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PRIME MINISTER

OPENING OF RICHARD CLEAVER LODGE

PERTH, W.A.

Speech by the Prime Minister, The Rt Hon. William
McMahon, C.H., M.P.

MAY 7, 1972

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for your welcome and for the opportunity to be here today. This occasion is an important one for every one who has the welfare of old and handicapped people close to their hearts. But most of all it is important to those elderly people who will move into this new lodge to live. This new building is to be their home, and in it I know they will find security and care - as well as contentment and happiness. In it they will find friendships and associations which will do much to remove fear and loneliness from their lives. I do not believe that any nation can be at ease with its conscience - while there are old, and frail, and handicapped people in our midst who are without proper care.

The problems of modern governments are many and complex, but there must still be in the forefront of our policies, the welfare of the people whose life's work is done, and who are without the means to look after themselves. In one way or another, every elderly person in our community played a part in making Australia a favoured country in the world.

Just think for a moment of the events in our history through which a person of seventy years of age has lived. They saw the foundation years of this Commonwealth, and saw us grow and mature from a rural to an industrialised society: Two world wars and other conflicts; droughts, depression, flood and fire; progress, development, achievement and prosperity. All these things - good and bad - have given Australians many reasons to be proud. They have made us a nation. Let us not forget, then, that today's old people were the young people of those yesterdays of our history. They were part of the pioneering force in our community. They worked hard and they reared families and gave real meaning to the old song "Advance Australia Fair". Those of them who are in need should not be forgotten now, and here at Swan Cottage Homes they are not forgotten.

This is one of the leading institutions of its kind in Australia. Nearly twelve years ago, it was founded by my friend Dick Cleaver - to provide modern low cost housing for elderly people. At that time he opened a bank account of ten dollars. Today the Swan Cottage Homes organisation controls assets valued at two and three quarter million dollars. There are now 401 units providing accommodation for 531 people with a later potential for 617 people. I think you will all agree that this is a magnificent result of the dedication and inspiration of Dick Cleaver and Mrs. Cleaver, and I pay my tribute to them now.

I think it is appropriate that this new block, which I will officially name shortly, is called after him. One of its impressive aspects is the effort made - and one which is obviously succeeding - to treat elderly people as individuals and not as numbers in an anonymous group. This is tremendously important because each one of us, whatever our station in life, has pride and self-respect. If our needy old people cannot have these things because of our neglect then the nation will have a stain on its record which will be to its eternal shame. This village protects the pride and self-respect of all who come under its roof. It offers constant care for those who must have it. It offers a home for those who need one.

My Government regards its social welfare policies as among our highest priorities. We have been actively reviewing, revising and extending them and each year has seen some new assistance being given or existing benefits increased. This will go on. The business of looking after those in need is "unfinished business", so far as my Government is concerned. It may be a task without end, but we are determined that the Government will play its part and play it in a significant way. Under the Aged Persons Homes Act - which I had the pleasure of introducing into Parliament - the Commonwealth government has given substantial assistance towards this project. Much has also been provided by dedicated fund-raising efforts. My Government does depend heavily on community effort and interests: For the identification of the needs of old people and the areas where help is most wanted.

Governments can act against poverty only with the guidance and help of their own citizens and when help is given, it is the personal touch of the local groups of welfare workers and the staffs of the institutions themselves which makes the old and the frail and infirm feel that human beings are helping them - not an anonymous, remote and impersonal government. Today marks the completion of another project in the proud record of Swan Cottage Homes. They have served a noble purpose and have set an example to the nation in so many of their activities. The development of their resources is not at an end by any means. We need to spend very substantial sums to help our elderly citizens who cannot help themselves.

Since the Aged Persons Homes Act came into force in 1954, Commonwealth grants have totalled about 131 million dollars and when all subsidised projects have been completed, accommodation will have been provided for over 41,000 old people.

This is a fine community effort, and I don't want to appear to be suggesting that it is mostly the Government that has done all this. The Government is a substantial contributor, it is true, and will go on providing as much as it can, but this is, in fact, a co-operative effort by Government, by people, by institutions and companies. I want to see it continue throughout the whole range of our social services. My Government is pledged to help and help it will. Our record in the past is, I believe, a good one. But we are not satisfied. We want to do better and we intend to do better. We want to see our old and needy people - all of them - secure, remembered, and at peace in the evening of their lives. I believe this is a national duty for us all and one we must and will fulfil.
