

OPENING OF THE A.P.I.A. (ITALIAN/AUSTRALIAN  
SPORTS ASSOCIATION) CLUB

LEICHHARDT, N.S.W.

14TH APRIL, 1965

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

Mr. Chairman, Your Excellencies and Ladies and Gentlemen :

I must say that having looked at this magnificent room which is the only part of the enterprise that I have yet looked at, I think all the newspapermen ought to be compelled to come here to have a look at it and then when, in due course, we build a modest new Parliament House at Canberra, they will have no complaints whatever. (Laughter)

I just want to mention two facts before I engage in a little excursion of my own, interesting facts. I obtained them and I was tremendously struck by them. I have been around, as many of you know, for some time. I have been - by good luck or good management, probably good luck - Prime Minister for a long time, and when I began - I claim no credit for this, I may say - there were 35,000 Italians in Australia, and now with all the movement that has occurred, there are 265,000. In other words, an increase by almost eight times. Now that is a very remarkable thing. This represents, nationally speaking, the second largest movement into Australia, the largest being from Great Britain. This is the second largest.

We have heard occasionally that people come here and after a while they get tired of us, they don't fancy us very much and they leave. We hear a good deal about that, and therefore, I said, I would like to know what happened to the Italians who came here. The answer is that the return rate for Italians is one per cent. The average overall rate is six per cent.

Now all that demonstrates that this country has proved vastly attractive to members of the Italian community, the Italian nation, and that having come here, they do fit into the pattern of Australian life so well that they don't want to go. Now this to me is something of tremendous significance. It demonstrates the value of the kind of work that this club has been doing, to integrate into the Australian habits and customs a number of people, thousands of people who come from a different kind of country, who have in many cases a different kind of background and might therefore feel strange and in many cases rather homesick for the country they have left. Therefore I want to congratulate the Club and I want to express the immense pleasure that I feel at the figures that I have just been reciting to you.

Now having said that, I wonder if I might say something of a general kind. The people of Italy - I will describe them in that way - have had an immense capacity for moving out, right through history. This is no modern novelty. Indeed I want to remind those of you who are Italians that your ancestors 2,000 years ago invaded Britain, and it was a long way away from Rome in those days - invaded Britain and held it for some centuries and left a lot of names behind and a lot of fine, straight roads, Roman roads, all over the island. That argued the questing spirit of the ancient Romans under great leadership.

I would also like to remind you that your language derives directly from a language which has made its imprint not only all over Western Europe but over a great part of the civilised world, because although very few people today can speak Latin, or for that matter understand Latin very consecutively, the truth is that all the Romance languages - Italian itself, French, Spanish, all these Romance languages as we call them, have spread around the world. They are the whole basis of our own speech which is very very much affected in the long run by the ancient speech of Italy, as is that of the United States and all round what we are pleased to call the English-speaking world or the French-speaking world or the Italian-speaking world or whatever it may be. So don't think that you have done something rather peculiar by coming here in the last few years. You are acting in the highest tradition of your country, the highest tradition of the ancient Romans, and the Latin tongue and the Latin writing.

When I was a university student, I took a subject called Roman Law, which served to remind me very much indeed that there is a definite line of indebtedness to the ancient home of Roman Law over a considerable section of the world. You see what I am getting at? Your language you have exported. You have taken it in one form or another all round the seven seas. Your literature in one form or another has moved and found its place all round the world. The legal systems which were devised in Rome are not the common basis of the English system of law, the English Common Law, though it has had its influence here and there, but it has had a very big mark on the legal systems of Germany, of Scotland and so on, so that in point of speech, in point of literature, in point of law, the people of your country - I am now speaking directly to the Italians who are here - have been great carriers of wisdom and of culture all round the world. They have, so to speak, made it migrate to other countries and in this century, as we have seen in Australia, we have had a great wave of migration of human beings from Italy to Australia. Now this is something that is good for us - I hope and believe good for you. This enriches our own life.

You know, if I might make a quiet, confidential admission to you, we native-born Australians are occasionally a little narrow-minded about our own ideas and our own way of living. We say, "Well, who are these fellows to tell us?" This is the best proof that we have a lot to learn. And you come along, and many others from some other country, but I am talking particularly to you who have come along here, and if you haven't shown us the error of our ways, at least you have shown us new ways in which to walk, new ways to understand, and I venture to say that in one hundred years' time, somebody writing what I will call - to use that abominable word - the cultural history of Australia, will be able to trace in it the influence of your people who have come here and settled here and contributed to the country a lot of faculties, a lot of ideas, a lot of standards that came in almost as new things. This will be fascinating someday to trace the pattern of what will then be described as our civilisation, the pattern of Australian civilisation.

Now I have indicated very very briefly to you that this is not the first time, nor is it the first country in which people of your race have made this contribution. They have done it all round the world. They have every right to be proud of having done it and you have every right to be proud of the contribution that you are making.

Now the one other thing I want to say is that it is a little simple, a little tempting to retain a special narrow sense of community and to say, "Well, we Italians stick together, just as in the case of my own ancestry, "We Scotsmen must stick together." Well, between ourselves we do quite a bit, you know. We get on well with each other. We have a Scottish Society here or there but what we have done by way of compensation for this is to marry into people of other and not such fortunate races like the English, and having married and intermarried and identified ourselves in the community, then as you have not failed to observe, we are not unwilling to take charge of the country and run it. (Laughter)

Now this is an interesting parallel, isn't it? Very interesting. Don't be exclusive. Don't get off but get in, get into the community, get mixed up with the community. Let everybody have the benefit of what you can contribute and you get the benefit of what they can contribute, an integrated Australian society. This is what we want and it is because you have seen that with brilliant clarity that you have established this organisation. This is the thing to do, and now that you have such splendid premises, I am sure that the work will go on afoot indeed. I rather think that if you are not careful, there will be such a majority of native-born Australians coming here to enjoy it that you may be a little squeezed, but in that case, extend it.

Good luck to you. Bless you.

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