



**PRIME MINISTER**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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ETHNIC COMMUNITIES MEETING  
MELBOURNE - 26 APRIL 1987

Ladies and Gentlemen, fellow Australians, friends.

Some forty years ago, in the aftermath of war, the Labor Government led by Ben Chifley took a visionary, passionate and historic decision.

It opened the doors of Australia to a great wave of migration.

That was a decision that offered new opportunities in a new society for a generation of people weary of the warfare and privation of Europe.

It was a decision that allowed old cultures to flourish again in a new land, enriching and diversifying the Australian society.

It was also a decision that provided a great new engine of manpower, a mass of workers whose energy, experience, and expertise helped build Australia's post-war prosperity to new levels.

A generation later another Labor Government - the Whitlam Government - expunged the last traces of ethnic preference from our migration policy.

It is with that great Labor tradition behind me - that tradition of vision, compassion, courage and fairness - that I speak to you today

Now I know some of you have come here today to register your concern about the SBS. I have some important comments to make about the SBS - but let me return to that topic later.

At the outset I want to take this opportunity to reaffirm the principles and policies which my Government has developed to guide its hand in the field of ethnic and multicultural affairs.

We believe that all Australians, irrespective of their ethnic background, their cultural heritage or their linguistic tradition, should be able to exercise their rights and obligations as full and equal members of the community.

We hold that belief not as an empty rhetorical device to be endorsed in isolation, but as the basis of a real commitment to ensure those rights and obligations can actually be exercised.

So we believe all Australians should be able to develop their skills and abilities without discrimination or prejudice.

We believe multiculturalism is central to any commitment to social justice.

We believe all Australians should have equitable access to government services.

We believe all Australians are entitled to a fair go.

These are goals for which we strive despite the difficult economic climate and in the face of an exhaustive and continuing search for savings in Government expenditure.

Despite the restraint imposed on us by the economic environment, we have taken important steps to achieve those goals.

Today let me outline some of these initiatives for you.

We have for example provided funding to a large and diverse number of community groups through the Grant-in-Aid program.

These grants are intended to help those groups in their work of easing the difficult years of transition of newly arrived migrants into the Australian society.

Over the four years in which we have been in office, the number of grants has increased by 40 per cent, to just over 200. Since we came to office we have more than doubled total spending on the scheme.

At the same time, we are studying the way the grants are administered, and Mick Young is now arranging for closer co-ordination between his Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs and the Department of Community Services.

This process has already yielded fruit.

We have already approved a number of funding proposals for ethnic groups under the Home and Community program of the Department of Community Services.

This will allow the provision of nursing home, hostel and other facilities to care for Australia's growing population of elderly people born in non-English speaking countries.

In other words, we are endeavouring to meet the needs of the ethnic communities through the broader programs of all relevant departments.

Another significant development towards the achievement of our goals is the recent establishment of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs.

These two bodies will enhance our capacity to bring into being a truly multicultural Australia.

The Office of Multicultural Affairs is located within my own Department. This ensures it will have an input at the highest level of government.

In fact, the Office is able to be involved in each and every proposal that comes before the Government in terms of its impact upon Australia's multicultural society.

The Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs is just as important.

Its diverse and highly skilled membership is a true reflection of Australia's multicultural identity.

I want both the Office and the Advisory Council to work actively at keeping open the channels of communication between my Government and ethnic communities.

I do not want them to be token bodies. I want ideas from them, not platitudes - realistic options, not rhetoric.

In particular, I have asked the Advisory Council to formulate a National Agenda for Multicultural Australia - that is, a program of specific priorities that will translate the philosophy of multiculturalism into a series of long-term, concrete initiatives. The National Agenda will give definition, direction and drive to the policy of multiculturalism.

I am looking to all ethnic communities to contribute to this process so that the National Agenda truly reflects realistic and genuinely held priorities.

Let me turn to another initiative of my Government in which we have demonstrated our commitment to advancing the cause of multiculturalism - the implementation of a national policy on languages.

Our linguistic richness is a rare and valuable resource which we should develop to advance the domestic and external interests of the nation.

People who lack an adequate command of spoken and written English are inevitably disadvantaged in our society. English must remain the national language.

But there are also sound reasons why the many languages used in the Australian community today should be maintained as a legitimate part of the Australian heritage.

There are equally sound reasons why English-speakers should learn some of the languages now spoken every day by their fellow Australians.

Knowledge of another tongue promotes tolerance and understanding across cultural differences.

And in a world where Australia's economic and political destiny lies with people who speak Japanese, Chinese, Bahasa Indonesia or Arabic as much as English, we would be foolish to place ourselves at a disadvantage.

As 'The Age' newspaper commented only on Friday, the onus is now on us to speak the languages of our trading partners, rather than the reverse.

The Government commissioned Mr Joe Lo Bianco to prepare a report on a national policy on languages.

The Lo Bianco report provides a blueprint for how Australia can best use its language skills so as to reap some of these benefits.

The Government endorses that Report.

Accordingly I have asked Susan Ryan and Mick Young to develop a detailed submission on this.

Let me take this opportunity to announce that we are committed to fund an integrated package in the August budget to implement a national policy on languages.

All of these initiatives, as I said at the outset, are being undertaken in the face of Australia's dramatic economic challenges.

When we came to office four years ago we had to reverse the terrible effects of the Fraser/Howard recession.

We did reverse that recession and we were rebuilding national economic growth.

But then the collapse in the prices earned by many of our primary commodities presented us with a new challenge - a challenge to restructure the economy, a challenge to become more innovative and competitive in the way we earn our national income, a challenge to build sustainable economic growth for all Australians.

I am totally confident in our capacity to overcome these challenges. That confidence is based on the belief that the Australian people will accept the short term sacrifices which are necessary to achieve our goal.

I do not want to pretend that our economic problems are solved. Indeed, Paul Keating will next month bring down a May Statement in which we will be continuing our tough approach to finding new spending cuts.

But I do want to say very positively that the curbs on wages and government spending have a definite purpose: long-term prosperity for all Australians.

At the same time, we have also taken pains to ensure that the burdens those curbs impose have been shared as fairly as possible.

The Government has ensured that the momentum of growth in central social areas has continued.

Employment, for example, remains the key to economic well-being and individual fulfilment.

Under my government, more than three quarters of a million new jobs have been created.

Migrants have reaped the benefits of this growth.

In 1983 overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking countries had an unemployment rate one-third higher than that of native-born Australians. Today that rate has been reduced to one-quarter. That is still too high, but it is real progress nevertheless.

And women in particular have benefited from the growth in jobs - including many migrant women and women of migrant descent.

Again, in meeting the challenge of restructuring our industries, we are making sure that workers, including migrant workers, are protected.

Restructuring is necessary to make our manufacturing sector more competitive and less cocooned from the stimulus of international competition. The depreciation of the dollar has opened up great new vistas for our manufacturers.

The burden of restructuring must be borne equitably. In devising a new plan for the textiles, clothing and footwear industry, for example, we were conscious of the large number of migrant workers - particularly women - in this sector.

Thus the restructuring plan for this industry contains special provisions for workers to acquire new skills, move to other industries, widen their horizons, and compete more effectively for other jobs.

Education, too, is a critical means for Australians of migrant origin to achieve effective participation in this society. Our policies are designed to help more young Australians benefit from the education system and they are bearing fruit.

More and more students are staying at school to complete Year 12 - and there is some evidence that students from non-English speaking backgrounds are more likely than others to be among those who complete secondary school. These students also seem more likely to attend university.

These increases in retention rates have not come about by accident. The government has provided improved income support for students and is also endeavouring to increase access to and participation in higher education.

Further we have chalked up some considerable achievements in the teaching of English to adult migrants, through the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP).

We have developed a permanent teaching service for the AMEP; we have provided childcare to some 60 AMEP classes throughout Australia to ensure that women can attend the classes; and we have increased funding for the Program to some \$50 million this year.

The quality of the service has been improved through the establishment of new education centres, steady progress in professional development, and the establishment of the National Curriculum Resource Centre.

The recent independent review of the AMEP has confirmed the value of the service and provided a blueprint for its future development. My Government will continue to give high priority to this program.

Now, finally, let me return to the immediate purpose of today's meeting. I said at the outset that I have some important news for you about SBS.

As part of our response to our national economic challenge, my Government has made it clear that no area of Government expenditure will remain immune from rigorous scrutiny.

As part of that commitment, we made the decision to merge the Special Broadcasting Service with the ABC.

That decision was made with the clear intention that SBS would benefit, not suffer, from the amalgamation - that is, that while the amalgamation would produce some savings through more efficient operation, it would also enhance the SBS's ability to broadcast good quality radio and TV programs.

Indeed, I insisted that the Government receive formal advice, before we took any decision on the merger, that the SBS's capacity would be improved through its access to the larger capital and equipment resources of the ABC. The decision we took was thus consistent with our commitment to ensure that taxpayers' funds are used in the most efficient and effective way possible.

However the legislation we introduced into Parliament to achieve these improvements through amalgamation was rejected by the Opposition parties in the Senate last December.

That rejection has prevented us from making any savings for the time being and has meant the advantages which we intended to pass on to SBS have not been able to be passed on.

That presents the Government with two alternatives. We could proceed with the amalgamation by administrative means - a course which we had rejected from the outset as unacceptable..

We have decided therefore to take the other alternative: to drop the legislation entirely and not to proceed with the plans for the amalgamation.

We will however ensure that cost savings are made within the publicly funded broadcasting sector to offset the savings that had been anticipated.

I am well aware that the merger decision was not a popular one with many of you - though some of the criticism was I believe based on a confused understanding of the proposal. It is to end that confusion, and to clear up any misperceptions that may exist about the Government's intentions, that we have decided to take the proposal off the Government's agenda.

The legislation will not be re-introduced.

And savings will still be achieved.

And let me make this promise: any future consideration we may give to the Special Broadcasting Service will be on the basis of full consultation with and understanding by the ethnic communities. Should there be any such consideration, our new Advisory Committee would have an important role to play.

We are fully committed to ensuring that SBS effectively carries out its role as a national broadcaster for a multicultural Australia.

We remain equally committed to ensuring that the ABC become more effective in dollar value terms, in the services it delivers to all Australians.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I do not come to this meeting as a recent convert to the benefits of Australia's migration program or to the cause of multiculturalism.

For forty years now - since I joined the Australian Labor Party in 1947 when I was a student at the University of Western Australia - I have been utterly convinced that Australia and Australians can only gain strength from the influx of settlers from overseas.

Indeed one of the reasons why I joined the ALP was my sense of excitement at the vast immigration program then being initiated by the Chifley Labor Government - a program that laid the foundations for the enormous growth of the Australian economy in the post-war years.

Later on as President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, I was closely involved in working with governments of both political persuasions in implementing their immigration policies.

So it is a particular source of pride to me now as Prime Minister that under my Government Australia's migration intake continues to gather pace and that we are continuing to build a truly multicultural society.

We are committed to maintaining the momentum of immigration for we believe firmly that it brings not just economic benefits but yields social and cultural and humanitarian advantages for the whole population.

As proud as I am of Labor's special achievements in creating the immigration program, it is important to understand that immigration was, until very recently, a program which enjoyed bipartisan support.

I readily pay tribute to the work of previous Liberal Ministers for immigration. One of them I believe stands out - Ian Macphee, a sensitive Minister, an architect of multiculturalism, a friend of many ethnic groups and a man who still holds the respect of many individuals involved in the field of immigration and ethnic affairs.

Mr Macphee's relegation to the backbench of his Party takes place at a time when the would-be hijackers of the Liberal Party - the New Right - are themselves becoming more strident in their attacks not just on multiculturalism but on many of the common decencies of Australian life.

So in closing let me express the wish that we might return to the spirit of bipartisanship in immigration and ethnic affairs. Together, let us continue building a better and wiser Australia, committed in word and in practice to the principle of equality of opportunity for all Australians.

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