

OPENING OF SPACE-TRACKING STATION AT
TIDBINBILLA, A.C.T.

19TH MARCH, 1965

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

Sir, Your Excellencies and Ladies and Gentlemen :

You may imagine that my presence here calls for some explanation and I concede that point. I am here for two reasons. One is that as I am Allen Fairhall's Prime Minister, he wasn't game not to ask me. (Laughter) Now that is one very good reason.

The other very good reason is that he knew that I would bring to this task a completely fresh and untrammelled mind - untrammelled by the faintest scientific knowledge. I live in the Dark Ages in this sense. I drive in here this morning and I see this great dish-looking object sticking out and in some vague way I know it has something to do with collecting information from outside, but how it is done I haven't the faintest idea. This is unpardonable ignorance, I know. I can see Sir Frederick White gazing at me with great contempt. But it does give me an objective, and clearer, mind. I come to this problem without any prejudices whatever, and therefore, coming to it without prejudice, I just want to say I think this is a very remarkable example of two things.

The first is the rapid progress that is made in this scientific and technological age. I know that every now and then something will crop up in Cabinet and my colleague (Mr. Fairhall) here will be putting up a proposal of some kind and in our ignorance we may question it and want to know what the end result is and whether the end result is really worth all that money and he constantly tells us - and it is so true - that it is not really the end result so much as the information you gather as you go - the improvement in techniques, the stretching out of the borders of our own technological knowledge that is so important. This is profoundly true.

We, perhaps, direct too much attention to some distant end result and too little to the fact that in this century - increasingly in this century - the country that is backward in these fields will be backward in a hundred ways that may not appear to be closely connected with what is going on. Therefore this is a great step forward, a notable event in this technological period of our lives.

In the second place, it is one more example of the kind of co-operation that is extended by the United States to its friends; not always perhaps to its friends, but in double measure to its friends.

I looked through the papers that were sent to me to find out something about the budgetary aspects of these tracking stations and I am bound to tell you, Mr. Lydman, though you musn't use this against me in future, that I thought it was a bit one-sided. You seem to be carrying the enormous bulk of the expenditure. Well, this is, if I may say so, characteristic of your great country. We, ourselves, have been capable of building up great resources in what may be called scientific manpower and this station is manned, as I gather, by Australians.

This is a great advantage to us because it increases our stock of knowledge in these fields in Australia. It is also of advantage to the United States because in suitable areas, it is able to get highly skilled and authentic information in the course of tracking the satellites or other objects moving around in space. There is a certain mutuality about this.

But behind it all there is a tremendous friendship. Any time, I am told, that some reports go in from one of the tracking stations in Australia, there will be a friendly and generous compliment passed from the United States end on the skill with which the operation has been conducted.

Sometimes people think that a little country like Australia, little in terms of numbers, maintains a very close friendship with the United States purely for purposes of self-interest. Now, of course, I am not going to deny for one moment we have a tremendous lively interest in Australia in friendship, in goodwill, with the United States. But in a way, there is a mutuality about this because all great powers - and history has demonstrated this - inspire, on the whole, rather more enmities than friendships - jealousies, resistances. And they need friends. Even though Australia is a relatively small country, I know from my contacts in the United States that the attitude of Australia on these matters is one of immense satisfaction to the American administration and the American people. Big friends, little friends, they are friends, and friends on this occasion co-operating in one of the new miracles of the twentieth century.

Sir, that is all I want to say. I notice that you have discreetly placed around the audience little cartons or tins or something of fly repellent. They sprayed me with it on the way out and I am bound to say that so far I haven't been struck by a fly and I don't think you have either, and therefore the event is happier still, and adding all these things together, I have the greatest pleasure in the world in declaring this Deep Space Tracking Station open.
