

SIR JOHN MONASH CENTENARY SERVICE

65/060

HELD AT MONASH STATUE, LINLITHGOW AVENUE,  
MELBOURNE

11TH APRIL, 1965

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

Sir, Mrs. Bennett and Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a great, though I fear an undeserved, honour for me to be allowed to speak to you today about one of the very greatest men of our time. The Chairman has said kind things about me. He might have multiplied them four times and still have understated the case for Sir John Monash.

It was my good fortune to know Sir John Monash in the last period of his life. It's quite simple for me to say to you that he has various memorials. He has an assured place in military history, a place founded not only on his brilliant understanding of the art and science of war, but also on his unsurpassed capacity for communicating his ideas; in other words, his advocacy in the greatest sense. That is one secure place, an overwhelmingly secure place that he has in our history.

In the second place, he has a secure position in the industrial development of this State. His work for the Electricity Commission, his utter command of it, his lively capacity for telling politicians where they got off and where they got on, this contributed so much to the ultimate development of the Electricity Commission, now spreading or spread all over the State of Victoria, that I am perfectly certain that in that field alone he would never be forgotten.

He had, and has, a secure place in the educational history of Australia. I remember years ago there was an appeal being made on behalf of the University of Melbourne, my own old university, and I was there - not, I am happy to tell you, as a speaker but as a highly interested listener - and Sir John Monash made the principal speech. When he had finished I turned to my neighbour, whoever it was, and said, "You know, whatever else in his favour may be said about John Monash, he is the finest advocate I ever listened to." This was a tremendous attribute of his. Tremendously involved as I have briefly indicated in his own magnificent achievements in war, he was a great advocate. He was a great advocate who knew how to think, who worked out his thoughts and who could then present them to other people with such compulsion, such persuasion that they began to wonder why they hadn't thought of it themselves. He was, I venture to say, as one not without some experience in the field of advocacy, the greatest advocate I ever listened to.

And on top of that, his name has been honoured in the creation of the university which bears his name, and therefore he has a secure place in educational history. It was a most brilliant stroke, if I may say so, Chancellor, when this university was named after him because for a century or two centuries or three centuries to come, young men and women will be found to say, "Why was this university named after this man?" and they will then learn something about him, and in that sense his great soaring spirit, his superb qualities will be memorialised for centuries to come.

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And in the fourth place, I hope I will be allowed to mention this. He has this splendid memorial in bronze, one of our treasures, a constant reminder in this area - which is, in itself, full of history - of the man who made more history than most of us will ever be privileged to make.

And so, Sir, he has the enduring respect and gratitude of all who lived in his time and of all who will read of him with intelligence and understanding.

I said something just now about his quality of advocacy. I got to know him a little in that capacity. It may not be known to many of you but at one stage in his life, he being the most versatile of people, he was a patent attorney. I have always thought this was something of a sideline because he was, above all things, a most distinguished engineer. But in a number of cases in the patent side of the law, he was called as an expert witness. Now, we had a very great judicial lawyer in Victoria in my earlier days, the late Sir Leo Cussen, perhaps the greatest judicial lawyer we ever had on our own Supreme Court, and it was well reported that Cussen had more than once said - this was one of the legends at the Bar in my time - that any solicitor who failed to retain John Monash as an expert in any patent matter was prima facie guilty of negligence. Now this was not a rash statement made by a rash man, but a very wise statement made by a very wise man. I tell it to you because it serves to recall to me, and I hope will recall to you, the astonishing versatility of this great man, his immense virtuosity in whatever he touched and that utter integrity of mind and force of personality which conveyed with everything he said the stamp of truth and of conviction.

I had another experience - I hope you will allow me to recall it. I was, as you have been reminded, for a little time in the Legislative Council, a happy state of affairs from which I have long since escaped. And while I was there, I was the junior honorary Minister in the McPherson Government, and next to me was the other honorary Minister, the late Ted Morley whom some of you knew who was Member for Barwon.

Well, up came a proposal from the Electricity Commission from Sir John himself about some extension, about some trifling expenditure of £1M. or something of that kind which was in those days quite a lot of money, and we rejected it. It was knocked out by the Cabinet, and the word went out - you know how things do get out - the word went out and it came down to the S.E.C. and Sir John put his hat on, came up to the top of Spring Street, arrived at the outer doors of the Cabinet Room and if I know anything about him, demanded admittance. Anyhow, the word came in that Sir John was outside.

The Premier, that most delightful and amiable of men, Sir William McPherson, said, "Oh, yes. Bring him in", and he came in and we all stood up instinctively. We all stood up. We were in the presence of a man we knew was a greater man than we would ever be, and we stood up, and he was given a seat at the table. Other people responsible for branches of the civil service of this State usually sat in the second row and spoke when they were spoken to but, no, Sir John was strong on this matter. He was given a seat at the table. He looked round towards the Premier and said, "Well, Mr. Premier, I gather that the Cabinet has rejected my proposal." "Well, yes, I

think that's right, Sir John." He said, "Well, that can only be because they have failed utterly to understand it. I will now explain it." He sat there with that rock-like look, and he explained it, and one by one, we shrivelled in our places; one by one, we became convinced, or at any rate, felt that we were convinced of the error of our ways, and for half an hour he went on. He explained this thing step by step by step and we were left silent. It is quite true that my friend and colleague, Ted Morley, started impulsively to put a question and said, in his excitement, "Now look, John," and I wickedly - I have always been a trifle impudent - said, "No, come, Ted, come come. Why don't you call him Jack?" And that settled it. There was no more, not another word came out. And so Sir John said, looking at the Premier, "Well, Sir, I take it that your decision is reversed and that I now have approval for my proposal and so that there will be no delay, I have brought with me the Order-in-Council that will be necessary for this purpose. He pulled it out of his breast pocket, passed it around, it was signed and he went out.

Now I know that there are mixed feelings about political people who are supposed to have all sorts of almost endemic disqualifications but that is the only time in my life when I knew a man come in from outside into a Cabinet and utterly reverse a decision which, at the time he arrived, had been unanimous. I mention that because I think that this is something that must have characterised him all his life.

He didn't arrive at conclusions hastily. He burned the midnight oil. He was reputed to live with a dictaphone alongside his bed so that if he woke up during the night, he could dictate a few notes of one kind or another. He was never guilty of coming to any task inadequately prepared. This characterised him, I am sure, in every aspect of his life, but above all things having done that, he had the force of character, the utter integrity, the persuasiveness of language, the clarity of vision which enabled him to take all the ideas that he had and put them clearly into the minds of other people. If you look back over the whole of his life, I am sure you will agree with me that this remarkable gift was not his greatest gift but it was a gift without which his even greater gifts might not have found their full effect.

And so, Sir, I am most honoured to be here. It is a wonderful privilege for me who happens to be, and who has been for some time, the Head of the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia to be able to come here and say a few simple but honest words about a man who is beyond question one of the very great men in my life and in yours. It is a great privilege for us in this city to have had this man among us. It is a great privilege for this State to have contributed to the life of Australia and to the life of the world the services of so notable a man.

Sir, I thank you indeed for the opportunity of speaking today. I would hesitate to describe what I have said to you as an oration. On the contrary, what I have set out to do is to convey to you with perfect simplicity and sincerity my deep feelings about this great and famous man.

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