

Allan Myers

Notes for Menzies Oration, University of Melbourne 18 September 2017

Members of the University, Ladies and Gentleman.

1. My text for this evening is well known. Brutus said to Cassius in Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar", Act 4 "There is a tide in the affairs of man which, when taken at the flood, leads onto fortune ... We must take the current when it serves."
2. Most of my predecessors as Menzies orators have been distinguished scholars who have spoken of educational theories and policies. I will take a different course and speak of Robert Gordon Menzies.
3. Robert Gordon Menzies is among the greatest alumni of this University. He entered the University as an undergraduate in 1913 and he became Chancellor in 1967, an office he held until 1972. This evening, I am wearing a replica of the robes he wore as Chancellor.
4. This is the 27th Menzies Oration held in the University of Melbourne. The Menzies Oration, since its inception, has been supported financially by the Menzies Foundation. The Menzies Foundation will no longer support this Oration following a review by the Foundation of the activities it undertakes and supports. The University of Melbourne is grateful for the support of the Menzies Foundation over so many years. It is the intention of the University to sustain the Menzies Oration for the future in the same way as the University has supported the Menzies Oration until now.

5. Furthermore, the University has ambitions to revitalize the Old Quad of the University. That ambition could include a place for research connected with Menzies and his contribution to the public life of Australia. Such an undertaking, if it can be realized, would be a fitting recognition of Menzies connection with the University and his influence on Australia.

6. Before I address directly the subject of tonight's Oration let me say a few things about the life of Robert Gordon Menzies. Menzies was born in Jeparit, a small town in Western Victoria. His father was a storekeeper, but later a member of the Parliament of Victoria. Menzies was one of six children. He was educated at the local state primary school. He attended the Law School of the University of Melbourne and won the Supreme Court Prize. After his articles of clerkship he became a barrister. He had great success almost immediately. Upon his retirement as Prime Minister he wrote two volumes of memoirs. "Afternoon Light" deals more with personal and private aspects of his life and "The Measure of the Years" has more emphasis upon, and is a defence of, his public life and achievements. The achievements were many. In the end, he was showered with honours. Although, for most of his life, until 1963, a few years before he resigned the office of Prime Minister, he was plain Mr Menzies. He was Prime Minister of Australia from 1939 to 1941 and again from 1949 to 1966. He is Australia's longest serving Prime Minister, serving over 18 years. He was responsible for the development of Canberra which, until his Prime Ministership, did not possess the institutions of a national capital. He was Prime Minister in a period of stability and economic growth for Australia. He promoted social equality and access to education at all levels. He promoted the post-war immigration scheme. Many regard him, more than any other person, as the creator of the modern Australia. I and

many of my generation owe a debt of gratitude to Menzies for his support of tertiary education. In common with many others, I was able to attend the University of Melbourne because I received a Commonwealth scholarship. Without such a scholarship it would have been quite impossible for my parents to support me at this University.

7. Menzies' life was one of public service. It is said, I believe, truly, that when he retired from Parliament, aged more than 70 and after 40 years of distinguished public service, he was dependent upon his friends to buy a house for his retirement. Not for Menzies a life, which he could have lived, with the security of wealth and the enjoyment of the luxuries that go with it. The honours he received were a due recognition of a life committed to the service of Australia. Thus, he is a model for us today. He is one of the giants upon whose shoulders the present generation of Australians stand.

8. The title of my address this evening carries an echo of the title, *The Idea of a University*, given by John Henry Newman to his work published in 1873, which is a collection of reflections from his time in Dublin when he had been asked by the Catholic bishops of Ireland to establish a Catholic University in that country. Newman was one of the great Englishmen of a great age of Englishmen. He was widely celebrated as a thinker and as a great, if not, the greatest stylist of his time in his own language. Why have I mentioned Newman's work? I have done so to create a focus for the consideration and assessment of Menzies' idea of a university.

9. Newman's description of the nature and purpose of a university was the conventional view in England in the 19th Century.

The purpose of a university education was described by Newman thus:

If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society ... it is the education which gives a man a clear, conscious view of his own opinions and judgements, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought to detect what it is sophistical and to discard what is irrelevant.

10. You will have noticed at once that Newman began "If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course." He believed that the acquisition of knowledge was an end in itself, requiring no other justification. The first end or purpose of a University education was the pursuit of truth. Newman said that, if another purpose must be assigned to a University course, it was of training good members of society. At another place Newman wrote "a University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society." Newman was also clear about another matter: scientific discovery was not an object or purpose of a University. A university is for the education of its students.

11. Newman's name has been attached to many university institutions in the United Kingdom and abroad. For almost seven years I lived in Newman College, a Catholic residential college of this University. It must be said that, by the time Newman's work was published, developments in university education had made outdated much of his idea of a university. Already the Germans were creating universities among the principal goals of which were, not merely the education and personal formation of young men, but also scientific research and research on scientific principles in fields within the humanities where the nature of human knowledge was being envisaged differently.
12. Menzies spoke and wrote about universities a great deal. When he was a student at the University of Melbourne he was Editor of the Melbourne University Magazine, he was President of the Student's Representative Council, President of the Student's Christian Union and President of the Law Student's Society and a Member of the Historical Society. He received the first Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws in this university in 1942. He spoke of university education both as a member of the Parliament of Victoria and as a member of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. As Prime Minister he delivered innumerable addresses, many of which touched upon university education. At this university he opened International House in 1958; he opened the Baillieu Library the next year; in 1960 he opened St Hilda's College; in 1964 he was back again to open a wing of Queen's College; in 1965 he opened the new Whitley College building; in 1968 he opened McCaughey Court at Ormond College. In "The Measure of the Years" he devoted an entire chapter to developments in education.

He was, I believe, the recipient of no less than that number of honorary degrees of universities throughout the world as is the number of occasions on which this Menzies Oration has been delivered. On each of those occasions he spoke about university education. When he retired as Prime Minister in 1966 he went to the University of Virginia in the United States of America as a scholar-in-residence where he delivered a course of lectures.

13. Let us begin with what Menzies said in Britain in 1941. At that time, Menzies had gone to Great Britain to participate in the Imperial War Cabinet. On 3rd April 1941 he received an honorary degree at Queen's University Belfast. May I quote a passage from his address in Belfast:

Now, Sir, [that is the Chancellor, Lord Londonderry] this is a University ceremony in which we are taking part to-day. I have a life-long interest in the work of universities. I have, Sir, and I say it without shame, an almost passionate belief in pure learning. I have never been able to accept the view that a university is a mere technical school. If time permitted and anybody in this Ulster audience could throw off the argumentative habits of a lifetime I should be prepared to discuss very crisply with him the value of pure learning in a world in which too much applied, or misapplied, learning has brought humanity to a very strange pass.

Why, Sir, do I defend pure learning? Because to me pure learning, the freeing of the mind from the inhibitions of ignorance, is one of those great moving forces that distinguish the civilized world from the uncivilized world, one of those great underlying things for which this war is being fought. And because I believe that, because I believe that this precious thing, this scholarship for which universities stand, is an essential ingredient in the freedom not only of the human mind but of the human spirit, I am proud indeed to think that we are met for half an hour in the middle of a war to take part in a ceremony in which a university in Ulster confers on a graduate of another British university 12,000 miles away the right to inscribe himself as its graduate.

14. This view is a distinct echo of the views expressed by Newman 75 years before. But did Menzies really believe it? I think not. His own university education was not “pure learning” but was in large degree a training for a professional career. Although the first Australian universities, Sydney and Melbourne, were modelled superficially upon Oxford, Cambridge and Dublin and they drew their founding professors from those who held degrees from those universities, in the new colonial societies there was a great need to train a cohort of professional men. From the beginning Australian universities had more practical purposes. “Pure learning” was never their main object.
15. When addressing his Belfast audience Menzies was, like many a speaker on such an occasion, giving voice to high minded ideas by which he believed his audience would feel uplifted and, of course, judge him accordingly. A University education was the means by which Menzies entered the legal profession, success in which enabled him to take the step into politics. Menzies was an ambitious man enabled by success at University to fulfil his ambitions to make his way in public life.

16. A little over a week later, still in April 1941, Menzies received an honorary degree at Bristol University, the Chancellor of which was the Right Hon. Winston Churchill. Menzies said:

I am greatly honoured because it seems to me that this conferring of degrees, as you yourself, Sir, have pointed out, while the ruins of parts of this city are still smoking outside, has an immortal symbolism. This ancient city of Bristol is a city from which great explorers have gone forth; it is a city from which people sailed to discover the world and, if need be, to conquer the world. At this moment, after all these centuries, it finds itself a city that is sending out to the world a superb message which is addressed to the spirit of mankind: "Our city may lie in ruins, our University may have had its Great Hall destroyed, but the University goes on, not because the University is a building or a set of buildings, or even a body of graduates or undergraduates, but because the University is the home of that search for the truth which is part of the stuff that is the free spirit of man.

...

It is because our cause is not only true, but is the Truth itself, and because every University that is worthy to be called a University is dedicated to the pursuit of truth, honestly, fearlessly, wherever it may be, that I find myself with treble reasons to be extremely proud that I have been one of the figures at this ceremony to-day.

Here we have Menzies giving voice again to the same idea of a University which had been his theme in Belfast.

- 17.** What do Menzies actions in public life tell us about his idea of a University?
I believe we can be confident that throughout his life Menzies understood the advantages he enjoyed on account of his education at this University. I believe also that, as an intelligent person of sound values, he would have wished to acknowledge the contribution that his University experiences and education made to his success in life. His continuing close connection with this University throughout his life is evidence of that proposition.
- 18.** But what of his actions when he was in a position to affect the policies and actions of government? The first such action to which I wish to refer is that, when Menzies was the Attorney General for Victoria in the early 1930s, he sponsored a Bill for the appointment, for the first time, of a full-time Vice Chancellor in the University of Melbourne. This is not a small or merely symbolic act. It is a recognition that the University required proper, professional administration. It is also a recognition that the University was an important institution deserving of real public support.
- 19.** After the Second World War, the Commonwealth Government and Parliament of the day made provision for the repatriation of ex-servicemen and women. Under the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme substantial sums were paid by way of grants to the States for the support of universities. This led to a growth of universities and was the occasion for consideration of the resources required by universities for capital expenditure and for operational purposes.

- 20.** Thus, in 1950 the Menzies government appointed a committee made up of Professor Mills, Sir Douglas Copeland and Mr H.G. Goods of the Commonwealth Treasury. The terms of reference were to examine and report upon the finances of the universities and to make recommendations as to whether any, and if so, what actions should be taken by the Commonwealth of Australia to assist universities.
- 21.** It is significant, I believe, that Menzies insisted that the committee should give consideration to the needs of residential colleges. Menzies understood, from his own experience as a student, that generally students who live in residential colleges have a better university experience than those who do not. It is possible also that he understood that universities have responsibilities for the broader care and welfare of their students, especially young undergraduate students. Menzies view that residential colleges are generally a beneficial environment for students is evident from the many occasions Menzies, as Prime Minister, attended important events at colleges affiliated with this University.
- 22.** The importance of residential colleges at this University was not well recognised for many years. Until quite recently the view was widely held that they were an unimportant appendage for the privileged few. That view has always been wrong. The experience of university of those who could live in a residential college is superior generally to that of those who do not. The attachment to the University of those who had the experience of living in college is reflected in the response to the Believe Campaign. Less than 10 per cent of alumni of the University of Melbourne have enjoyed the advantage of living in one of the affiliated residential colleges of the

University, but about 70 per cent, by aggregate amount, of gifts by alumni to the Believe Campaign of the University of Melbourne have been from former college residents. The University now has about 16 per cent of its undergraduate students from interstate. Another 40 per cent are from abroad. The University has a clear duty of care to those students who do not come from Melbourne or nearby to ensure they have accommodation at an affordable level which is safe and secure and allows them to pursue their studies effectively. You may be sure that the University well understands this responsibility and that it has great plans to discharge it.

23. In December 1956, it was the personal initiative of Menzies to establish the Murray Committee. Murray was Chairman of the British University Grants Committee. The Committee also included the Vice Chancellor of Leeds University, Charles Morris, who had been suggested to Menzies by Murray, Ian Clunies-Ross, the Chairman of the CSIRO, Alexander Reid, a public servant in Western Australia and later Chancellor of the University of Western Australia and Mr J.C. Richards, General Manager of BHP. The terms of reference suggested by Menzies for the committee were that it should investigate how best the universities may serve Australia at a time of great social and economic development within the nation; to indicate ways in which the universities might be organised so as to ensure that their long term pattern of development was in the best interests of the nation and, in particular, to enquire into such matters as the role of the universities in the Australian community, the extension and co-ordination of university facilities, technological education at university level and the financial needs of universities.

- 24.** It is notable, that Clunies-Ross and Richards were members of the committee. Clunies-Ross was responsible for scientific and industrial research in Australia and the latter was a senior executive officer of Australia's leading corporation. Menzies saw that research and education pertaining to technological research were important functions of a university. This is a long way from the university of his experience 40 years before. It is a university which bears no resemblance to the university of which he spoke during the Second World War.
- 25.** When the Murray committee presented its report on 19 September 1957 Menzies was anxious that the report should be implemented as soon as possible. Cabinet considered it within a few days of the report having been presented and sat throughout a whole day, morning, afternoon and evening to reach a conclusion about the Murray Report at once. Cabinet approved the report. Its recommendations were adopted. These recommendations formed the basis of a speech by the Prime Minister to Parliament on 28 November 1957, when the report was tabled. We all know that the result was a change in the financing and management of Australian universities with the consequence that the Commonwealth thereafter has played the leading role in university education, almost to the exclusion of the states.

- 26.** The Murray report also led to an extension of the Commonwealth scholarship scheme which had been earlier established by the Menzies government. It was that scheme that made university education available to wide classes of young Australian men and women, which itself led to further profound social changes, which by the 1970s created an Australia quite different from that which Menzies had understood so well.
- 27.** Menzies' government was responsible for the Colombo Plan, including the scholarships which were part of it. These scholarships may well be the most enlightened and successful action of this country to recognise its place in Asia. That is to say, not simply, the geography of Australia but also, the national interests of Australia, to make accessible understanding of this country by our neighbours and to provide countries of the region with well-educated leaders. On the same theme, at the official opening of International House, on one of his many visits to the University of Melbourne as Prime Minister, Menzies said:

The conception of this International House is one of the splendid conceptions in University history. I have nothing but praise for it myself, because it recognises that if you bring together into one place people of intelligence, students coming from different backgrounds, coming from old and different cultures and absorbing something of a new one, then you are bound to increase the area of human understanding and the possibilities, the probabilities, of genuine friendship within the peoples of the world.

28. In “The Measure of the Years” Menzies says that of what was achieved during his time as Prime Minister, education, particularly in the university field is one of his happiest memories. In Volume 2 of A.W. Martin’s “Life of Menzies” he quotes Murray, speaking of Menzies, thus:

I shall never forget his parting words. “I have been almost 30 years in Australian politics. I have not found them very rewarding, but if I leave the Australian Universities in a healthy state it will have all been all worthwhile.” It was said with such a note of sincerity, and also of emotion that I was convinced once again of his deep seated devotion to the universities welfare and scholarship in general.

29. In preparing my remarks this evening I have read A.W. Martin’s Biography of Menzies, the two memoirs earlier mentioned, the collection of transcripts of radio broadcasts entitled “The Forgotten People” and a miscellany of other writings by and about Robert Gordon Menzies. In reflecting upon those sources I have an impression of the man. I do not claim to have any special insights and certainly not as compared with the knowledge and judgements of many of my audience here this evening. Nonetheless, the conclusions I will express about Menzies “idea of the University” can only be understood with reference to my impressions of the man.

30. Menzies was intelligent and ambitious. He was imbued with and proud of his British, especially Scots, heritage. He believed in J.S. Mill's conceptions of society as embodied in "On Liberty" and "On Representative Government". Thus, he was tolerant, not a bigot in matters of religion or otherwise. He was not at all racist. Perhaps after his long sojourn in Britain in 1941 he became less sympathetic to English social customs and prejudices and more attuned to those of his native land. Nonetheless, he never entirely abandoned the still prevailing view of British history based upon a belief in British (or English) exceptionalism. Like John of Gaunt in, Richard II, he saw England as the "Sceptred Isle", "this other Eden", "the envy of less happy lands". Menzies was a man of great presence. He was witty and articulate. He came to dominate parliamentary debate. He was often cruel to opponents. He was charming to those whom he wished to impress. But charm is not concerned with ideas or truth. I do not see Menzies as an original thinker. He was not a man of ideas. He was, of course, a very successful politician. Like the most successful of politicians he was a man of his time, in tune with the aspirations of his time. If I may return to my text, which is, I believe, a good working definition of a leader. He judged correctly the current of affairs and took the tide of his times at full flood. His singular genius was that he foresaw that the old differences of class, of education, of wealth were to be swept aside after the Second World War by a new middle class who were ambitious for themselves and their families. He understood the importance in this new Australia of the opportunities which university education could provide. He understood that, in large part, because of his own experience of life.

31. Menzies idea of a University was an expression of his conception of this new Australia. The University was not a fixed idea determined by the past. The University was an institution to be moulded to serve the new Australia. It would provide professional training for the new Australian middle class. University education would be widely available to the able and ambitious from all sections of society. Australia would cautiously open its universities to the able and ambitious from Asia. Research would be conducted within universities because it was seen to serve the interests of the Australian community to ensure that, in the fields of science, Australia maintained a place in the advanced world. In making decisions about universities in Australia, Menzies was completely pragmatic.
32. We know what were the results of Menzies support of university education. Whether and to what extent those results best served our country is for another day. For my part I am very grateful to him and the society whose aspirations he so well understood.

Allan Myers

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