

FIFTH COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION CONFERENCE  
CANBERRA, ACT

3 FEBRUARY 1971

Opening Address by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Your Excellencies, Honourable Ministers, Mr Secretary-General, Ladies and Gentlemen :

It is an honour for me to be opening this Conference and to be welcoming to Canberra so many distinguished educators from so many parts of the world.

On behalf of the Australian Government, I extend a warm welcome to our overseas guests and to our own State Ministers and leading educators from within Australia.

This is the first time a Commonwealth Education Conference has been held in Australia and there will be stimulation and benefit for many of us in what you discuss. I am sure that a sound basis of co-operation already exists among all those present.

In many ways, this Fifth Commonwealth Education Conference is a more accurate reflection of the benefits of the Commonwealth of Nations than the recent Heads of Government Meeting in Singapore. It is the co-operation that takes place on the practical level in education and in countless other fields that gives this unique free association of nations its durability and its strength.

It is not realistic to expect thirty-one diverse nations to be able to reach a consensus of opinion on highly controversial political issues, nor is it realistic to assume that if they do reach a consensus it in any way affects those who are not part of that consensus. But I would further say that unanimous viewpoints and attitudes are not necessary for a successful Commonwealth relationship.

Unfortunately, though understandably, it is the periodic Heads of Government Meeting and the inevitable political stresses and strains that attract most publicity. To many people these summit gatherings are the Commonwealth. Well, they are certainly important and I suppose they represent the ultimate in the Commonwealth's political activities.

But it is the many practical strands running beneath the surface that form the basic fabric of the Commonwealth. And that is why I am particularly glad to be here, because this Conference, less than two weeks after Singapore, helps to put the whole concept of the Commonwealth in perspective.

It is in the field of education - among others - that a great deal has been done which has been of mutual advantage for Commonwealth members. And this Conference is a tangible demonstration that the Commonwealth of Nations does work, that it is of practical value, and that when we get together, our meetings aren't always political, but are often designed to come to grips with issues of common concern, such as the education of our various peoples.

After all, so much of the future of all our countries depends on education. When we remember that one in every four people in the world today lives in a Commonwealth country, it comes home with dramatic force, I think, that the Commonwealth of Nations as a free assembly can do much for the common good by such exchanges of views and experiences at practical levels as will take place here during this Conference.

In that particular field of education, the Commonwealth has a really worthwhile role to play. It is an activity which goes on year in and year out, important to all our welfare as individual countries, and to the Commonwealth itself, concerned as it is with democracy and liberty.

And liberty is more than the freedom of the market-place. Liberty of the mind is perhaps ultimately the key to our survival. And to allow liberty of the mind to have a full flowering is the task, the ideal of the educator in all countries, for education is the great liberator, and from properly educated minds flows understanding which is the basis of co-operation and progress in so many other fields.

We have our problems in Australia, as you have yours. There is in this country, an endless pressure on our education systems. More of our people are wanting more education, and more are wanting higher education, and more of our young people are staying at school longer. In fact, the number staying on beyond the compulsory age has doubled in the last decade.

There is a ceaseless demand for more teachers, and for teachers who are said to require much higher qualifications - are said to require. And on top of it all, there is a questioning of old methods, and a searching for new ones, as our society at all its levels recognises great changes resulting from technological progress and from different attitudes of mind, particularly among the younger generation - different attitudes of mind, different desires as to what will provide a good life, a questioning of whether purely material things are as important as perhaps they were thought by past generations.

So no longer are the old methods and the old standards good enough. The times are too demanding. The challenge is real. We are constantly endeavouring to match needs to resources which I note is your theme at this Conference but, at any rate in Australia, we also have to bear in mind the need to match resources to needs and this may not be quite so easy or lead to quite so quick a progress as we would like.

But we have made a lot of progress in expanding our education systems in Australia. Under our Federal system, the prime responsibility for education is with State Governments, but the Commonwealth Government is deeply involved, directly and indirectly. And I have considerable first-hand knowledge of this involvement for I was the first Minister for Education and Science in the Commonwealth.

We are spending on education more than five times as much per head of population as we were spending a decade ago. It has gone up from \$4½ per head of population to \$25 per head of population. . . . a much bigger population.

This year, just over four per cent of total Federal Government expenditure is specifically for education, while on top of that, the Australian States are now committing about one-third of their total revenues and loan expenditure to this field. They have more than doubled their expenditure per head of population in the last decade.

So while there are always newspaper headlines which tell us there is a "Crisis in Education", we are, I believe, making progress. We don't measure progress simply by the increased amount of money. It is how, where and why it is spent that matters. And here the need for flexibility is, I think, of very great importance.

None of us can freeze old systems of education in a world in a ferment of change. So here in my country, we are seeking new ways of co-operation with Australian States. With them we are looking at the standards of the curriculum in our schools, to see where jointly we can do things better. We have looked, and helped, in science education and in technical education, and in the building of teacher colleges, in such things as the teaching of Asian languages, and in other fields. This is going on all the time. It is not going on as quickly as educators would like - probably not nearly as quickly. It is perhaps not going on nearly as quickly as the population would like, but it is going on, and improvements are made year by year.

At the tertiary level, we now have here colleges of advanced education as an alternative to universities - not as institutions which provide a lesser brand of education, but as institutions which are alternatives in that they provide a slightly different approach to studies in tertiary fields. They are geared more directly to the specific needs of industry and commerce, and I think they will prove to be a most significant development in tertiary education in Australia in this decade.

And for ourselves, we have in our Budget this year to assist in Commonwealth educational co-operation, a sum of some \$890,000.

Now, Sir, I think I have said quite enough. You will no doubt hear much more of these matters from the experts here as your Conference proceeds. And so all that remains for me to do is to wish good luck and success to the Conference and to declare it open.

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