

WORLD CONFERENCE OF ORGANISATIONS OF
THE TEACHING PROFESSION
SYDNEY

4 AUGUST 1970

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Mr. President, Distinguished Guests and Ladies and Gentlemen:

By way of a preface to what I have to say to you, may I say two things. One is that I have learnt by experience that I am always so pleased to have the ordeal of making a speech over that I almost always forget to open whatever it is the speech is designed to open. And therefore in case this should happen tonight - and to be on the safe side - I want at the beginning to make it quite clear that this is the opening of this conference, even if I forget to say so at the end!

The other thing which struck me was something you referred to, Sir, in your speech about a remark made by my colleague, the Commonwealth Minister for Education, that nobody visits Australia by accident. I always agree with my colleagues, and I am sure that in the present day, this is entirely correct. And yet in this Bicentenary Year, my mind goes back to a gentleman who probably didn't visit Australia entirely by design. His name was Captain Cook!

Sir, this is the first international conference of teachers' organisations ever held in Australia, and it falls in the year designated by the United Nations General Assembly as "International Education Year". And on behalf of the Australian Government and people, I welcome you to our country and assure you we are glad to have you with us as individuals and that we are proud indeed to be the host country for this international conference.

The conference theme of course is "The Qualities of a Teacher" - a discussion I take it of what qualities are needed to make a good teacher - and by selecting this as the theme, I believe that the organisers of the conference have gone right to the heart and soul of any education system for physical requirements for education - buildings, classrooms, libraries, language laboratories and so on, and the external aids to education such as radio, television, the projector - necessary as they are - are no substitute for a good teacher. As aids to a good teacher they are admirable - but as a substitute for a good teacher they are abominable. So I add congratulations to the conference on its choice of a theme,

Now I spend a good deal of my time being told by teachers what to do, and what not to do and I expect that this will continue (and I hope it does), so I propose to seize this opportunity, with all the apprehension proper when a layman speaks to experts, to put this layman's view of what the aims of education ought to be, of how we may best achieve these aims, and of the qualities a teacher needs to play his full part in this achievement.

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Well, what should the aims of education be? It is no good talking of those aims in phrases such as "modern education for a modern world" or "education geared to the social needs of the modern community", because I am afraid that on examination such phrases too often turn out to be only plausible lullabies designed as lullabies to put the enquiring mind to sleep.

I would suggest that the proper, and primary, and overriding goal of education is the creation of a community of human beings who are as nearly perfect as human nature, and the individual variations of talent and personality will allow. This, you will agree, is quite a goal. Yet I believe it is the ultimate goal and that it is better for education to fail in the attempt to make a perfect human being than to succeed in making only a fully competent technician. It is better to try to develop perfect human beings through education than to confine ourselves to the subsidiary goal - easier and perhaps more practicable though that may be - of trying to turn out only good scientists, or good engineers, or lawyers, or technicians - or teachers.

In the words of Sir Richard Livingstone:-

"May not the desire to make first rate human beings and a first rate society be a master whom all would serve. To see the vision of excellence as far as our limitations allow; to get at least a glimpse of the unchanging values of the eternal and good and to make our infinitesimal contributions towards a society which will embody these values - is not that, in itself, a sufficient motive for life."

I think it is - and that is more than you can say for studies confined to electricity, or the workings of computers, or medicine. Not that these studies are not good and necessary - for they are - but they are subsidiary and not an end in themselves.

The good teacher indeed has many such subsidiary tasks - widening the mind and enlarging its interest, training the intelligence, teaching the multitudinous techniques on which our civilisation is somewhat precariously based - but I believe we could successfully carry through all these subsidiary tasks and still never attain the true goal of education as I have defined it.

For what raises man above the savage is not his inventions or his science, his economies or his technology - it is the practice of goodness and kindness towards other men, it is the appreciation of the love of beauty and truth and the application of reason. And so whatever a child is going to be, whatever speciality he may wish to study, or need to study in order to make a living, and however well he may be taught that speciality, failure to inculcate those qualities means, I suggest that education has failed to achieve its true goal.

Well, what part do the schools of various kinds play in helping this achievement and the teachers in those schools - for I suggest that each type of school has its definite function in achieving this aim.

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I suggest that it is the primary and overriding responsibility of the primary school to teach reading, writing, elementary mathematics, and English grammar, for those are the tools with which knowledge is mined and unless the child is adequately provided with such tools, the secondary school and tertiary education can do little.

Nor, I believe, can such skills be taught in an "easy" way. They should be taught in such a way that in learning them the child automatically learns to sit down and concentrate, to gain the habit of work, and above all, to develop, as he will under a good teacher, the faculty of reasoning for himself. All other activities of the primary school are secondary to these. Good spelling is useful but not essential, as Shakespeare dramatically showed. The development of creative work is important but can take place out of school as well as in it. The amount of history which can be taught to a child before the age of eleven is usually meaningless, and almost always inaccurate - and so on.

I do not say the primary school should ignore these activities. Not at all, but I do say that the good primary school teacher will keep them in their proper perspective - and that is subordinate to the task of turning out a child who can write legibly, express simple thoughts clearly and unambiguously by the use of good grammar, read with ease, solve simple mathematical problems and reason out from data which he knows to be true, why something else - which he does not know - must in fact be true.

And so what qualities does a primary school teacher need to do this? It is claimed that one essential is a university degree and additional years of teacher training. With some trepidation I challenge this. Such qualifications, of course, are useful and helpful, but I doubt whether they are essential, in the sense that no one can be a good primary school teacher without them, and I am sure that such qualifications in themselves or of themselves, and them alone do not automatically make a good teacher.

The qualities needed for a really good primary school teacher are dedication - the feeling that one is following a calling, a vocation, which alone can give full satisfaction in work; a genuine love of children which accepts the undoubted fact that they can on occasion be absolute little horrors; a warm feeling of achievement and adventure when at last, after many attempts to explain something which has not been understood, the light of understanding suddenly lights the eye of the child being taught.

Such teachers must have the capacity to take each child and break the new and puzzling situation which it is facing into simpler bits. They must discover what the child does know, as a starting point, and lead its mind in the right order from one bit to the next until finally the whole is understood. But what those simpler bits are, and what is the right order, varies with each child and no-one can know it ahead of time. That is why teaching is an art.

There are, I think, other requisites for a good primary school teacher. Firstly, I think he should not be swayed by the tides of fashion in educational theory, for fashions in educational theory change more slowly but just as surely as do fashions in skirts. So he should never be swayed to the belief that, even in primary schools, discipline and hard, repetitive, monotonous work is no longer necessary. It is necessary where it is essential and it is very often essential.

In any branch of study some facts must be ingrained on the mind so they can be brought out at a second's notice - and some techniques have to be followed smoothly, quickly and automatically without conscious thought. So the teacher should explain why such hard, monotonous work is necessary, He should tell the child the purpose of learning some particular, repetitive, task so that even if the child doesn't fully understand that purpose he does at least know that there is one and therefore the task itself becomes that much less meaningless and arbitrary.

But there are occasions when what I shall call good, old fashioned drill is necessary and a good teacher should not excuse the pupil from it, for after all, the task of the teacher is not so much to make learning easy, as to make it an understandable, a reasonable, a logical and an exciting thing to do.

Secondly, such a teacher should not be so carried away by his belief that all children should be equal in ability as to shut his eyes to the demonstrable fact that they are not.

Ruskin wrote :

"Two children go to school hand in hand and spell for half an hour o'er the same page. Through all their lives never shall they spell from the same page more - one is presently a page ahead....two pages....ten pages and evermore though each toils equally, the interval enlarges".

The good teacher must accept that. He must encourage that ability not fight against it, for he cannot destroy ability even in the name of equality but he can cramp it or maim it. And he will do this just as surely by preventing a child from developing at his natural pace as he will by trying to force it to develop faster than it naturally would.

I have so far spoken of the qualities necessary for the primary school teacher. The secondary school teacher of quality needs all these - and a greater specialised knowledge for it is in the secondary school that the mining of knowledge really begins. It is here that the tools provided by the primary schools are tested. It is here that the process of specialization starts. All I shall say of this is that whatever specialization is selected, the centre of studies should be - as I said at the beginning - the study of human striving, and human greatness in action in the past, and the study of various human ideas of how to build that ideal society, which gives the greatest possible freedom to each individual, and avoids the licence which follows if that individual interferes with others' rights.

And also each pupil ought to study at least one subject on the curriculum so thoroughly, and in such depth, that he begins to know what true knowledge really is and how much industry, thoroughness, precision, and persistence it requires if he is to have even a distant sight of it. And so the teacher here needs not only the qualities of being able to impart knowledge, of being able to make learning an exciting experience, but also, a much greater knowledge of that subject, or subjects which he teaches.

The numbers receiving education in Australia are growing so dramatically, the numbers of pupils remaining at school to the final year of secondary education are increasing so greatly, that I doubt if there are enough young Australians possessed of what I have described as the qualities needed by an ideal teacher.

But it is no bad thing to set out an ideal even if it cannot at once be attained. And indeed I think that is the object of the theme chosen by this conference.

Sir, I have shown temerity tonight as a layman in speaking to experts, and I have, I expect, been slightly pompous - I hope only slightly, but may I in conclusion close by saying something on my own behalf which demonstrates that I have more than a passing interest in this subject.

I was placed in charge of Commonwealth Government activities in education some seven years ago, and was the first Commonwealth Minister of Education. At that time the Commonwealth Government was spending \$67.5 million a year. Today it is spending \$312 million a year - some five times as much. I put into operation a scheme of supplying science laboratories, properly planned and equipped, to all secondary schools in Australia. I had adopted a scheme to provide libraries - not just repositories for books but modern libraries complete with teaching aids, in all secondary schools in Australia. I inaugurated a scheme designed to revolutionise and re-equip all secondary technical schools in Australia. I brought in a scheme to provide eight - now ten - million dollars a year for building teachers colleges. I inaugurated a scheme for providing colleges of advanced education as alternatives to universities in tertiary education.

I rejected the previous concept that the state should penalise children whose parents send them to non-government schools by refusing such schools any assistance from the taxpayers' funds, even though the parents of such children contributed to those funds. I still reject that concept and I am proud to do so, for it is educationally illiterate and economically absurd.

I put into operation a scheme for providing scholarships for the last two years of secondary school, and in technical schools.

Sir, I have been interested. And if the ideal physical requirements for education have not been attained - and of course they have not - at least we have taken steps towards such attainment, as you are seeking to take steps towards the attainment of an ideal teacher. Because of that interest that is one reason I have been emboldened to speak to you tonight. Another is because you all bear such responsibility for moulding the citizens of the world of tomorrow, and yet another is because you asked me. I thank you for it - and I have done, and this conference is open.