

OPENING OF RED CROSS HOUSE, HOBART PLACE,  
CANBERRA, A.C.T.

19th SEPTEMBER, 1964

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

Sir Roy and Lady Oliver, Your Excellencies and Gentlemen :

Before I forget, I declare the building open.  
(Laughter) (Applause) Whatever I say hereafter will be just a trifling bonus because the job is now done.

I was very interested in what Sir Roy was saying. Of course, he is an old Chief of Staff, and chiefs of staff seldom miss an opportunity of getting a little money or a project out of the Government. (Laughter) I was therefore a little disappointed when he comforted you by telling you that with these admirable and highly solvent tenants in the building, they will wipe off the debt. I was sorry that he said that. I thought he was going to say, "Well, that will help us, but unless we get a lot more help from you people, we will have a debt hanging around our neck." This is a point that I make for him. (Laughter) Because, of course, this is just a small building. When Canberra has risen to its fullest state, this will have to be added to. This will, I hope, in due course, Dr. Newman Morris, become the national headquarters of the Red Cross in the Capital of this country.

Therefore I suggest to Sir Roy that he ought to always keep on his face that strange look of a man who is yearning for somebody to produce some money. It is quite easily done; as I tell you, in the past I have seen him do it, (Laughter) sometimes with success.

It is a very interesting conjunction of events today because, putting it in round terms, the Red Cross Movement is 100 years old and the Australian branch or organisation is 50 years old and therefore we are dealing with an organisation which already has achieved considerable seniority. I was reminded, when I was thinking about this matter today, that the founder of Red Cross was - and I hesitate to pronounce his name because of local rules about French names - but I will call him Andre Dunant and if anybody says it's "Dunant" I accept correction. (Laughter)

But he was a very remarkable man in two respects. One was that the battlefield of Solferino filled him with the most tremendous ideas that something ought to be done about the care of the wounded and it ought to be done without having regard to sides, it ought to be done in a broad sweep of humane action, and that nations themselves ought to subscribe to a convention so that all those who needed attention as a result of battle could have it irrespective of what side they had been on. This is elementary enough to us today who have inherited the benefit of this matter, but in those days, an idea of immense novelty, but of course, so profoundly humane in its conception that it took on, and before long, most if not all of the nations of the world had understood it, subscribed to it.

The second interesting thing about it was that he drew some inspiration, a great deal of inspiration from the work of Florence Nightingale. You know, Sir, I speak with hesitation in the presence of distinguished Generals and people of that order, but really, the Crimean War, and the events which followed on it, are very difficult to understand

today. It seems an almost inexplicable contest. It did two things, anyhow, in the case of Australia. It honoured the names of its not frightfully competent Generals by attaching their names to hotels and items of clothing (Laughter), and so we have a raglan sleeve, a cardigan jacket, and hotels in the suburbs in Australia were built at that time richly garnished with their names, and this, I think, is very satisfactory. If they were now alive and looked back on it, they might feel that they had done better than they knew. (Laughter)

But the remarkable thing about it was the conflict, so difficult to understand as we look at it over a hundred years later, gave rise to two most astonishing developments. The first of them, of course, will always be associated with the name of Florence Nightingale. I think people are occasionally inclined to think of her as the Lady with the Lamp, as a rather benign and kindly creature, who soothed the brows of those who needed attention in the Crimea. She was, of course, one of the most astonishing women of the nineteenth century, one of the most astonishing people, male or female, of the nineteenth century.

It isn't for nothing that Lytton Strachey, when he wrote about eminent Victorians, included her in his relatively small gallery, because she had enormous strength of will, tremendous ability, a superb capacity for telling politicians where they got off, considerable family influence which she didn't hesitate to use. She was responsible herself for the whole modern character of nursing. Indeed, I always delight to remember the story of Queen Victoria, herself a very strong-minded woman, always sure that she was right and, sometimes, let it be admitted, she was right - but not always. But when she had had Florence Nightingale up to the Palace in audience, and had listened to her and had fallen under the spell of her personality, she was reported, as many of you will recall, to have said, "Ah, what a mind! She ought to be in charge of the War Office." (Laughter)

Now, Florence Nightingale; we can have all sorts of views, very properly - quite sentimental - about her. The fact is that this woman was one of the great creative people of the last century. She created the whole modern conception of hospital treatment and of nursing and she did it at a time when it was considered faintly disreputable to become a nurse, when the popular image of the nurse was the one created by Dickens - you know - when he describes Sairey Gamp who had a little container on the mantelpiece and took a drop of it when she felt disposed. (Laughter) This was a revolution that was created by Florence Nightingale. She is one of the great people in our entire history. And then this was followed up, partly I am sure as a result of the stimulus of her example, by the creation by this great Frenchman of the Red Cross idea and of the Red Cross organisation.

Now, Sir Roy Dowling who has devoted a tremendous amount of energy - I think with great public spirit - to this matter, has told you something about its history, something about its numbers today, something about its growth, and all this, of course, is tremendously stimulating. I just want to supplement what he said by mentioning one point.

In time of war, the work of the Red Cross becomes vividly clear in the public eye. Nobody doubts its enormous

value, its tremendous and sacrificial efforts in time of war, and in time of peace, we are a little inclined to think, "Well, that's over" and also to think, "Well, that can't happen here" and there is therefore a danger that the Red Cross may come to be regarded as something that falls back into a state of hibernation between one war and another.

Now, I just want to say to you that you can't in the event of war, bring into existence a mass of services of this kind without notice in a week or two, any more than you can bring into existence armed forces to perform their tasks at a notice of a week or two. There must be tremendous preparation when we are in a state of peace, and the more the Red Cross organisation is sustained, not only by the money, by the understanding and moral support of the people of Australia, between wars or after a war, the better it will be for our efficacy in these fields whatever may come.

I beg of you, don't let us fall into the error of thinking that when all is quiet the Red Cross doesn't matter and that when all is not quiet we may suddenly expect to find a fully sustained and well organised Red Cross, ready to do its work at the drop of a handkerchief. In other words, we must, I believe, in Australia keep our interest in the work of the Red Cross always up to date, keep our personal support up to date, keep our financial support up to date, because it is only in that way that when the big strains come on to it, it will be able to sustain them and perform its remarkable function on behalf of humanity.

And so, Sir Roy, I am delighted to think that in this city, increasingly becoming recognised as the capital of this nation, you have this building, a building which will serve as a constant reminder to people of the significance of what goes on. I don't want to say any more than that because I don't subscribe to this old doctrine that when people come and sit in the shade and feel cold, they ought to be compelled to listen to politicians ad nauseam. I don't believe in that at all, so I'm not going to detain you, but I want to say to you, Lady Oliver, that I accept your invitation with very great pleasure; I am delighted to find that somebody like yourself, distinguished in office and in person, has been so actively engaged in this matter.

I publicly acknowledge the great services that have been rendered by Sir Roy, by Dr. Williams, by all those who have been mentioned; I needn't go through them, one by one. I would like to extend my own congratulations to the Minister for the Interior and to the Chairman of the Capital Commission because a great deal of co-operation has performed itself in the bringing about of the result that we see today.

There's a rule in Parliament, in the Standing Orders, and as I don't need to tell some of you, the Standing Orders are an interesting document, never observed by presiding officers or members, but there is a rule in the Standing Orders against tedious repetition. I shall now, in the highest tradition of Parliament, violate that rule. I will engage in repetition. I declare the building open.

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