

PRESENTATION TO THE PRIME MINISTER,
SIR ROBERT MENZIES, BY THE INSTITUTE
OF BUILDERS AT THE GROCERS' HALL,
LONDON

10TH JULY, 1964

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

I was told by my staff that there would be no speeches. So far the prophecy seems to be wrong. But I am bound to tell you that if I once got going and developed some of those themes of yours, you would all be here a long, long time.

I want you to realise what a versatile fellow I am. (Laughter) I am a gynaecologist and obstetrician, as you said. I am a surgeon, I am a physician, I am an architect - I couldn't be relied on to design a hen coop (Laughter); I am a plumber, a builder. The gynaecologists, like you, were good enough to give me a tie, here in London - quite splendid - and the last time I wore it, I was going out to Government House with a couple of new Ministers to be sworn in, and the Governor-General said to me, "That's a rather decorative tie. What's that?" I said, "That's the Gynaecologists' and Obstetricians'". He said, "It's a very odd tie to wear". I said, "Not at all, I've just been giving birth to two new Ministers". (Laughter) (Applause)

But you know, Sir, I am grateful for this. I have always admired builders and, at the same time, envied them. My line of country, as you have courteously pointed out, has been heavily involved with politics. Dear me, when I look at my respectable days at the Bar and I now realise that I have been a Member of Parliament, one way or another, for about thirty-five years and a Prime Minister for sixteen or seventeen of them, I realise that my lines have been cast inevitably in that field. And, of course, you know, politicians are never given credit for building anything. Indeed, there is no evidence visible that they have. Everybody knows if the country is going well, that it was his fault and not the fault of the politician. Everybody knows if the country is going badly that the politicians are lousy and that the Government ought to be changed. So we lose both ways.

I suppose we do have to write a great deal on water or on sand and that's inevitable. Those of us with enough vanity, occasionally console ourselves in the still watches of the night by saying, "Ah, well, when history comes to be written - you know that frightful platitude - when history comes to be written, old boy, you'll get an honourable mention, (Laughter) even if it is only in a footnote." I'm never too sure of it, all the same. The historians can't be relied on, and therefore one never knows, but at the same time, you have your monuments all about you.

I was talking this afternoon about Mannie Hornibrook, whom some of you know in Australia, a great bridge-builder. We now have a lake in Canberra - I make bold to say we wouldn't have it if I hadn't been advocating it like mad for a long time, persuading the Treasury and having the item struck out in my absence and having it struck in again when I came home (Laughter) - but really, the man who has got a memorial in relation to the lake is Sir Manuel Hornibrook. He built two magnificent bridges across it, a great credit to him and a great credit to the city of Canberra. And so you will understand why I really feel this afternoon I am in company that is a little too good for me. (Laughter) I feel a little above myself because here you are, mortals though you be,

you occasionally produce the stuff of immortality. People like me, we just hope for the best.

But anyhow, whether it is the best or the worse, politics is a most interesting business, frustrating, sometimes terribly amusing. I'm at a Prime Ministers' conference now which is very amusing because I am the only fellow who makes speeches that are speeches and not written out, so mine are the only ones that never reach the newspapers. (Laughter) (Applause) We meet in private, great frankness is to be observed, you know, this is the theory of it, and if I haven't heard too clearly what somebody is saying, it's all right, I open a paper the next morning and there it is, because I know it's gone out.

When I first attended a Prime Ministers' Conference, I wasn't a Prime Minister. I was there representing my then Prime Minister, Mr. Lyons. That was in 1935, so I'm the senior inhabitant. At that time, there were four of us. Ramsay MacDonald was the Prime Minister, George Forbes was the Prime Minister of New Zealand, I think R.V. Bennett was there from Canada and I was representing Mr. Lyons, and I am not sure that at the same time, sitting discreetly in the corner, there wasn't Godfrey Huggins from Southern Rhodesia. We've been arguing today about Southern Rhodesia. Things have changed. Godfrey used to turn up. He wasn't invited. (Laughter) He had no right to be there because Southern Rhodesia wasn't a member of the Commonwealth but he arrived, very sensibly and sat there and we all liked him immensely.

Now there is a terrific argument going on, of course, as to whether Southern Rhodesia is to be given certain orders or not. When I look back over those thirty years, it seems a little hard to believe, doesn't it, that a country which has been sitting with us should today be the subject of debate, and somewhat acrimonious debate at times. Still, I think we got through that one pretty well. We will resume again next week. I am now sitting there looking at the representatives of eighteen countries, including my own, eighteen, all sorts and conditions, all sizes and shapes. I will just tell you one simple reminiscence of two days ago.

At the last Prime Ministers' Conference, the Prime Minister of Sierra Leone, Milton Margai, was present. I don't know whether any of you ever met Milton Margai, but he was a little chap and he wore a cap such as my old Scotch grandmother used to wear, you know, with leads. (Laughter) And he was a splendid chap, wonderful chap. He delivered himself to one representative whom I didn't care for very much, one day, in the most spirited fashion. It would have done great credit to an Australian in a bad temper. (Laughter) I admired that very much indeed. Well, he's dead and his brother, Albert Margai, is now the Prime Minister of Sierra Leone, and he arrived. He's a huge fellow. He's about six feet five and he's large in every conceivable direction. He's a terrific fellow. And I being the oldest inhabitant and therefore entitled to a certain amount of privilege and impudence, walked across to him and shook him warmly by the hand and said, "Now tell me, are you a brother of Milton's?" He said, "Yes". I said, "Don't think I'm being offensive, but same mother and father?" (Laughter) He said, "Oh, yes, same mother and father" and then he gave a great hearty chuckle and said, "Mind you, Milton was the only little fellow in the family." (Laughter)

You know, Sir, it is not what emerges from a Prime Minister's Conference, because I lay odds that, as usual, the communique at the end of it will be the greatest collection of cliches that the world has ever seen. It always has been in the past, because you see, we have a unanimity rule. (Laughter) There are eighteen vetoes and it is only when a proposition is so harmless, such as the accommodation was good, or something like that, that it gets into the communique (Laughter) and then our friends of the Press write scathing articles about it. Very properly. It is a most awful, dreary collection of platitudes in the world. But the real point is not in the communique, but it is that round the table are all sorts of fellows, some of whom may poop off in their own countries and make fiery speeches and breathe threatenings and slaughter. But when you are sitting around, chatting with them at intervals, or across the table, you find that they are all, basically, people you can talk with and get to understand, and this is what distinguishes the Prime Ministers' Conference, or one of the things that distinguishes it from the United Nations because in the United Nations, people haven't time to sit down and have little friendly conversations breaking the ice. They are all round the corner cooking up an amendment or lobbying for something. (Laughter) Well, we don't go in for that.

Therefore, long may we survive and Sir, long may you survive. In spite of this accident that has happened to it today (Laughter), I hope the Institute goes on and flourishes for a thousand years, and all I need add is that I am most grateful to you and to your members for the honour you've done me.
