

MENZIES FOREST IN ISRAEL GALA CONCERT

CANBERRA THEATRE, CANBERRA

23RD OCTOBER, 1965

Speech by the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies

Sir, Your Excellencies and Ladies and Gentlemen :

I don't need to tell you that this is a remarkable honour for both my wife and myself, the kind of thing we would have never thought of, once, the kind of thing that we shall never forget now that it has happened.

The evening has been, as you haven't failed to notice, rather cunningly arranged. For the first half of the programme we were taken to Heaven by Mr. Kentner, and then you descend to earth and you listen to three gentlemen - three men, anyhow (Laughter) - two of whom are politicians --- four men, one of whom is an ambassador who, of course, by definition is a respectable man, and the other my old friend, Mr. Ungar. But be of good cheer, when the speeches are over, you will be taken back to Heaven by Mr. Kentner. (Laughter, applause)

I must say that I love the idea of the forest. It is a very happy association between Israel and Australia because a forest has beauty, it has usefulness, it has endurance, and above all things, it expresses a spirit of continuity which to me is the most important thing in the world. A forest.

You know, it is a curious coincidence that my old friend, Baron Snider, who has been a friend of mine for many years in spite of the fact which now appears he used to listen to me at political meetings - it is a very happy coincidence that he should have quoted Walter Scott because, strangely enough, I propose to quote him twice tonight.

The first thing I want to quote is a tag that all of you will remember from your schooldays from "The Heart of Mid-Lothian" - "Jock, when ye hae naethin' else to do, ye may be aye stickin' ina tree. It'll be growin', Jock, while you're sleepin'". I read that, I learned that when I was a child, and I have never forgotten it.

And it happens, Sir, that people with my name have another interest in forests, because the people of my clan - I don't claim that there are not a few bar sinisters in my..... (drowned by laughter) I am willing to accept that out of hand. But the heads of the clan, in the great days of the Mingies clan - because that is the right way to pronounce it - they were great foresters. They planted forests all over the Menzies country, right up to the old Caledonian forest. One of them introduced the larch into Scotland, and by very good judgment when in Coronation year I went up to Scotland to what was once the country of my clan, alas no longer, because they fell into litigation and wasted it on lawyers (Laughter) but I went up to open a power station on the Gaur just near the Road to the Isles on the fringes of the old Caledonian forest, and the souvenir they presented me with was so appropriate - two or three seedlings from the old Caledonian forest, and one of them at least grows amain in the Lodge gardens today. And when I get around to it, I must have a little notice put alongside it so that those who live there in the future will see that the element of continuity survives. This is from one of the old forests of one of the old countries of the world.

And therefore the idea of the forest is something that strikes deeply into the heart and mind of both my wife and myself as it will into the hearts and minds of my family.

The Jewish National Fund which has been referred to, and with which there may be some here who are not familiar, has been operating, I think I am right in saying, for over sixty years - sixty-two years - and in that time it has raised vast sums of money for the express purpose of taking a country - the old Palestine - arid, eroded by wind and weather, not very fertile, full of history but not full of water - they have set out to build it, almost physically to build it.

I remember at the very beginning of 1941 being in Palestine because even at that time, as some of the older of you may recall, I was Prime Minister (Laughter, applause). In fact I was reminded as I came in tonight by a very celebrated newspaperman in Canberra that though he still cross-examines me, the first time he ever did was in Palestine at the beginning of 1941. And I was fascinated by what I saw even though so much more has been done since by hard work, by imagination, by the completely constructive ideal of a national rebuilding. And therefore, when in due course Israel was established as the independent home of the Jewish people, this was something that didn't just start, as we might say, from scratch, but worked on a basis which had for a number of years been steadily created by the Jewish National Fund.

Now that establishment of Israel as an independent State was swiftly acknowledged, of course, and supported by Australia, but it had a world significance, a world significance that we do well to recall. And here I come for the second time to Walter Scott, because this is one of the little verses that you find in "Ivanhoe" -

"When Israel of the Lord beloved
Out of the land of bondage came,
Her father's God before her moved
An awful Guide in smoke and flame."

".....out of the house of bondage..." for the second conspicuous time in history, and the earlier time was long long centuries ago - for the second conspicuous time, the Jewish people, oh many many scores of millions of them, came up out of the house of bondage. They didn't all go to Israel. They couldn't all go to Israel. But the establishment of Israel as an independent State was a gesture not only on the part of those who created it, but on the part of the world, that there had come up out of the house of bondage the disabilities and persecutions of centuries that culminated in Hitler's Germany, and are not quite extinct, I regret to say, elsewhere - those disabilities and persecutions were, in a symbolic way, brought to an end, and hence the State of Israel.

The civilised world, I like to think, saw in the establishment of that State, that State in which this great forest will grow, not only the providing of an independent home for many Jewish people but also a shining symbol of delivery from bondage, of relief from persecution, and I believe, I am sure it is true, a shining symbol of world repentance, long delayed but never too late.

But having said that, Sir, and without desiring to keep you here too long, I would like to say something about the 70,000 Jews in Australia - about them, to them. And not just as 70,000 Jews in Australia but as 70,000 Jews of Australia, because this is really the burthen of my song.