

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

DEGREE CONGREGATIONS 1964

Ceremony in Great Hall -

11.0 a.m. Saturday, 11th July

THE RT. HON. SIR ROBERT MENZIES - Prime Minister of Australia

Hats are curious things - have you noticed that? The higher orders, like myself, we wear these; and then I am supposed to keep it on, but I won't. I noticed this morning that on a slightly lower level they wear mortar-boards and this permits an infinite variety of appearance, but I want to award a special prize to the man who, I thought, wore his mortar-board with the most bravura touch right back on a well thatched head. I refer, you will all understand, to Mr. Jonathan George Hodgkins.

Now, Sir, I don't want to detain this congregation but there are perhaps one or two things I would like to say. One of them is about the Public Orator. Being public, but no orator, myself, I have a great interest in Public Orators. Very frequently they address the Chancellor in Latin, a language now not as commonly understood as it should be, but even then if you still retain a smattering of Latin, Sir, you are up against the great problem of how it is to be pronounced: old, new, or what I call 'Law Courts Latin'. A very great problem. At another great seat of learning in this country I was presented by a Public Orator, who produced his Latin with the strictest adherence to the new pronunciation, (some of you scientists understand this), and the Chancellor was Lord Halifax, who replied much to my relief in the old pronunciation, and I thought I was doing very well when I roughly, roughly, understood both of them. I found out afterwards, looking around all the assembled dons, that it turned out I was the only one who did, and that is very encouraging. In the University of Western Australia the other day I was given a degree, one of these unearned degrees - I have one or two of my own that I have sweated for - and the Public Orator did most of it in English and then a few phrases in Latin. Now I must tell you, if you don't know, that many years ago in my country I had a little dispute with the waterside workers about the shipping of pig iron, and they christened me "Pig Iron", a title that I have worn with singular distinction for a long, long time, and the Public Orator at the University of Western Australia, Sir, he presented me finally in the Latin bit: "sub nomine porcum ferrium".

Sir, having disposed of these irrelevances, I would like to say something, if I might on this very happy occasion, about you. I come from a far country, but I don't come from a very far spot in your mind. We have been, over many years, great friends, and I, over many years, have been your great admirer. I think that this country has been fortunate in having in its service a man of such learning, high intelligence, great courage in prosperity and adversity, as the present Lord Aven, whom I know better as Anthony Eden, and this University, if I may say so, is greatly honoured to have him in the chair.

You know, Sir, politics - of which I am a species of practitioner myself - politics is regarded by all non-political people as extraordinarily easy, and by all newspaper commentators as almost fantastically simple. Quite easy. Politics, of course; statesmanship in the conduct of the affairs of nations; is the most testing of all occupations. It sometimes attracts the attention of people of coarse fibre and low quality. Every now and then it attracts the attention of a man of fine fibre and great quality. I don't like anticipating what that mythical being, the historian, will say; you know, this is one of the cliches of life isn't it - "the historian will say", the belief being, Mr. Chancellor, that historians get it right. Well perhaps they do - occasionally. But still, in the long run, there is a judgment of history and I venture to say with some dogma that history will record, when it comes to be settled and balanced, if it ever does, that your Chancellor was the greatest Foreign Minister that this country has had in this century, and a Prime Minister of such courage and imagination that, looking back on it, and we had a few troubled times together, I marvel at his fortitude.

This is a great story of a great life, and when I received a letter asking me to come here to be honoured by a degree, and I found that the Chancellor was this friend of mine, what normally would have been a great pleasure became a singular pleasure, a tremendous occasion for rejoicing in my heart, and pride in my mind, and that is my first reason for appreciating this honour.

I have a second reason, about which I will be quite brief. It turns out that I have had a good deal to do with the modern development of Universities in Australia, and I say it turns out, because although I am a University man myself and have always had, I hope, some understanding of what Universities mean and how much the world needs them, it did turn out that after the war there was a tremendous upsurge in the number of students who wanted to come into the Australian Universities. Now the Australian Universities are primarily the business of the State Governments, the State Parliament, in Australia; the Commonwealth had never entered into that field; but the whole problem seemed to me to be so tremendous and so growing that I did secure the services of Sir Keith Murray to come out and head a Committee, and when he made his report, and I read the figures, I concealed the report from the Treasury. I don't encourage deceit as a general rule, but on this occasion I practised a little. I didn't conceal it from them altogether, but I just let them have it at the last possible moment, and then I had a Cabinet Meeting and I circulated the report among the Cabinet Ministers only the night before the Cabinet Meeting, so I was the only one really who knew what was in the report, and by nightfall we had adopted every recommendation in the report. Anybody who is contemplating politics as a career could do no better than study that example of political technique. And since then we have established a University Commission and the amount that is called for year by year, or every triennium, grows in the most fabulous fashion, but this, I believe, has opened up a new chapter in the history of the Universities; and in this generation, in this century, everybody must realize that the greatest need of the world, and the greatest need of your country, and the greatest need of my country, is not some happy stroke on a financial investment, but an increasing production of educated men and women through our Universities. This is the potential wealth of the country and, without it, we will dwindle, peak and pine.

It is a very exciting thing to me, Sir, to go to a conferring of degrees like this, because I look around and I see literally in front of me the additional assets that the nation has secured, and I hope every graduate will think of it, not in a priggish way, but with an understanding of how true that is.

But there is one great problem that confronts the Universities in my country and that no doubt confronts the Universities here. It is this. It is always possible, given enough authority, or impudence, or ingenuity, to get money out of the Treasury. It's a fact - it's always possible. But you can't get University professors and lecturers and staffs in some shop or from any Government department. Thousands and thousands of undergraduates are added to the normal rate of increase in my country every year, and my complete problem all the time is where are we going to provide the academic staffs that are needed to maintain this standard. That is a much bigger problem than bricks and mortar, a much bigger problem than money, because of all things that we must avoid it is a debasement of the currency. We can't have a Gresham's Law applying to academic standards, of bad money driving out good. We can't have this. We just can't afford it.

I have a fixed belief that every year's group of graduates ought to be, on the whole, rather better than their predecessors; better trained and, of course, in the world of Science complexities grow so much that you must be immeasurably better equipped as scientists than your fathers were. But we must keep the standards up, and I hope that the standards will be kept up, that many people who are now going to the Universities and who have great talent and have achieved high academic status, that some of them will think of working in the Universities, of teaching in schools, of helping to produce a new generation. We can't all go off after the best paid job, there must be constantly, year by year, a number of people who have a feeling of dedication to this matter and who say, I am determined that the standards of my University will rise, not fall, every year. That's the greatest problem that confronts the Universities, in my opinion. But every time, Sir, I feel pessimistic about it, and I go to an investiture and I see the new graduates, I become an optimist.