

CONFERRING OF THE HONORARY DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
LETTERS UPON THE PRIME MINISTER, SIR ROBERT
GORDON MENZIES, KT, CH, QC, MP, AT WINTHROP HALL,
UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

29TH APRIL, 1964

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

Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Pro-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen :

Never in my life have I permitted myself to make a speech with my hat on and, therefore, in breach of all the rules, I take it off.

I have been having a most fascinating time tonight. My mind went back to the several occasions when I got a Degree myself that I had earned; all my others are the unearned increment. I don't know what the position is today, but in my day, the Bachelor of Laws had a hood with.... what do they call that fur? Vermin or something (Laughter) around the edge of it. It cost you three guineas to hire it. The Master's Degree was exactly the same but it had no fur trimming and it cost you five guineas to hire it. (Laughter)

As all these distinguished graduates came up tonight, I wondered whether they were still exposed to these raids on the privy purse on such a celebrated occasion in their lives, but I had another thought as they came up. You know, I'm getting along in years now and I begin to think that all the graduates are young and all the policemen are young. I suppose that's true enough, but when tonight I watched them come up - Bachelors or Arts..... and then came along dentists. They all looked so young. (Laughter) It was hard for me to believe that as soon as practicable, they will be saying to poor victims in the chair, "Open your mouth a little wider, please" and then using that superb phrase that all dentists have invented - they don't say "Spit" - they say "Let that cut please" (Laughter). I could quite imagine it. It was great fun, but when a most talented young man came along to be given the degree of Master of Arts for a thesis: "Personality Characteristics of Habitual Traffic Offenders", (Laughter) well, I thought for a moment I had better speak to my colleague, the Minister for Customs and have his thesis banned. (Laughter)

Then, of course, it is not for me to take on, in open combat, the Public Orator, except that all of those of you who have vestigial remains of your Latin in your minds will not have failed to realise that he is a Professor of the new pronunciation. Now this is one of the great problems. I say this to all of my fellow Latinists here tonight, male and female, this is one of the great problems, how you pronounce it. Oh dear, I went through most of my life thinking that disjecta membra was disjecta membra but tonight I was reminded that it is disyecta membra (Laughter) Don't talk about Julius Caesar - it's Yulius. (Laughter) I was reminded of Julius Caesar tonight when that charming young woman gave me the crown, and I remembered a few scraps from Julius Caesar in my acknowledgment.

Well, now, this is not the first Public Orator under whom I have suffered. (Laughter) It is a very odd thing but when you get to my stage of life and you have been able to do a little - that's all - in the university field, but you feel you've done it with great good will, people in the universities attach importance to it and when I look back on the number of unearned degrees that I have had all over the

world, I blush for shame. I know a lot of people in Australia think that I am not capable of blushing (Laughter) but I am. I think that on seventeen occasions these strange unpurchased fruit have fallen into my lap. But I remember four of them. I wonder, Mr. Chancellor, I wonder if I might, even at this late hour, take your time by mentioning very briefly four recollections, because they are all different.

One is that, as you have been told, I was given a degree at Oxford. Fascinating occasion, highly distinguished by the fact that one of my co-graduands was Margot Fonteyn who is now in Australia. (Laughter) She and I have no superficial resemblance whatever. (Laughter) She had two great advantages over me. One was that she is decorative and the second is that she came late in the list. I had the great misfortune in being first in the list, only because I happened to be Prime Minister of Australia.

We marched up the High Street, went into the Divinity School and there, our Master of Ceremonies gave to all of us pieces of paper which contained on the one side the Latin of what was to be said about us and on the other side the English. This man was bilingual, whoever did it. He did the Latin and he did the English - at least I have always assumed that. Unfortunately for me, all the others had a chance of sitting down and reading and looking wise, but I was first up, so I had no chance of looking at my English at all. The Public Orator, he did his subject well. He had the new pronunciation - thank God the Chancellor, at that time Lord Halifax, had the old pronunciation - and between the two of them I arrived at an average sort of an idea as to what was going on.

Well, my luck was in because I stood there - you can't imagine it, any of you who are not utter highbrows, you can hardly imagine what it meant standing there in the presence of all the great and learned in this great seat of learning, with the Public Orator declaiming past your right ear in the most impeccable Latin, which I knew had to contain a couple of jokes because that's the way Public Orators go on. (Laughter)

I want to tell you - and this is the proudest boast of my life - that I listened, I tried to appear intelligent; there were two jokes and I laughed at each of them at the time. (Laughter) This I regard as my greatest moment and afterwards I spoke to the Public Orator and I said, "You know, that was a great strain on me, but still, I got the points, didn't I?" He said, "Yes, you did. You did very well." I said, "The one comfort I had was that when I looked around in the theatre to see all these immense scholars, none of them saw the joke, none of them understood a word of what was being said (Laughter) and this made me feel that it would not be true to say that a little Latin is a dangerous thing. It is better to have little than none." That was a great occasion.

On another occasion, I was given a degree by the University of Laval in Quebec, a French Canadian University and Laval is a most fascinating place, quite seventeenth-eighteenth-century in its character. As they were giving me a degree, no doubt as a result of some mistranslation in some correspondence (Laughter), I thought that my time had come to speak some of my reply in a species of French. So I did, about 150 words, all with loving care. I walked up and down the night before and I rehearsed this, you see, and I was delighted at the result because although nobody present understood a word I said, they were all with the highest possible courtesy, looking at each other and saying, "Il essaie, il essaie" and I thought that was rather agreeable. (Laughter)

Another one that I recall, and I must get back to the Latin, but I won't keep you long, is the Royal University of Malta. My wife and I arrived in Malta one day and had a tremendous day, about four days in one. We went all over the island, we attended this and that. It was very hot; we got very wet through; we got very tired, but we went on and on and on, and in the long run, I was driven down, looking as proud as a lord mayor (if you know what I mean) (Laughter) (Applause), down through the streets, to receive a degree. The Governor was the Chancellor and somebody else was the Vice Chancellor. They had given me, just before we had set out on our driving, the oath that I was supposed to take, an oath, about, I would think, four or five hundred words. I had to kneel at a faldstool and read out this oath and it was in Latin, and I had no time to give it the study that it no doubt deserved as we were galloping up and down the island.

When I arrived at the University, I said with that impudence that has served me fairly well in my life, I said to the Vice Chancellor, "Quickly, quickly, my dear boy, old pronunciation or new?" (Laughter) This is very important. He said, "It's all right, nobody will ever know" (Laughter) "Take my advice, you mumble" (Laughter) So I took his advice and I knelt there and I mumbled. My wife was very annoyed with me. My staff said, "Never heard you mumble like that before". "Well," I said "I mumbled on the best possible advice". (Laughter)

Then on another occasion - this is the last one I'll quote to you, though it is the earliest in point of time, in 1941, when Winston Churchill was, of course, at the peak of his powers, Great Britain and all the rest of us were in the very throes of a struggle for existence, I was in London and I went down to Bristol to be given a degree at Bristol of which Winston Churchill was then Chancellor. A few hours before we arrived, the place was bombed and the Great Hall at Bristol was burnt and the whole town was in smoke and fire. It speaks volumes for the durability of the true university spirit that the ceremony went on. It went on in the Senate Chamber, a small place - the American Ambassador, the President of Harvard, myself, Winston, the Chancellor. All the faculty came in with their academic robes thrown over the battledress, all smoke-stained, with the fires burning outside, smoke down the street.

This was a memorable, an unforgettable occasion. And the ceremony went on, and it went though in the normal fashion and then the old man who, of course, added to his tremendous spirit a lovely sense of the dramatic, said to me, "Let's go outside and let the people have a look at us" (Laughter) and he lit a fresh cigar and we went on to the front steps. I had a few movies taken of this by some convenient arrangement. There were the people; there was the smoke; there was the fire, and they all rose to it because their leader had not cancelled an arrangement in a great seat of learning but had made it clear that whereas the struggle must continue, learning must never be cast down. That, to me, is one of my unforgettable memories.

And, Sir, that duly summarises everything that I would like to say. It has been my great privilege to do something about the universities. I go back to the time when Sir Keith Murray came out to be Chairman of a Committee, and I agree, I had a great deal to do with that, but from then on, what was created has gone on, I almost believe of its own momentum. Once as a result of his Committee, once we had established that the progress of the universities was something that was vital to the existence of Australia, that notion itself developed a momentum which I don't believe anybody, however stupid, could have stopped. We set up

the Universities Commission. We have had the most unbelievable co-operation from the State Governments because, never forget that although the Commonwealth Government, stepping somewhat outside its constitutional responsibility, has found many millions for the universities, so have the Governments of the States. This has been a joint enterprise of the most exciting kind, and I believe that in the result, great things are happening to Australia and the future of our country is liable to be improved beyond all our imagining.

Sir, I said something this afternoon about the alleged conflict between science and the humanities. I don't want to repeat it. All I want to say is that it is our business in a university, your business, our business as people who are concerned, to reconcile the study of matter, of physical or chemical forms or elements with the study of man both individually and socially. This is really the great challenge to the world in the second half of this century, to have people not only clever in a scientific sense and that's essential, if the world is to make material progress, that's essential if we are to do our duty by the new countries in the world which need growth and need improvement, and that also in the doing of all these things we should never forget that the most important thing on earth after all is man, woman, the human being who must be understood, who must be encouraged, who must be, wherever necessary catered for, because otherwise science can become an inhuman monster and without it, human beings can become academically disposed without purpose, without drive, without ultimate ambition for the rest of the world. This is a great joint enterprise and I know of no places in which it can be conducted half so well as in the universities.

Of course, it is quite possible to be an able scientist and to be ignorant of a lot of the things that have been referred to tonight. It would be a pity, it would be a calamity, but it is also happily quite possible and increasingly probable to be a scientist with a clear view of humanity and an acute sense of social responsibility.

Look back on the biochemists. I remember saying to somebody two or three years ago, in fact I think it might be found in some essay I wrote, that when people in some of these great over-populated countries of the world - the Chinese continent, the Asian mainland - looked into the sky and saw a sputnik passing across above the horizon and marvelled at it and said, "Isn't this tremendous. The people who can do this must be the masters of the world," a little information to them would have let them know that half of them would not be looking at it if it were not for the work of the medical researchers in the Western Hemisphere - the biochemists, the people who produce all the antibiotics, the enormous discoverers, the oculists in the field of the brain. Think of all these wonderful things that have been done by the scientist and the applied scientist and we get a rather better balanced view of mankind.

Sir, I believe that the course that is open to all of us is to study and practise the humanities against the background of a world which expands or contracts as scientific knowledge grows or fails. This is the great thing that we must remember and therefore, Sir, living as we do in an era of brilliant cleverness and immense material achievement, the like of which our great grandfathers would have regarded as utterly impossible, living as we do in this era, we still have to face up to it that whether the close of the twentieth century, our century, will find us credited by our successes, with a great contribution to true, human, spiritual and intellectual development, will be a question, part of the answer, perhaps more than part of the answer, will have to be provided by the vision and faith and sense of mission of our universities. Mr. Chancellor, I thank you.
