



PRIME MINISTER

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FIRST BRAILLE COMPUTER BOOK

I am very grateful to have been given this opportunity to receive the first Braille book produced in Australia by means of a computer.

The Royal New South Wales Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, which has for over a century so lovingly and effectively served the deaf and blind children of New South Wales and the A.C.T., has achieved another first.

Recently, there has been considerable debate and controversy over technological change and its effects in the community. But computers are at the forefront of current improvements of technology and the development of the Institute's computer system is a good example of the benefits that can flow from it.

The computer system you have installed has revolutionised the capacity, speed and accuracy of the production of Braille. It is a great breakthrough for the blind in this country. For many years now there has been an acute shortage of reading matter for the blind. The computer system will increase the amount of available reading matter.

Previously, only one text out of several set for the School Certificate could be translated into Braille for study by blind children. Now the computer will be able to translate all the set English texts into Braille and I commend the Institute's intention to sell its Braille reading material at no profit to agencies and to Government bodies such as the New South Wales Department of Education.

The computer will help blind people overcome some of the limitations imposed on them by their handicap, facilitating their ability to acquire an education necessary for employment and to participate fully in the life of the community.

While its main use at present will be to provide Braille reading matter, I understand that there is a possibility of using the system to teach mathematics, science and music very effectively to the blind.

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I am sure that the production of Braille books by computer will be the first step in a series of important and exciting developments in the application of computer technology to assist the blind.

Voice communication with the computer would similarly open up a number of possibilities for handicapped children and adults.

I understand that the computer services staff includes a blind proof reader and that the computer will be used to assist in the training of other blind persons as programmers. This is an important step in training the blind for entry into the workforce.

The Institute's achievements in assisting the blind, of which the installation of a computer is an outstanding example, are made possible through the support of many sections of the community including governments, sporting bodies and the general public. Many hours of effort and dedication have gone into this worthwhile project.

I would like to again extend my congratulations to the many people involved, and wish the Institute every future success in its use of computer technology to assist the advancement of its work. I should also say that a major responsibility rests on all of the community not just to support innovations such as this computer but also to make greater efforts to understand the blind and the difficulties they face.

This requires some changes in community attitudes. We have to rid ourselves of the misconception that the blind are helpless or that they can perform only a limited set of tasks. This misconception unduly limits the opportunities the blind have to gain maximum independence and it all too often unfairly debars them from gaining employment they want and can perform.

Our object must be to give blind people the independence they want and can achieve. We have to recognise that although the blind are handicapped with respect to sight their interests are the same as other people's, and that they want the maximum control over their own lives. It is through a general community acceptance of these facts, that the advances promised by this computer can be fully realised.