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The English Academy of Southern Africa: Opening address . . . [at the inaugural meeting of the Academy]

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The English Academy

of Southern Africa

Opening Address — by the Chairman of the Steering Committee,

DR. G. KNOWLES-WILLIAMS

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have great pleasure, on behalf of the Steering Committee which was appointed to launch this English Academy of Southern Africa, in welcoming members to this Business Meeting, and in opening our three-day Conference. As you will see from the list of members on a sheet in your file covers, we have in all about eighty full members to date, as the nucleus of this Academy; but many of these have not, with the best will in the world, been able to do more than send us their good wishes. A number of them are overseas on vacation, or on business or study leave. Prof. Durrant and Mr. C. T. Gordon, who are members of our Steering Committee, have left or are leaving our country to take up appointments overseas. Our members are widely scattered in the Cape, Natal, O.F.S. and Transvaal, in Southern Rhodesia and Basutoland; and many have been prevented by distance, or the expense involved, or their own personal commitments from being here today. Differences in university and school holidays in this country, and clashes between this and other conferences, have complicated the situation for us considerably. Anyone who has tried to organise a national conference in this country of great distances, will know how difficult it is to find a time which is likely to suit more than about 20% of those who are genuinely interested and would like to attend.

For this reason we chose to limit the Business Meeting at this Conference to a single morning session and devote the rest of the period to Public sessions—with the idea of interesting the public in our movement; for without public support, moral and financial, we cannot hope to achieve our aims. With public support, and willing workers in our own ranks, we hope to build up a strong organisation, with enough members—full, associate and corporate members to serve on sub-committees and carry out the projects envisaged in the means clauses of our Constitution.

The names of members which appear on the list you have before you constitute, I would emphasise, only the nucleus of the Academy. The members were selected so as to be as widely representative as possible of various sections of our community. They include representatives from the academic world of university, school and Training College; from Commerce and Industry, from the Theatre, and the world of Broadcasting and the Press. There are, of course, omissions but these can be remedied once our constitution is adopted and we can spread our net more widely to include Associate and Corporate as well as full members. Movements like this must always begin in a small way, and gradually establish themselves and grow, as interest grows and possibilities open up.

Let me remind you, briefly, of the events leading up to today's Inaugural Meeting, before proceeding to formal business.

At a meeting held in Pretoria in May 1960 it was decided "to work towards the establishment of an Academy of English in Southern Africa," and a Steering Committee of 10 members was appointed to go into ways and means of implementing this decision. Several meetings of the Steering Committee were held in Pretoria during 1960 and early this year; but as the members were scattered and it was difficult for them to come to Pretoria for meetings, the burden of work fell mainly on the shoulders of our invaluable secretary, Mr. V. H. Osborn, without whose absolutely dedicated service to our cause, I can assure you, this Conference could not have taken place. He tackled the tiresome problem of amendments to the original draft constitution which needed a good deal of tidying up. He undertook the burden of secretarial work, letter writing, phone calls and so on—with some assistance from his wife and from the Secretary of the S.A. Council for English Education, Mrs. Cogill. I know that he has, quite literally, had nightmares about this conference. Moreover he has not been at all well, yet he has never spared himself. I, of course, have had nightmares lest he should go into hospital and the hundred and one details of organisation for which he made himself responsible, be left in the air and unresolved. We certainly owe to Mr. Osborn a very hearty vote of thanks. Other people and organisations I am glad to have the opportunity of thanking this morning are the following:

The Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand, Prof. Sutton who allowed us to use this fine building for our Conference and who, though unfortunately unable to be present himself, sent us his good wishes; and members of the administrative and technical staff of this university, Mr. Duggan, Mr. Cubit and Mr. Spencely who have helped us greatly. The S.A. Council for English Education which has been generous and enthusiastic in its support and helped us financially in the initial stages when we had no money. The British Council through the kind offices of Mr. Butlin, Cultural Attaché to the U.K. Embassy; Mr. Butlin was instrumental in arranging for Prof. Norman Jeffares to fly out from England to attend this Inaugural Meeting. May I say, at this stage, how very pleased we are to welcome Professor Jeffares among us and how grateful we are to him for agreeing to come at considerable personal inconvenience. We do want him to know how greatly we appreciate his interest and willingness to give us a helping hand and how much we are looking forward to hearing him talk to us. I hope he will enjoy his stay with us in South Africa.

Then there is Dr. Tresidder of the American Information Service who arranged the Exhibition of "Aids to the Teaching of English" which he will tell you about when he opens the Exhibition this afternoon at 4 p.m. Thanks are also due to Mr. Breytenbach, Director of the National Theatre Organisation, who was most co-operative in arranging for the famous actress-producer Miss Margaret Webster to speak to us this afternoon, and to Miss Webster herself for finding time amid her many commitments to give us the benefit of her wide experience and the stimulus of her enthusiasm. To the other speakers also who appear on our programme I would like to say "thank you"—to Dr. E. G. Malherbe, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Natal, and Professor R. G. MacMillan, also of Natal University; to Mr. A. Rodger Martin of Johannesburg, Past-Chairman of A.A., Professor A. C. Partridge of the University of the Witwatersrand and Mrs. Sheila Schiff of the Kilnerton Bantu Training College Pretoria. To those who kindly agreed to take the chair at various meetings: Mr. Whitmore Richards, Chairman of the Council of Education, Witwatersrand; Miss Margaret Inglis; Professor Gardner of the University of O.F.S.; Prof. E. Davis and Prof. Harvey of the University of S.A.; Professor R. M. Titlestad of the University of Pretoria and, again Prof. Partridge of this university. To the Press and the S.A.B.C. for the great interest they have shown in our activities and the publicity they have so generously given us. To members of the Education Vigilance Committee who have helped us with transport and organisation. To those firms and friends who have given us the financial support without which we could not have operated at all; and to B.P. Southern Africa for supplying us with these attractive folders and undertaking the tape recording of the addresses at the Conference. This long list of "thank you's" will indicate how widespread has been the support we have received.

The theme of the Conference is "Falling Standards in English—the need for an English Academy in Southern Africa." The topics chosen for the addresses have relevance to various aspects of this theme. In drawing up the programme the situation of different racial groups in our country was borne in mind—the South African whose home language is English, the truly bilingual South African, the Afrikaans-speaking South African to whom English is, increasingly becoming a foreign language, and the Non-White South African who, in the case of the Bantu and the Indian, is expected to be trilingual.

The movement for the establishment of an English Academy, is intended to be, under these complicated linguistic circumstances, much more than a narrowly academic movement for the upholding of high standards of English usage, in a country where these standards are slipping. It is this, of course, but it is much more than merely this. It is an attempt to canalise public opinion into a concerted effort to preserve a very valuable part of our S.A. heritage—the English language and its literature. We are concerned not merely to maintain English as a trade language and a means of international communication but as a cultural and educational force without which we, as a nation, would be greatly impoverished. Our contact with Western culture and progressive ideas comes to us largely through the English language publications; and it is essential that we should keep this link in good repair if we are not to lay ourselves open to cultural isolation. It is for this reason that we included in the Means clauses of our Draft Constitution those clauses relating to the defence of the democratic rights of free speech and publication, and of opposition to trends and policies inimical to a full and free education in English. It is for this reason also, that in inviting members to form the nucleus of our Academy we have tried to get representatives from various sections of our community and not limited ourselves to the academic world. We want an Academy which will be truly representative of educated opinion in the many different occupational groups in our community. I hope, in selecting Council members, you will bear in mind the need for a balance of varied interests in the Controlling Body of the Academy.