I suppose I am one of the few Australians here this morning who remembers vividly the drought of 1902; that's going back a bit. I lived in the drought-stricken country, being then a very small boy, in the North-West of Victoria, and it was a drought. It wasn't one of those rather agreeable little things that you get in heavy rainfall country where, at the end of a month without rain, people tell you there is a drought - this was a drought as we understand that term.

Two inches of rain fell for the year and they fell all at once at the wrong time. And the result was that there was bare earth and a great empty lake and the most tremendous problems. But that year, one of the farmers who had a property at the bend of the Wimmera River, with a few little sandhills stacked up in the corner of the bend, casually went out in an enterprising spirit one day before the drought began and scattered some vegetable seeds, just like that. It almost looked like the parable of the sower. I used to go to Sunday school, you see, and I remember it. And, of course, the drought happened and nothing happened on these little sandhills at all.

Then, of course, as not uncommonly happens when the drought broke, it broke with heavy rain and a few weeks later, his sandhills were covered with vegetables, the seeds of which had been lying there quietly at rest for the better part of the year, and in the result, I saw, as a youngster,

displayed on the corner of the hotel verandah in the village, the largest vegetables I ever saw in my life. In case you think they merely looked large to a small boy, I assure you they looked large to very big men, because everybody drove in to have a look at them. Tremendous vegetables. And that bit into my mind : What can be done in Australia by water.

I opened my newspaper yesterday and I saw that already there is some hint of an argument going on as to the relative importance of water and other things. I am bound to confess my child-like and uninformed belief that you can't do without water. You can do without most of these other things up to a certain degree. Water is the great provider in this country.

Now why are we interested in pursuing these studies? Why have we set up a Water Resources Council? Why is it that the Academy is today performing one of its great functions, one of the functions for which it was created, the function of bringing together, in conference, the experts, scientific and otherwise from around the world? And the answer is that water, in Australia - and we are not the only country - is a problem of the first magnitude. Every time I open, for example, a report on some forestry authority and see how many million super feet of timber have been cut, I just say to myself, "That's very good, we need timber. I hope it hasn't involved any loss of acre feet of water." We must constantly, in my opinion, think of forests in Australia from two points of view, and the first point of view is the protective forest that is going to continue to assure the sources of water that we now have, and perhaps expand them in the course of time.

Sir, we have a dry country - I know that there are very many people periodically on the northern rivers who wouldn't agree with that at all -- but taking the country by and large, it is a relatively dry country. Therefore we need - and I hope that a great deal will emerge from this Conference - to have some better knowledge than we have of the actual and potential water resources of Australia. We need to have the most active and careful steps to preserve and extend those sources of water and we need, of course, above all, having regard to their very scarcity, to do all that we can to secure their most economic and productive use.

Now, it is easy enough to say all those things. We haven't done perhaps as much about them in the past as we might have. We have had, to an extent, too many cases in which a storage has been established and a suitable reticulation delayed. We have had instances of water being kept for use but not used. I have a very strong feeling myself that the whole of the storing and use of water requires some more comprehensive planning and some more detailed and accurate views than we have so far been able to evolve, and I don't say that critically of the people who have had responsibility for some of these things. I say it prospectively having regard to the needs of the country.

I know, Sir, that there is a school of thought which says that we in Australia can, without any discomfort, produce all the food that we require; the products of the land are products in abundant supply so far as Australia is concerned. That is very true for the most part, but I constantly find myself starting back a little when I consider the rate of increase in the world's population and the

enormous pressure of that population upon the resources of the world. I am no mathematical expert, as my old friend Professor Cherry is, nor am I sufficiently intelligent to be a statistician, but they tell me that by the end of the century the world's population will at least have doubled, perhaps more, and that means that there will be hundreds and thousands of millions more people who need to be fed, clothed, who need, in other words, to have made available to them the products of the land and the products of the land to which water is applied. And therefore Australia has a responsibility on this matter, not just a selfish or narrow one to feed herself, but to play her part in feeding other people. That means that the study of our water resources, the effective use of those resources when we have finally ascertained them, is not only a matter of domestic advantage but I believe of international obligation. This is a matter of immense importance.

It may be, Sir, that in some countries the study of water supply is of theoretical interest but of no great vital importance to the country in which it occurs because it is by nature a well-watered country. All sorts of things may happen in other places, but I will just conclude by repeating to you that in my own opinion, as a man concerned in affairs of State, not as a scientist - because I am a purely honorary one as the President knows - I firmly believe that it is in this problem that you are now proceeding to discuss, in the ascertainment - let me repeat - of our resources, in the extension of those resources (because we don't yet know all about them), in their preservation from adverse influences, in their effective direction and their effective use in this country and indeed in other countries - these things are, from the Australian point of view not just interesting, they are essential, and therefore this conference, which contains so many remarkable minds and experiences will, I believe, do something, produce something, stimulate something which will be of enormous advantage to the people of Australia.

And that, of course, is the best, the conclusive reason why even a much-travelled and busy Prime Minister takes great pleasure in coming here and saying to you, in anticipation, on behalf of the Government and on behalf of the people, "Thank you for the work you are about to do."
