

P & O BUILDING - OFFICIAL OPENING
23.1.1964

SPEECH BY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE SIR ROBERT MENZIES, K.T., C.H., Q.C., M.P.
PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA:

Sir and Mrs. Bass and Gentlemen:

Would those who were present the last time I opened a building near here please show their hands? Well, thank heavens for that, because I complained as we came up that I've fallen into the habit of opening buildings and each time I appear to see the same people and each time I've tried to say something fresh, and each time I've tried to get a laugh ~~out of them~~ occasionally. And the next time I can't remember what I said and I can only hope that they don't. But today as far as you are concerned, you are all clean skins, because only five or six people held their hands up, so I'm free. I like that reference that was made to my previous enterprises in this area, because during the last election - a thing of which you may have heard - I was very interested to discover how many younger people attended meetings and showed interest in what went on and I always try to keep up to date and therefore I've become familiar with the new language of the young and it appears that I am a 'square' and here I am today, the living proof of it - the fourth corner!

Talking about elections, Sir, I don't want to make a political speech here, of course, but talking about the election, some of you will remember that when I decided to have one, quite a few of you thought I ought to be examined. But now, of course, everybody knows it was the right thing to do. But may I tell you that I used to say to my colleagues, whom I'd plunged into this vortex of politics, at an election, 'Don't worry, if I win all will be forgiven, if I lose I'm going to catch the earliest and slowest ship to the furthest corners of the earth'. In fact I was prepared to nominate, if such a thing had been available here, a slow banana ship, because I understand that that kind of ship would suit me very well. Now, of course, this was a lighthearted remark in a sense for me to be making to them because I must say I didn't entertain many doubts about having to catch a banana ship, but I stand here as a fellow who's opened the Qantas building, well of course Hudson Pysh, (is Hudson here today?) - Hudson owns Qantas and we pay for it, and therefore I have a certain interest and so have the members of the Government, in Qantas, and whenever I travel by air I go to great pains to travel by Qantas, for the best reasons in the world. But my great ambition - don't use this against me - my great ambition when I finally do get heaved out of politics, is to retain enough health and strength to travel thereafter by sea and in no other fashion, and that's why I'm delighted at the end, at this fourth expedition in this area, to come back to the sea - but of course in Australia when we talk about travelling by sea we have poor memories if we don't suddenly find ourselves remembering P & O and Orient. I know there are other shipping lines - down below I asked for a booking on one of them to see what reaction I would get - and it was appropriate! But travelling by sea - I know that it's always easy to say that the romance goes out of travel - it does in a sense; I daresay that when the men who sailed the seas under sail found smoky steamers frequenting the sea lanes they said 'This is a step backwards, this is terrible, this is monstrous' - and every step forward that occurs produces some reaction. But I was remembering today, coming down here, that remarkable little poem of Kipling's, do you remember, in which he is talking about this kind of thing and the dying away of romance - and then says suddenly 'Romance brought up the 9.15'. Now this is true - this business of travel can be a romantic thing in a prosaic life, it can be a necessary exercise in a busy one. And, of course, we all who are concerned with affairs in this country, like to imagine that we are

extremely busy and that every minute counts and that's why nowadays they are always devising some means of travelling faster and faster. My successor, Heaven help him, will have to fly supersonically; he'll be in London before he leaves here, or words to that effect, and if my experience counts for anything the faster you go, the more weary you are at the end of the journey; but still, time, they say, is money, and I understand this and I don't resist it, and as a fellow who may have been carted around now about a million miles in the air, I practice it. But the sea, the sea, when time doesn't matter all that much and when you really want to see something of the world and when you want really to relax, when you want to be able to arrive at your destination in fine shape for whatever it is that you want to do, provided you're not in too much of a hurry, this is the way to travel; this is the way to see foreign ports, this is the way to have a glance at foreign people, at new people, at new climates. I've found in travel by sea the most exciting of all experiences and its exciting for me because it isn't exciting in the sense that so many other things one has to do are exciting. And therefore I'm a great man for travelling by sea and one of these days as I said, I'm going to gratify myself, I'm going to glut my low tastes, I will be at sea all the time - I'll be at sea so much - (my opponents, of course, know that I have been in one sense, for a long time) but I will physically be at sea so much that I'll be able to go along to Donald Anderson and say 'Donald, my boy, I'm a very good customer, could I have a slight discount on my next fare?' and when that time comes you'll know that I have achieved paradise.

Now there's one other thing that I would like to say about this famous Company or Group of companies - we talk about the Victorian era, to a certain extent with disrespect. We're so much cleverer than they were, in the 19th Century, we're so much wiser, we understand so much better how to make war and cause trouble in the world - we are rather superior to the 19th Century. Very interesting that the Peninsular Company began in the very year that Queen Victoria came to the throne, and terribly interesting to discover as I did when I read the notes, that one of the two partners who projected this enterprise was an Anderson. And then, of course, later on, the Orient Line - very interesting to realise that when the Orient Line first began to see the possibilities of travel to the East, travel to India, they not only went around the Cape, but they went through a phase that preceded the Suez Canal, in which passengers were disembarked at Alexandria and went across to Suez by Camel train. Well, of course, travelling on a Camel was all-right if you had been travelling by sea in those days - no doubt passengers hardly noticed any breach of continuity. But isn't it interesting that today there should be so closely associated with us, so familiar in the mouths of so many hundreds of thousands of Australians, a Company, which has in these various phases, been associated with, or at any rate, contemporary with, very remarkable historic events. There's another aspect that I realised for the first time when I was looking into this matter, and that is that after the war, half of the fleet of each Company had gone - they came out with 50%, I think I'm right in saying - 50% in the case of the Orient, 50% in the case of the P & O. Now this meant, of course, in a sense, starting from scratch. It must have presented a challenge, it must have produced in the first instance a certain feeling of sorrow that such blows should have been struck. But in the result, the opportunity was seized of making all things modern, and in the result the great fleets of this Company or Group of Companies, the great fleets today are, if I may say so, the last word. I've occasionally had the satisfaction of going across the Atlantic in one of the great ships of the world - quite frankly, Sir Donald, without buttering you up in any way, I would sooner travel aboard one of yours. We have an enormous service. Down below they have on the doors as you come in - the swing glass doors - a couple of symbols, did you notice them? - instead of

door handles, one that looks like three penguins standing side by side indicates the passenger ships - it's symbolic; and the other one which is all covered with squares, oddly enough - it represents the cargo aspect of the business. Well, of course, I was at great pains to come through the passenger entrance because both as Prime Minister and as R. G. Menzies I can speak in the highest possible terms of the passenger transport activities of this Company. But when it comes to cargo, I always have to speak subject to the Department of Trade and subject to the Department of Primary Industry, you know what I mean; just as I'm about to become enthusiastic they say 'Now wait a moment old boy, we're trying to get the freights down' and so we'll reserve judgement on that. But Sir, we live in a time in which communications in the world have developed out of all sight - it's only the other day I was present at the opening of the first conversations on the Compac - the new submarine cable for telephone purposes. We've had all these experiences - I've said something about flying, television - all these matters have opened up a new world of communications - tremendously important, provided that we use the instruments in that world with wisdom. But shipping, travelling by sea, retains one thing which none of these others can aspire to, because it gives to a lot of people the opportunity of greater speed than their grandfathers ever thought of, but at the same time of leisure, happiness, a sense of exploration, a sense of discovery after exploration.

When I first went at the expense of the taxpayers to England as an Attorney-General of Australia to attend a conference, these were wonderful days - may I just mention them, quite nostalgically? We went by sea, we travelled by an Orient ship, we took a long time - five and a half weeks. We sometimes in an exuberant moment, or at one time - twice, I think - got off at the South of France and travelled up through Paris. We arrived in London, we were met by a Minister, who didn't ask us any questions except whether we found ourselves suitably arranged for at a hotel and we found it wasn't a bad hotel - some 'cheap dump' like the Savoy, or something of that type. And then we were left alone for about three days and then we were given a handsome luncheon, where speeches were made, but as only the Leader of the Delegation spoke I was on the free list. And then 10 days later, we had the first conference and the Leader of the Australian delegation put a powerful case, (I hope) and the President of the Board of Trade or whoever it might have been or the late Jimmie Thomas, he would say 'Well this is very interesting and valuable, we would like to consider this. When would it be convenient for you to resume?' And it finally appeared that Tuesday week would be a suitable time. (I wouldn't want this to go beyond this room you know, but still it's a long time ago - all claims against me are now statute barred). Then you went up to Scotland, or if you felt that way disposed you went over to Ireland - some reckless characters nipped over to Paris and on Tuesday week you resumed and the other man made a powerful speech and this was very good; it was leisurely - at the end of eight weeks we usually got an agreement by the simple process of threatening to catch the next ship unless we got it, and we got it, but it was a good agreement and it was kept. Now - what happens? You catch the 'plane, you put your head on one side, you put your head on the other, you go up, you go down, seventeen hours flying time, whatever it is and you're in London, you hop out, as well as you can after a long period of time in which you really haven't slept. You're ushered into the presence of all these camera boys and television people and press reporters, where you have to give a celebrated imitation of being extraordinarily intelligent and disposing of international problems almost with a witty aside - you know, which is

usually quoted against you for the next twelve months. And then you get into the hotel, you take a bath, you change your linen and the conference begins at half past two the same day and then it goes on every morning, every afternoon, every night with a reception, same people, different place. And at the end of ten days you hurtle out again. Now you ask me to cast a single first past the post vote as to which system I prefer and in my doddering old age I will tell you that the earlier one had much to be said for it. And Sir, nobody contributed more profoundly to this happy state of affairs than the Orient shipping Company and the P & O shipping Company at that time. This was the beginning of my affection for them, an affection that has never faded away. And therefore you can see that I have many reasons, some of them public, many of them private and personal for being delighted to be here and most honoured to be asked to declare the building open.

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