

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

SPEECH

BY

Rt. Hon. SIR ROBERT MENZIES,
K.T., C.H., Q.C., M.P.

ON

PROVISION OF SCIENCE BUILDINGS AND EQUIPMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT.

[From the "Parliamentary Debates," 5th March, 1964.]

Ministerial Statement.

Sir ROBERT MENZIES (Kooyong—Prime Minister)—by leave—At the last Federal elections the Government placed before the people of Australia plans to assist the provision and equipment of science teaching laboratories in secondary schools. It was made clear that the assistance to be provided for such purposes would be available to all schools with a complete absence of any discrimination. Procedures to achieve this end have now been discussed with all of the States—naturally this has taken some little time—and there is agreement that they raise no special problem for any State, although the Tasmanian Minister for Education has indicated that he would prefer the distribution to the States to be on the basis of secondary school enrolments rather than State populations as we intend. Where necessary, all States will co-operate with the Commonwealth in the carrying out of the scheme.

The amount for the purpose is £5,000,000 annually and it is intended to divide the amount each year between Government schools and non-Government schools. The division will be made by obtaining the numbers of secondary school pupils enrolled

in Government schools and the numbers of secondary school pupils enrolled in non-Government schools and dividing the total amount of money available in proportion to those numbers as certified by the Commonwealth Statistician. This will be done on an Australia-wide basis and would at present result in a sum of the order of £3,750,000 being available for Government secondary schools throughout Australia and a sum of the order of £1,250,000 being available for non-Government schools throughout Australia. The sum available for Government schools will then be allotted to the various State Governments in proportion to the population of the States as certified by the Commonwealth Statistician.

Allotment will be made by way of a grant under Section 96 of the Constitution and the recipient State will be entirely responsible for spending the sum allotted it in ways which, in its opinion, best suit the requirements of education in that State. The grant will, however, be made subject to the conditions that it can only be spent on the provision of science teaching laboratories in secondary schools or the provision of capital equipment for such laboratories. and it will be subject to the further condition that the items on which it is spent, and the source of the funds so spent, are

clearly identifiable in the State Budget. The Commonwealth has made it clear to the States that it expects the sums so provided to be regarded as supplementary and additional to sums which the State would normally provide for education. Money for these purposes will be made available in the 1964-65 Budget, that is to say, in the financial year beginning on 1st July, 1964. The States have been made aware of this and are no doubt in process of preparing their plans for the expenditure of the money to be available to them for these purposes.

In the case of non-Government schools, the Commonwealth will be solely responsible for deciding grants. To do so it will adopt the following procedures: First, it will allot the amount available for non-Government schools among the States having regard to the population of each State, though in later years it may be necessary not to be too strictly bound in this regard, because some States may be rather more advanced than others in this field. The amount available for each State will then be divided into two parts. I am talking now about the non-Government schools. One part will be for assistance to non-Catholic schools within the boundaries of that State and the other part for assistance to Catholic schools within the boundaries of that State. I have used that expression as these are rather awkward phrases. There are some non-Catholic schools which are under church foundation and some which are not. For example, as some of my colleagues know, there is the Sydney Grammar School. This division will be made by obtaining the number of secondary school pupils enrolled in non-Catholic schools and the number of secondary school pupils enrolled in Catholic schools and dividing the sum available in proportion to those numbers as certified by the Commonwealth Statistician. The Government will preserve some flexibility in this procedure so that the division may, as necessary, be adapted to the needs of schools for science buildings and equipment as the scheme develops. There will thus be for non-Government schools within the boundaries of each State a sum for assistance to non-Catholic schools and a sum for assistance to Catholic schools.

All secondary schools, whether boys' schools, girls' schools or co-educational schools are eligible to receive assistance,

and any science teaching laboratory the construction of which began after 1st December, 1963—that is the day after the election—is a building eligible to be considered for assistance. No such building which was constructed before 1st December, 1963, or which was in course of construction at that date, will however, be considered as eligible to receive assistance. A school is, however, eligible to apply for assistance for capital equipment bought after 1st December, 1963. Money for these purposes will be made available in the 1964-65 Commonwealth Budget; that during the financial year beginning 1st July, 1964. Schools which are eligible for assistance and which seek assistance should therefore make application for such assistance as soon as possible. Applications should be made to the Minister in Charge of Commonwealth Activities in Education, Prime Minister's Department, East Block, Canberra.

It is clear that very many independent schools will be seeking assistance and that the Commonwealth will not in the first years of the scheme—at least in its early years—and despite the funds available, as one might say, in one stroke, be able to assist all schools that are eligible. It is intended therefore to select in each State schools to be regarded as those which fall into a category meriting first consideration for assistance. This selection will be done by the Commonwealth having regard to the number of secondary school pupils at a school, the number of such students doing science courses, the teaching facilities already available and similar criteria. Even so, all schools falling within this category will not be able to be assisted initially and it will be necessary to allot priorities to such schools within each State's boundaries.

For this purpose, the Commonwealth hopes to create, within each State's boundaries, two advisory bodies. One body, drawn from those responsible for non-Catholic schools, will be asked to suggest priorities for such schools and, subject to the standards proposed being acceptable to the Commonwealth, to advise on the amount of assistance extended to each school. The other body, drawn from those responsible for Catholic schools, will be asked to do the same for such schools. I may say that my colleague, Senator

Gorton, who has been doing a great deal of work on this, has already discussed this matter considerably with these representative groups. When grants are decided by the Commonwealth they will be made to a State under section 96 of the Constitution. I am now talking about non-State secondary schools. The State concerned would act as agent for the Commonwealth for the purposes of payment and would not itself accept any responsibility for making such grants. I should, perhaps, emphasize that these advisory bodies have not yet been set up and it will be my colleague's next task to conduct talks for the purpose of setting them up. He has already had quite a few of these. But, in the meantime, so that honorable members may know the lines on which the Commonwealth is proceeding and that schools which require assistance may make application without delay, I believe it appropriate to make this statement in this place.

I might add that the question of the standard to which a laboratory ought to be built, or at least the standard for which Commonwealth funds should be supplied, is one that has received our attention. For advice on this matter we are setting up a small committee which we have asked Mr. L. C. Robson to chair. Mr. Robson is a former headmaster of Sydney Church of England Grammar School. He is a very famous headmaster, with a scientific background, who has had much experience of these matters in his capacity of Chairman of the Committee of Advice of the Industrial Fund, of which most honorable members will have heard, which has been engaged for some years in assisting independent schools to build science teaching

laboratories. This committee will be available to give advice, when asked, to schools planning to build science laboratories and will be responsible for advising the Commonwealth as to suitable and reasonable standards for laboratories for particular numbers of students and Commonwealth assistance will be limited to providing, or assisting to provide, funds necessary to build to that standard. This is the situation regarding this matter at this moment. I shall keep honorable members informed of progress in the setting up in each State of the advisory bodies to which I have referred.

In conclusion—this is, I think, a most interesting and just experiment—there are a number of different procedures which could be adopted for making the various divisions between State Governments referred to in what I have said. The one set out earlier appears to the Commonwealth to meet requirements most nearly and has been agreed to by five of the States. It will be the basis used for the first year of operation. But this is a new scheme. It must be tested in operation. In subsequent years it may develop that the State Governments would prefer the Commonwealth to consider some other system of division between them. If they do agree that some other system is preferable in the future, and provided that the Commonwealth is satisfied that an agreed proposal is just to all, the Commonwealth will always be prepared to listen to suggestions designed to make the scheme operate harmoniously and to the greatest benefit of the greatest number of Australian students.