

THE FEDERATION OF PARENTS AND CITIZENS' ASSOCIATIONS
OF N.S.W. 1964 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Y.W.C.A., SYDNEY

14th AUGUST, 1964

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

Mr. President, Mr. Minister, the Director and Ladies and Gentlemen :

If I haven't on a former occasion appeared before you, or those who work with you, I can assure you that it isn't the fault of your former President, because Sid Liebert and I were at school together; he was known as "Skinny", and I was skinny; so you can tell it was a long, long time ago. We've remained great friends, and I know rather more about the Parents and Citizens than I would have known perhaps but for him.

Now I want to say at once that I think that the work that you do is of tremendous importance - I've a few reasons for saying that. One is that we live, don't we, in a period, in an age in which there is a disposition to think that governments ought to do everything, and that all we need to do is pay our taxes, and complain at the way the government spends them.

When one encounters the supplementing of public duty by private voluntary effort, one is greatly encouraged about the future of the country, and you, ladies and gentlemen here today, represent in the most striking fashion that spirit of self-help and of help to others which must never be allowed to die out; we must never become so regimented that we regard our duties as confined to our obligations. Now, that's one reason why I'm very glad to be here.

Now what is it that you do? I was a schoolboy once, believe it or not, and a State schoolboy in the State of Victoria - we call them State schools there - a little country school first of all, and then a larger State school in the City of Ballarat, and then a private secondary school, and then what we call a Public School in Victoria, and the University. I've had a fairly versatile experience and perhaps because of that, I've maintained all through my life the most passionate interest in the educational development of the country. But in those days, in those State school days, using the Victorian term, I don't remember any Parents and Citizens bodies. You went to school, you gazed with profound awe at your teachers who gazed at us correspondingly with profound contempt, and then we went back home, and went along to school next day. Now, what you've done, and what you are doing on the most extraordinary scale and in an expanding way, is not only to add to the facilities that the government provides - other things, other human things that will help to round out, to fill out the life of the school boy and school girl, and in the course of doing that, you come into contact with regularity, I venture to believe, with the schoolteachers.

Now, I've a very great respect for schoolteachers, and we all have, but you know, we must never allow them to become a race apart. We must never allow them to become a race apart. We must never allow them to get into that state of detachment in which they tell children what they must do, or ought to do; and not come into adequate contact with the

...../2

parts of Australia already very highly developed and there are others that are just crying out for it. But we can't discriminate under the constitution between one State and another. We can, if we make a grant. We can't discriminate in our taxation laws. We can't say, "well, all right, you can go without paying

...../3

taxes. We want to encourage you." Mind you, we've tried to. We've got a rather unlawful statute operating at the present time, but as a strict constitutional principle, discrimination is barred. Now, I just give you that very simple example of why the passion for uniformity can be a serious menace to national growth. And I believe it would be a serious menace to individual growth.

Today, education, in particular primary and secondary education, are within the domain of the States, and not within the domain of the Commonwealth. Now, this is an excellent thing, in my opinion. I would violently resist a proposal that the whole business of education should be passed over to the Commonwealth, and put under some central legislative and administrative control because I believe that would be a very bad thing for education. And why? Because I don't think it is necessarily true that the curriculum or circumstances appropriate to a child north of Cairns is necessarily the same kind of thing that is appropriate to a child south of Hobart. This is an enormous country; it has all sorts of differences - of climate and conditions and industrial growth - all the varieties in the world can be found in Australia. To say that every child in Australia must go through exactly the same process of tuition and be controlled by an all-wise Parliament at Canberra seems to me to be hopelessly wrong and, indeed, very dangerous.

Uniformity in education has little to commend it in my eyes. I'm all for variety, a variety of schools, a variety of curricula; standards to be observed, yes, standards to be raised, but above all things, never let us lose sight of the fact that all men (I say nothing about women for this purpose) but all men are not the same, and all men are not equal, except in the eyes of their Maker and, I hope, in the eyes of the law. But otherwise we're individuals, all different: some have great inborn talents for one thing, some great inborn talents for another, some with moderate talents, and some with none beyond the routine of life. We know this. Our great function when we approach the problem of education is to equalise opportunity to see that every boy and girl has a chance to develop whatever faculties he or she may have, because this will be a tremendous contribution to the good life for the nation, and to their own good life, because there's an immense personal satisfaction in accumulating some of the treasures of the mind. But we're never to fall into the error of thinking that we are all equal in talents, in aptitudes, in industry, in ambition, in energy, because if we are obviously not all identical, one or the other, in this way, it follows that what may be a very proper course of education for one may be inadequate for another, or inappropriate to a third.

I recently had occasion to be reading something about what has been called the mechanistic approach to life - the system of rather heathen philosophy which was practised by Karl Marx and expounded by Karl Marx and by Engels - the idea that human volition, individual human volition is really of no moment, that the whole of history moves along to the exercise of mechanical forces by material circumstances which, of course, reduces human responsibility to a minimum, and reduces in the human brain the necessary consciousness of having some command over his own destiny. And this is to be contrasted with our more civilised ideas which concentrate upon freedom for the individual, and the development of the individual - the encouragement, the opening of doors, where doors may now be locked and barred; but if we accustom ourselves too much, too easily, to a highly centralised, uniform, almost authoritarian control over the process of education, then we will be moving more towards that bad philosophy to which I referred, and away from the good philosophy in which I think all of us here this morning most firmly believe.

Now, Sir, I don't want to hold you up at any length, but I wanted to say those things because every now and then I detect a temptation in people's minds to say that if we're going to have a proper, effective, one hundred per cent. satisfactory educational system, it's the Commonwealth that must do it. Well, there's a very old proverb about the man who pays the piper calling the tune, and it's pretty deep-seated in human nature. I'm the last man to complain about the Commonwealth being called upon to make contribution where contribution is necessary. I, in fact, have the great honour of having instituted a system of advances in the tertiary field, in the University field, which have now amounted to very large sums of money paid out by the Commonwealth every year, and I don't complain of it. I'm proud of it. I think it was right, because I think the universities would have gone hopelessly bankrupt if we hadn't come in. In a week or two I'm going to receive a report, I'm told, from a special committee set up to investigate tertiary education, and this report will most obviously - though I've not seen a word of it, but I know - will contain recommendations of a far-reaching kind, which will produce, no doubt, a few pale and wan countenances in the Treasury. But that's in the future, though it's in the very near future.

We have recently intervened in the secondary field to the extent of our provision of scholarships and of science teaching facilities, both of these things of tremendous importance if, first, we're going to make the best use of our universities and if, second, we're going to increase the resources, the scientific and technological resources of this new world into which we move.

But all I want to say to you is this, that if the habit develops of saying that the Commonwealth ought to take over the financial responsibility for education as a whole (and we now carry quite a handsome percentage of it, I may say), but if the Commonwealth is to be told time after time: "You must take over the financial responsibility for education", then don't you think that it's quite likely that the Commonwealth Parliament, or the Government of the day may say: "Well, if we're to have all the responsibility, we must have all the control. If we're to pay the piper in full, we must call the tune in full." Look, this is a very great danger. It's not a danger with me, I may say, but then, of course, I won't, strange as it may seem, last forever. It would be no danger with me, because I have the most violent objection to the Commonwealth interfering with the States in the exercise of their powers, because they do their jobs very well, and I have no shadow of complaint about it.

But in the long run, if you take a broad view of constitutional growth, and compare it with the history of other countries, you will realise that in every Federal system (and that's the most difficult system in the world - it's the most legalistic system in the world), that in every Federation you either have a movement away from the centre, so that the Federation tends to break up, or you have a centripetal movement so that more and more power goes to the centre, sometimes without constitutional amendment at all; so that you may finally say: "Well, the States have become mere shadows, the whole power is in the central Parliament and administration." Now, this is elementary, constitutional history, I am bound to say.

In modern times, we've seen two new Federations established: one in the West Indies, and one in Africa - the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Each of them broke up within a few years; neither of them lasted - I think the one in

Africa lasted for ten years, the one in the West Indies for almost a matter of months. And that's because the instinct for central government was weak and the parts came apart, separated into their original form. Now, in Australia the process is different. The whole movement here has been rather to strengthen the position of the central administration, particularly in financial matters; and this is, perhaps, an inevitable part of history. But I don't want, myself, to see that centralising process in terms of power, authority, control, carried to a point where the States no longer manage their own educational programmes and affairs. Nothing could be worse.

You must have a proper respect for politicians, but you must also have a certain healthy distrust of us. We're not always to be entrusted with great power. It's a very good thing to have a division of power, if you're going to preserve liberty. Give any political organisation full power, and you are taking the first step in the direction of a tyranny which will be based on the idea that as all of those whom we control must obey us, then they must all be uniform; they must just be, so to speak, pawns in the power game. Don't, don't ever permit yourself to get into a position where there's a strong movement to hand over education to the Commonwealth.

I, speaking as the beneficiary of the educational systems of my own country, of all sorts, would regard it as a bad day for Australia if we ceased to have this variety of authorities, this variety of curricula in the schools, this immense variety of parents visiting the schools, talking to the teachers, producing a broad attitude of mind, encouraging the teacher by their interest, learning from him, and at the same time, all the time, contributing to this variety in human nature which, when you consider it, is the essence of life, isn't it? Just think of it: suppose we were all the same, suppose you looked all the same. I would have gone mad instantly, and I never would have received my award as the Father of the Year.

Sir, I have the greatest pleasure in the world in declaring this Conference open.
