OPENING AND DEDICATION OF WHITLEY COLLEGE,
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

27TH FEBRUARY, 1965

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

Mr. Chairman, Mr. President and Ladies and Gentlemen :

If you look at your programme you will see that you are about to listen to an oration. (Laughter) This is a sort of university practice. In some cases I am called on to make a speech. In some cases, rather deceptively, to say a few words; (Laughter) but at any university gathering it turns out to be an oration, but I assure you it won't be.

What I find myself cast for now, having listened to my predecessors, is a few supplementary observations, supplementary in particular to what Sir Leslie Martin has said to you.

I have had the great good fortune to have been mixed up a little in the recent university developments in Australia. I remember that not long after I came back into office - I think it was in 1950 or 1951 - we appointed a committee to have a look at the immediate needs of the universities. It was, looking back on it, a singularly modest committee because it didn't cost us very much - a million or two - and it seemed very cheap at the time. But when it was conducting its discussions, it came to my knowledge that at least one person connected with it had said there ought to be no recommendation about residential colleges, because they were luxuries, and if people wanted to have a luxury of that kind, they should pay for it.

I thought this was a barbarous sentiment, and being younger than I am now, more audacious than I am now and more domineering than I am now, I said, "Unless you make a report which includes something for residential colleges, I won't have the report at all." And so we got the first little morsel, but we established a very important principle.

Then later on, as you know, we appointed the Murray Commission. We were very lucky to secure the services of a man like Murray. He was a consummate expert on these matters. We had a powerful committee, and we had a Treasurer who, when I broke the news to him and told him about the committee and told him that it would turn out to be very expensive, relaxed and took it very well. He needed to, when the bill came in. Well, that began another great era, and you have been reminded the Murray Committee recommended a provision for residential colleges. Another of the recommendations that the Committee made was that we should establish a universities commission of our own in Australia and we did, and we had the singular good fortune to persuade Sir Leslie Martin to become its chairman.

I know that he has had a difficult job. I go into university circles occasionally and I find that he is not as generous as he should be. Well, if I walked around the corners of the Treasury they would say, "This man is becoming positively lush". (Laughter) But wherever I go, I will hear some criticism but I will hear a paeon of praise from most people. I don't think everybody understands what a difficult problem it is to have a universities commission,

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to be on a universities commission, and above all things, to be its presiding member. Because universities are growing enormously in their student population we have more universities coming into existence, we have a demand for higher education in Australia which is at once exciting and stimulating and almost overwhelming. If you had a look at the statistics which the commission itself produces from time to time, its forecasts of what will be the demand upon universities over the next two or three or twenty or thirty years, you would come to the conclusion that for our population there is no other country in the world that is generating such an eager desire for education in all its forms as we are in Australia. This is an enormous and complex task, and I want to take the opportunity of saying to Sir Leslie, in his presence, that I think he has laid the whole country under his debt for the way he has done his work. (Applause)

Now he gave you some figures. I am no great believer in cluttering up remarks with statistics, but I think the first beginning, Sir Leslie, (that was before your time) was £20,000 or £30,000, some token item. Well, in the 1958/60 triennium, that is the first one under the recommendations of the Murray Committee, £600,000 was provided - that is by the Commonwealth - £600,000 for the purposes of residential colleges which now, of course, includes halls of residence in some of the universities. In the next triennium - 1961/2/3, the £600,000 had risen to £1M. This merely whet their appetite, because in the 1964/65/66 triennium, the Commonwealth is finding, or is prepared to provide, just under £3½M. for this purpose.

Now you think of that in terms of growth - a few thousand, £600,000, £1M, £3½M. It's going almost by geometrical progression, and therefore I smile when I look back on the doubting Thomas who thought that residential colleges were a luxury instead of being - as they indeed are - of the very essence of a true university.

Now I am going to give you, as briefly as possible, three reasons - I think one or two have already been referred to, at any rate - but I will put them in my own way. I think one of the great dangers today in our universities with this rapid growth is that as the demand for teachers, for staff grows, and as the difficulties of securing staff of adequate standards grow, so will there tend to be an increasing remoteness between teacher and students. We put that comically by saying that there ought to be a certain ratio, that there ought to be a certain limit to classes, but sheer necessity will tend to produce a state of affairs, temporarily, at any rate, in which the teacher happens to be, or appears to be, far removed from his individual students.

Now this is, in its way, a minor tragedy. If it is a bad teacher perhaps it is good to have a suitable distance, but if it is a good teacher, it is a thousand pities that the people who are in his class in their year for any purpose should fail to come under the spell of his own personality, to fail to cultivate an attitude of mind, which in a sense, subconsciously they've borrowed from him. Wonderful thing for any man - I don't care if he's a scientist or lawyer or whatever it may be - to be able to look back on his university and postgraduate days and say, "Well, I worked under So-and-so", with a gleam of pride in his eye and a

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feeling of indebtedness in his heart. And therefore there is a great danger in remoteness.

Now here we have a new university college. We have others just, in effect, over the road. They have their own tutorial people. They will have closer contact in college than many of their colleagues in the university proper may hope to have with a great number of their own pupils. This, in this sense, is a contribution to bridging that gap, to removing that sense of remoteness that is liable to exist in future between the staff and the students. Well, that's one thing.

Then, of course, there is the second thing. Sir Leslie Martin referred to it. A good deal of the education in a university is imparted by undergraduates. I don't mind undergraduates like us, my own kind, who were perfectly ready under provocation to instruct the professor or the lecturer (Laughter). I was once invited by the late Professor Tucker, that great classical scholar, to come down and take the class myself as he felt he wasn't competent to do it. I refused his invitation (Laughter) to nobody's surprise.

But undergraduates do instruct each other because of their contacts, because of the different disciplines in which they are working. It's of tremendous importance that a man, for example, doing science, shouldn't run away with the idea that science is the be-all and the end-all of life. It is a very good thing for him to have to sit down with another student who is studying law or a student studying arts, or whatever it may be, and thrash out their differences of outlook. This produces, in the long run, a most valuable education. It justifies the word "university", the universitas that can be produced by these contacts, by argument, by quarrels if you like, by any other means. One branch of study rubs off on to the other and produces a broader outlook.

I know the Principal, who I find is a Welshman and a Baptist (simultaneously) (Laughter) - I know the Principal would say, "Of course, that doesn't apply to the theological students", or perhaps he won't say that. In my time, theological students, or some of them, badly needed close association with respectable law students. (Laughter) There are a few ex-theological students here today, I can detect I think, and they will understand exactly what I mean. But whatever it is, never let anybody persuade you that you have made an error by creating a university college, by creating these facilities for contact and dispute and some gathering of some aspect of the other man's study and the other man's point of view, because I believe that if everybody going to a university - of course this is impossible - but if everybody had the opportunity of living with other students and debating and arguing with other students we would produce a breadth of outlook in the Australia of the future which would be the greatest triumph of the twentieth century.

Then I want to add my third observation. This college is a college established by the members of the Baptist community. There are other colleges connected with the university established primarily by various denominations, by various churches. I want to repeat what I have said many, many times in Australia, that I believe that education reaches its highest point when it is

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conducted against a background of religion, and yet it is a background which constantly reminds the student that however clever he may be he is not his own maker, however self-confident he may think he is, he is living in a world not created by him, that he has responsibilities, that he has great inheritances, that he is responsible in his own proper fashion for the people who come after him, and this spirit is one which has never developed so completely in the institution which doesn't have a background of religion, a background of faith, a background of humility because that, after all, must be the inevitable product of religious belief.

And here is a church college - it's young, its name is an honourable name, the name of a great pioneer in this field. It will grow, of course. It may expand into other forms, but I confidently believe that out of all the hundreds and hundreds and ultimately thousands of students who come out of this college, you will find, or expect to find very few who have not acknowledged the debt that they owe to those who had enough wisdom and enough faith in God to establish this College, to accept its labours, its difficulties, all the problems - to do so because of their complete faith in the value of their work.

Sir, this is no oration and indeed it is painfully repetitive, but it is true and truth needs to be spoken in season and out of season if we are not to forget it.

Sir, it is a great honour to be allowed to be here today, a very great privilege to address you and a very great and particular pleasure to me to be on the platform with men who are contributing so much to the life of our nation.