

DINNER IN HONOUR OF SIR CHARLES BICKERTON
BLACKBURN, CHANCELLOR EMERITUS, UNIVERSITY
OF SYDNEY, SYDNEY

12th NOVEMBER, 1965

Speech by the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies

Chancellor and Ladies and Gentlemen :

When I was born, Charles Bickerton Blackburn was between twenty and twenty-one years old, and as I have a firm conviction that all happiness will be mine if I can attend his 100th birthday, I have a very great privilege tonight to be allowed to speak about him.

But before I speak about him, could I tell you that my memory has been titillated a little by some of the remarks that have been made along the table, and to my left by the Vice-Chancellor who, like me, suffers the fate of being, in his own right, a graduate of the University of Melbourne.

Reference was made tonight by you, Chancellor, to Robert Strachan Wallace who was the Professor of English in my time at the Melbourne University, and so parochial are the people in Sydney that when many years afterwards I was invited - inadvertently I can only assume - to have lunch at a celebrated club in Sydney, I arrived, I shed my hat and coat and I walked into the smoking room and there my host said, "I would like to introduce you to Sir Robert Wallace" and I stood off about three yards - I'm sure I've told this to some of you before today - and looked at him and said -

'Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.'

That's Wordsworth lads, and good stuff." (Laughter) After that, of course, they realised that I wasn't unacquainted with him. I hope Professor Mitchell will take a note of that.

And then when I heard the Chancellor tonight do us the singular favour of doing a little Lucretius into English - it is not his customary practice - I was reminded of a very great classical scholar in my time at the University, (and I think Vice-Chancellor in yours) Professor Tucker. He was a great man, he was a wonderful scholar and he had a nice dry wit as a classical scholar should.

One day we were sitting in the lecture room, one of these terrace lecture rooms, and he was addressing us, no doubt, on the subject of Latin, and two or three of the fellows - you'll be surprised at this - they probably turned out to be medical students in the long run; they were not very interested in this but they wanted to have a bit of fun, so one of them with that excruciating form of wit which I believe is still current in the undergraduate body, brought a dog in and soiled the dog down the steps, and the dog, not unwilling, went down, had a look around, walked up on to the dais and stood there with shouts of undergraduate laughter - this was the wittiest event of the year. I suppose it was - expecting that Professor Tucker would be a little incommoded by this. He just stopped in the middle of a sentence,

bent down, patted the dog on the head and said, "Well, puppy, did you come in with the others?"

Now having got off these highly irrelevant reminiscences of mine, may I tell you that I'm here and my wife is here because we both suffer from an enormous admiration and a deep affection for Sir Charles Bickerton Blackburn, now to be known, as I realise, as Chancellor Emeritus. Might I suggest, Sir, that you should do something about Prime Ministers. (Laughter) (Applause) When I have gone at long last to live in the street in Melbourne which is now I believe called Haverlock Avenue, I think it would give you and myself great pleasure if people would say, "That's where the Prime Minister Emeritus lives." Of course, there is nothing half so insignificant as a Prime Minister when he is a Prime Minister; nothing quite so contemptible as a Prime Minister who is no longer a Prime Minister, and I put in this little plea. You might do something in the academic world - Prime Minister Emeritus. Oh, this attracts me, enormously.

Now, when I agreed to come down here, I found my mission a little sketchy today because certain things have happened around the world which require a great deal of painful thought; I said to myself, "What is it about Sir Charles Bickerton Blackburn that makes him a legendary figure, not only in this university but in the whole of the Commonwealth of Australia. What is it about him?" Well, of course, he is a great physician, and that's a pretty good thing to be - with very great respect to you, Chancellor - that's a pretty good thing to be. The older I get, the more respect I have for great physicians.

He's a great educationist because for many years he has been the Chancellor of this great and famous university. In the whole of that time he didn't ever seem to me to flag or fail in any way. He was everywhere, he did everything. I couldn't get within half a mile of this place without encountering him. A great educationist. And the history of the University of Sydney has been enriched by the fact that he has been Chancellor and has held the standards high. Now this is a very great thing to be, in addition to being a great physician.

He has been a great citizen, and that, if I may say so, is rather more important than being either a great physician or a great educationist. He's been a great citizen. I will undertake to say that there are thousands and thousands of people in Sydney who, when they thought about the university also thought about Charles Bickerton Blackburn and this is tremendously important because if your Chancellor is - and this is still the simple truth - a great citizen, then the people take the university to their hearts and to their minds and don't regard it as something remote and apart,

And above all these things again, he is a great human being - alert, alive, warm-hearted and almost omnipresent. I don't understand how he's been doing it for 91 years because I'm sure he started in the cradle. I don't understand how he does it but wherever you go, you meet him. There he is, attending a party or two parties or three parties - I don't know how many parties we have in the Commonwealth now - let's say three or four - anyhow he's attending and looking around like that, you know, and still, if you will allow me to say so, with a remarkably quick eye for a pretty girl. (Laughter) This argues, if it needs to be argued, that he's a great human

being. Now these are the facets of his life and of his character that present themselves to me.

All I want to do apart from that is to say, "What have been the secret springs of his career because you can never judge any man from the outside, you can never just look at Who's Who, you can never just look at something that appears in a newspaper or some essay that somebody has written. These will give you the superficial aspects of a man but it is tremendously important to get to understand what are the inner springs of his character and his achievement and this takes us below the surface.

Well, in his case, could I say that he has throughout his life, his professional life, possessed enormous skill, and skill is not something given to you by a Government. Skill is not something created by a statute. Skill is not something created by a system of scholarships or awards. Skill is always the product of the marriage of a natural talent and a tremendous devotion to work, a tremendous devotion to knowledge. This doesn't happen by accident. It doesn't happen by decree. It happens because the man has in himself that urge to know, that urge to acquire skill, that willingness to scorn delights and to live laborious days which ultimately produces in him the top range of skill and this, if I may say so, has been one of the inspiring elements in Sir Charles' own life.

And in the second place, being a great physician, he has had a great feeling for humanity, for human beings. No physician could be a great one who merely acquired skill and then looked at people as if they were objects for study, as if they represented numbers in a catalogue or even on a computer. He must have true humanity. The proper study of mankind is man, and for a great physician, this is doubly true because every human being who presents himself to him is his own individual problem, and he must get inside the mind of the man, the heart of the man, the feeling of the man, and by man I include woman. This is true. There must be a deep instinct for humanity.

And then, if course, every now and then, somebody argues like the Chancellor Emeritus, who has great skill, who has a feeling of true humanity and who has enduring usefulness. This is something worth thinking about. I know, most of us are not in his class in this way; most of us know that as time goes on, you begin to feel occasionally that you are out of touch with the new generation, that you are in your own generation, that perhaps these others coming along have things you don't understand and that you ought to try to understand. Bless my soul and body, this man has the spirit of enduring usefulness. He's like Peter Pan, the boy who wouldn't grow up. How true this is. I've never heard him make an old man's remark - have you? I have always thought that whatever he had to say was a contemporary thing. He was a boy among boys. He was a young man among young men. This is a tremendous thing, and all the more tremendous to me, ladies and gentlemen, when I recall now something that I didn't know at the time that when I was born, for better or for worse, he was already most of the way through his medical course. He was a man and I was an infant who would have been mewling and puking in the nurse's arms if the family had been able to afford a nurse.

Now the last thing that I want to say about him is that he has this marvellous capacity for sustained enthusiasm. Now,

enthusiasm in a highly respectable world becomes a little suspect. "Oh, I wish you wouldn't say that".... "You sounded enthusiastic about that"..... It is proper not to be too enthusiastic, to be reserved, to be muted a little on these things. He has the spirit of sustained enthusiasm, and it is to be contrasted with the attitude of all too many people in our country who say, "Oh, why should I be enthusiastic; I'll take what I can and I'll wait to see what more is coming to me." This is an attitude of death - death intellectually, death socially, death politically, to say, "I'll take what they give me and I'll wait for the rest."

To have this divine attribute of enthusiasm, this is so tremendously important, and nowhere more important than in a university which is the oldest and most historic university in this nation. This is tremendously important. Some of you have heard me say in the past, my anxiety, in spite of all that I have had the opportunity of doing, and it's been a little in the university field, my anxiety has always been that we will become too much on the receiving end, too willing to lower standards, too willing to speak in terms of quantity instead of in terms of quality. And the answer to that kind of feeling is to look around and see this grand old man of Australian university life and to know that he has an enthusiasm in him today, still has a feeling of worlds to be conquered that could be a marvellous example to people seventy years younger than himself.

Now, Sir, I didn't intend to speak as long as this, but when you are speaking about a topic of this kind, it's not easy or convenient or desirable to be over-brief. But all I have said Sir, Sir Charles Bickerton Blackburn, all I have been saying is designed to convey to you not only for myself but for everybody here tonight and I think for a million or two millions or four millions or five millions of people in Australia something of what we feel about you, how thankful we are that you have been among us, how delighted we are to know that for the next ten years you will still be among us, because I repeat what I said at the beginning that my one remaining ambition is to attend your 100th birthday party.

Sir and Ladies and Gentlemen, let us drink the health of this great man. Sir Charles.
