

THE ARMIDALE SCHOOL SPEECH DAY11TH DECEMBER, 1963Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. R.G. Menzies

My Lord Bishop, Headmaster and Ladies and Gentlemen :

Before I address myself to the serious business of the day, I would like to say that at the Girls' Grammar School this morning, I was honoured by having pinned on to the back of my chair a picture of a thistle. Today, I am happy to tell you, the practical nature of boys manifested itself because lying on the seat of my chair was a shilling (Laughter) which I now donate to any worthy school charity. (Laughter) (Applause) Of course, you will not overlook the fact that while the thistle now has some association with me or I have with the thistle, the shilling also has an association with me because it's a bob. (Laughter)

As a matter of fact, there was some reference made - I must refer to what happened this morning at the other school, if for no other reason than this, that the Bishop this afternoon really stole quite a bit of the speech I made this morning. (Laughter) And, like Mark Antony, I must wait until it comes back to me. Anyhow, there was a reference made this morning, apropos of The Thistle, to the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Sir Alexander Douglas Home, whose name, as you know is spelt H-o-m-e, and is pronounced "Hume", just as my name, boys, as you all know, is spelt Menzies but in Scotland pronounced Mingies. So there we were once, two of us at a dinner in London, one of those large dinners at which people make powerful speeches and Lord Home, as he then was, made a speech proposing my health and had a little fun about the pronunciation of my name - one way in Australia, another way in Scotland, and so on. I had to get my own back by saying that when I got back to Australia and was invited to a concert in the local town, with perhaps the vicar presiding, though I would hope not because I am a Presbyterian myself (Laughter); I would look forward to hearing him say, "Now Miss Jones will favour us by singing, 'Hume, Hume Sweet Hume'". (Laughter)

Now Sir, I would like to pursue an idea which I had in my mind when I came here and which I am stimulated to say something more about now: The function of education. This sounds very, very heavy, doesn't it? The function of education. All sorts of fine things have been said about it, but I would rather like to divide it myself very, very briefly into two matters.

First of all, we go to school, we go to a university, if we are lucky enough to do so. We go to some place of learning in order, I believe, to equip ourselves to learn by our own experience. I hope I convey myself on that matter. To equip ourselves to learn by our own experience. Now, no man can learn by his own experience if he permits himself no experience, if he is merely one of a mass, one of a mob, if he has merely got the ambition of being so like everyone else in appearance and dress and mind that he will never be distinguished from any other man in the crowd. This is one of the terrifying prospects of this century that people should succumb to the mass idea, that people should be even so bemused as to believe that the majority is always right. I know fellows like myself occasionally like to get a majority; (Laughter) but if I hadn't got a majority this time, it would have been conclusive evidence to me that the majority is wrong. (Laughter) But the point I

want to make is this: Nothing could be more absurd than to have your own mind developed to a point at which you really believe that you can't disagree with the majority of people without being a little odd, a little unworthy, a little crazy.

You, Sir, referred to something that Jan Christian Smuts had said about mankind being on the march. I remember that very well. It was in the same speech that he pointed out that the most dangerous thing in the world was the mass movement and the mass mentality which threatened to destroy the freedom of mankind. This is true. I remember once attending a church service - somewhere or other, I've forgotten - in which there was a Scots preacher who told the story of the first disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Suddenly he stopped and he said, "Picture the scene" and he described it. He said, "That was the beginning of the greatest minority movement in human history." Now this is true because Christianity is the greatest minority movement in human history. We can't count majorities in this world for Christianity, but it stands for something more than that; because people, generation after generation and century after century, have been found who believe that the majority was not necessarily right, that minorities though they might be, they had standards to uphold and great ideas to preach and to practice.

Therefore, and this is really what I am trying to say, the first business is to learn to be yourself, not to be somebody else. To be yourself. That doesn't mean to be all filled with self-conceit, saying, "Ah, I am the greatest fellow in the world," but it is to be yourself and not a miserable copy of your neighbour, not a feeble imitation of some other fellow in your class or in your year or in your part of the world. We have to be ourselves if we are to make our contribution to life, whether that contribution is made in a vast place and on a high ground or in a small place obscurely and quietly. But we must be ourselves, not somebody else.

When somebody has learned by broadening studies - which may seem irksome, but which produce balance in the mind; when he has through those processes learned to be himself, then he will be well qualified to learn, to learn sensibly and wisely from his own experience. And it is a pretty good man who does. In my life, now no shorter than it was, I have seen people fall time after time into exactly the same error because they have not learned by their own experience, because they have got into the mental habit of having a stab at something as if the problem had suddenly arisen. So we must learn and I say to the boys, particularly, "Be yourselves."

Not a bad thing to be yourself, with all your defects or with all your advantages or with all your gifts or with all what you may regard as your lack of talent; it is a splendid thing to be yourself because it is as yourself that people will deal with you in this life, that people will meet you in this life, that people will judge you in this life. They won't say, "Oh, you belong to a good crowd." They will want to know what you, yourself, are like. Therefore we must be ourselves and prepared to learn by our own experience.

But of course, Sir, I don't need to say that in a school, in any place that professes to be a seat of learning, we must also be taught to learn from the experience of others and the books are full of the experience of others. Every library is full of the experiences of others; the whole study of history is designed to enable us to benefit by the experiences of others. I am astonished, time after time, to encounter people

who think they have been successful in life because they have made a lot of money which really, quite frankly, is the lowest of the arts - very useful one to have no doubt - but it doesn't mean much, on the whole, except to the individual; but who at the same time will almost boast about their entire innocence of what has gone on in the world before, as if they had made a new world of their own, all of a sudden, without benefit of history, without benefit of looking back or of looking forward. I think it was Henry Ford who, having turned out to be a benefactor, I think, of mankind, inventing the mass production of motor cars, and having become a very rich man and very powerful and having displayed a species of genius, I agree, in the industrial world, and a great constructive genius at that, the moment he became a multi-millionaire and a successful producer of motor cars, became, following our charming habit, an authority on everything. So newspaper reporters would go to him and say, "Excuse me, Mr. Ford, what are your views on classical music?" "Excuse me, Mr. Ford, what are your views on the international situation?" "Excuse me, Mr. Ford, who is your favourite poet, and why?" Once a year, they ring somebody up in my family and say, "What are your twelve favourite flowers?" (Laughter) and that leaves me for dead because I only know the names of about six. (Laughter)

It was Henry Ford himself who, being asked for his views on history, pronounced final judgment. He said, "History is bunk". (Laughter) Now, some of you earnest students may have said this too, for all I know. (Laughter) I get a gleam in the eyes of one or two of you that suggests that you may have said that under your breath. Believe me, just as a knowledge of your own language is imperative for life, just as the knowledge of somebody else's language, ancient or modern, is of terrific significance in life, so is the knowledge of history, which is the gathered-together and recorded experience of other people, essential for judgment. Any man who has to handle great problems - in my line of life, if you like, though this is by no means the only one - to try to make a decision about great problems, I believe is grievously handicapped unless his mind is sufficiently furnished to know that this is not the first time a problem of this kind ever cropped up, that it has cropped up elsewhere, that other people have had to look at it, that some people have solved it or tried to solve it in one way and the solution failed because of certain circumstances. This is a tremendous thing to have a mental background - yesterday's mind, if you like, in a sense, yesterday's memory in dealing with today's problems. So you see, your own experience and the experience of other people before you, you must learn from both if you are to come out from school with some sense of values. Headmaster is so right. It is a good thing to acquire a vocation. I did myself and not to my disadvantage. It's a good thing to achieve a profession or a trade or a skill or something or other that will enable you to earn a living. But earning a living is the mere mechanics of providing yourself with food and drink and clothing. Achieving a life, that's a different matter, because that depends on human values, upon human understanding, upon having achieved, however modestly, a kind of civilisation.

Now, this is a school with a great name, a great history, a great reputation and it has a Headmaster who has expressed it in his concluding remarks perfectly: "This is a church school. Don't let us ever forget it." Here the torch of learning burns alongside the altar of the Christian church, and this is a great thing because it means that the values we achieve will be the greatest and best and most enduring values in the world.

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