

OPENING OF THE COMMONWEALTH CENTRE
ELIZABETH STREET, SYDNEY

18th October, 1963

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

Well Sir, I am bound to say that this is a singularly unbalanced audience. If I look at that part of it, I have to turn my back on the others, so I will address myself to a most dubious collection of Parliamentary colleagues in front of me. I am bound to say that I envy my colleague, the Minister. He has publicly stated that he has a split personality. All I want to tell him is that that will come in mighty handy if he is ever charged with homicide.

There is another thing that just struck me since I arrived and sat down and that is that there is a cunning arrangement on the shop just across the alleyway here. I suppose it was put there by intelligent anticipation to remind us all that there is an election coming on because I can see nothing but references to pies, whether they're in the sky or not I don't know, and cakes, and this, I think, is a stimulating thing for all of us to see. I am sorry that my Parliamentary colleagues have their backs to it. The third thing I want to say is that for some inscrutable reason I have had to open quite a number of buildings in my time and I have always been warned, "Now be very careful to declare it open because otherwise it won't be open." Well, my job today is purely retrospective because it is open, and it is in use, and they're all working, so I suppose, Gordon, what I do is to declare it retrospectively open, and so I do.

One of the interesting things about this building is that up to now a variety of Commonwealth Departments have been installed in what, 12 or 13 or 14 different places in the city and this, of course, is the largest city in Australia and a tremendously important one, and from the point of view of the public convenience, of getting in touch with Departments, people who want to see one Department and perhaps want to see two or three, it is a wonderful thing to have them concentrated in this fashion in one building in the very heart of the city and therefore this is, not only from the point of view of the Commonwealth, but from the point of view of the citizens of this place, a very happy event. It is a formidable addition to the city of Sydney and it is a formidable addition to the convenience and well-being of the people who live here. Therefore this is a notable event.

Now my colleague made a glancing reference just now to "civil servants". I have always got into the habit of calling them "civil servants" and I am told I ought to say "public servants". Anyhow I will continue to call them "civil servants".

You know, I am so old and decrepit as everybody knows nowadays, that I can remember a time when it was rather a point of honour in any club, or places where men meet together, to make some rather adverse comments on these wretched civil servants, the bureaucrats, and yet whenever I come to one of these gatherings where businessmen of great eminence are to be seen, I see former civil servants who are now most eminent in private enterprise and in general business, very well regarded and much sought after, and I think it is quite true that all this silly old prejudice has gone. I remember many years ago an amusing friend of mine saying to me, "You know there is one thing you must always remember about the civil service, it provides a level, a level of ability and competence below which no Government can sensibly fall." Now you think about that, that has a world of

truth in it. It is not the function of the civil service to govern the country. It is the function of the civil service to contribute all it has in talent and study and experience in giving effect to the policies of the country which are hammered out by people elected by the electors of the country, and therefore, the function of the civil servant is a very high and responsible one, a very objective one, and speaking as one who has been a Minister for, oh, more years than the locusts have eaten, and Prime Minister for far more years than one or two of my friends here would desire, I want to say that nobody could be more indebted than I am to the high standards of the great work of the civil service and indeed nobody could be more indebted to them than the people who engage in production and selling, commerce and transportation, in this country, because every day they have some occasion to have some contact with them.

Somebody once coined a phrase; it is now quite shop-soiled. He said with all the air of novelty, "What we want is more business in Government and less Government in business." This is one of those delightful cliches that is to be regarded now, as I think, something of a curio, because my experience, not a brief one, has been that for the most part, when people get into difficulty, when they have some problem which affects the future of their own enterprises something happens and some politician is put in receipt of their views on the matter and some Government or other is asked to do something about it. So that, let's face up to it, we have reached a stage of life in Australia in which the whole essence of life is that there should be not hostility between public administration and private business but the utmost of co-operation between the two; the utmost of mutual understanding between the two, and I assure you that in dealing with the civil service, and this goes for civil servants wherever they may be, Commonwealth or State in Australia, you're dealing with a mass of people, the overwhelming bulk of whom are honest, objective, public-spirited people and here in this building we will have concentrated a very great number of them.

The only other thing I would like to say to you - because a lot of men here are very distinguished in private business, in seats of learning and in other aspects of the community - and it is this: "We have a constant danger of adopting what might be called "false dichotomy". Everything is black or it is white. If you are on my side in politics perhaps you think I am pretty good; nothing to be said against me. Well I say that with modified rapture. If you're against me, then of course, there is nothing good to be said for me. I am all black. Whereas, of course, the trouble is that we, most of us, are grey, some of us in the hair but all of us in our attributes and qualifications. We are neither black nor white, we are just ordinary people and therefore we have something to be said for us and something to be said against us. This is fair enough, but one of the choices that we seem to have been offered in the past is this. It is said that some expenditures in the country, those administered by public departments are in the public sector and others are in the private sector. This is one of those jargon-like phrases that economists delight to invent - it is the public sector or the private sector.

Gentlemen, I venture to say with all my belief in the expansion of genuine personal and private enterprise in this country, I venture to say that it just could not happen without the public expenditure that goes on to a very large extent and at great expense in this country. What are these things that are administered by some people in this building and by some people who are engaged in public affairs - the provision of

water, the provision of power, the provision of light, or roads, of schools - all these things which provide the very foundation on which normal enterprise may build and be strong, and therefore, I beg of you, put all these false conflicts on one side. We in Australia are a very considerable nation. We can be a much more considerable nation as time goes on. We will become that the more rapidly and the more surely if we understand that it is not one man against another, it is all men together for this country, that co-operation is much more important than hostility. Of course, there will be some hostilities, not necessarily personal hostilities - political hostilities of the first kind arise from differences in points of view and that is very good. That's the democratic process but don't line up the ordinary citizen against government or ordinary business against the civil service administrators, because this is the right way to produce the wrong results.

This task that we all have is a task of co-operating, not dependently, not subserviently, but with full vigour, full capacity to express our own views, but in the long run, to co-operate for the achievement of the great national result, and therefore don't let us have a feeling that a civil servant is a curious fellow, detached and almost monastic, except for his alleged devotion to idleness. Don't let us fall into the error of pursuing that kind of idea, and don't let us fall into the error of thinking that what Governments do in works, in development, in the nation, is irrelevant to what must be done by thousands of other people, to build on those foundations, to put them to effective use and thereby to improve the production, the distribution, the commercial activities of the country, the transport activities of the country, so that we may have more and more people, more and more to do, and more and more real power in our own country.

Now, I am sorry to take up your time by getting rather "into the pulpit" on this matter, but to tell you the truth, I have looked around here and I have seen so many of you before, I have tried to remember what I said to you last time and, mercifully, I can't, and I know anyhow you have all come along here, not to have a look at me, but to have a talk with each other, have a crack at both sides in the political contest and, with a little bit of luck, though I don't trust my Minister, have a drink at the end.

I retrospectively declare the building open.
