



PRIME MINISTER

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
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My latest appearance at this most important Australian forum was, of course, just before the Federal Elections last July.

It will not have escaped you that, had we made a different decision about the timing of the election, many of you might well be about to go on the campaign trail over the next few weeks.

As it is, we are now able to have the Bicentennial Year absolutely free of party politics, at the national level.

Well, shall we say - for perhaps a week.

However that may be, I do want to say one thing very seriously.

I count it as an inestimable privilege to have been elected leader of our nation and Prime Minister of Australia in this year of the Bicentenary.

I say that in no spirit of false pride.

But the duty does fall, in part, to me, to articulate on behalf of the Australian people, the meaning and purpose of the Bicentenary: and, in particular, to seek its true meaning for Australia's future.

And that is a rare honour and privilege indeed - and may I say, a great responsibility.

Even so early in the Year, I think it has already emerged what the Bicentenary does not mean.

It is not to be an occasion for vain glory or empty boasting.

There is to be no meaningless flag-waving or drum-thumping.

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In the gatherings and events I have already attended or witnessed through television, one could not help but feel that, underlying the evident enjoyment and enthusiasm, there is a seriousness, a thoughtfulness, a reflectiveness on the part of the Australian people - and not least, and most significantly, on the part of the younger people.

And if this perception of mine proves correct - as I am convinced it will in the days ahead - then it will be further evidence of the new maturity of the Australian people - a maturity which has been demonstrated so amply by their conduct in recent years, and by their response to the unique challenges we face in these times.

And that of course, goes to the heart of the true meaning of the Bicentenary.

Because one of the tests of our maturity is our capacity to learn.

The Bicentenary is as much about learning and reflecting as it is about celebrating.

The very nature of the specific event being commemorated on Tuesday - Australia Day - gives an impetus to this process.

A less mature people, a less self-confident people would scarcely choose the commemoration of such an event for the celebration of their nationhood.

That we are prepared to acknowledge the grim and harsh reality of the origins of modern Australia is itself testimony to our national maturity and self-confidence.

No-one of my generation could fail to be aware of the vast changes which have occurred in our attitudes to our history, our culture, and our relations with the rest of the world, especially the peoples of our own region.

It is a process of change which may be said to have begun with the fall of Singapore in 1942.

It has been an accelerating process in recent years - and for most of those who have lived through it, an exhilarating process.

And I believe that, in the years to come, the Bicentenary itself will be seen as a decisive point in the process - the process of deepening our sense of national identity, national responsibility and national maturity.

We have altered the focus on our past.

With that new focus on the past, has come a reassessment of the past.

And for none of our fellow Australians will this reassessment be of greater value than the Aboriginal people.

I do not wish to suggest that the Bicentenary is the sole cause of this reassessment.

Rather, it is part of a process which has continued ever since the people of Australia voted overwhelmingly in the Referendum of 1967 to change the Constitution and give the Commonwealth the power to make laws affecting the lives of Aboriginal and Islander people.

Specifically, I reject out of hand any insinuation that the policies of the Australian Government represent some sort of window dressing for the Bicentenary, for consumption overseas.

That kind of claim not only demeans the Australian people, but detracts from the unanswerable justice of the Aboriginal cause.

Nor is the cause advanced by attempts to draw up an indictment of criminality against the entire Australian nation.

The Australian people should never be asked to accept that their entire history as a modern nation must be predicated on the notion of a collective and irredeemable guilt.

But they will respond - and respond with great generosity of spirit - to the claims of truth and justice.

And there can be no doubt that the reassessment of the past - for which the Bicentenary has provided a focus and, to some extent, a catalyst - has sharpened the perception of the truth and justice of those claims, throughout the Australian community.

On 10 December, 1987, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Gerry Hand, delivered in the Parliament the policy statement entitled, "Foundations for the Future".

I believe that was a landmark statement - a landmark for the Australian aboriginal people, a landmark for all the Australian people.

Because, it does five things of tremendous significance.

It acknowledges the descendants of the aboriginal people of Australia as the prior occupiers and original owners of this land.

It acknowledges the dispossession of their land by subsequent European occupation.

It acknowledges that the dispossession occurred without compensation and with no serious attempt to reach agreement with the Aboriginal people on the use of their land.

It acknowledges the deep disadvantages and deprivations the Aboriginals have thereby suffered - and continue to suffer.

And it pledges the Australian Government and the Australian people to an earnest and continuing effort of rectification and reconciliation.

Now, these are not mere forms of words.

They represent a profound shift in concepts and attitudes which have been fundamental to the relationship between the original inhabitants and European settlers on this continent, for the past two hundred years.

That is the reason why the words we propose in the preamble to the Act establishing the new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission is of such very real and genuine significance.

I make just one more point in this connection.

The resolution of this issue will not be quick or easy.

But the key to its resolution undoubtedly lies in a clearer understanding of the true nature of the relationship between the Aboriginal people and the land.

We are now recognising what was largely ignored previously - the realisation that, before our occupancy of a mere 7 or 8 generations and 200 years, came, perhaps, as many as 2000 generations, and 40,000 years of a human culture of remarkable sophistication and adaptability.

And I do suggest that the clearer and wider understanding of this basic fact is another of the valuable results of the Bicentenary, and the new perspectives it has provided.

This is something which illuminates our whole understanding of human culture and civilization.

It is something which alters the perspective of our own relationship with each other as Australians.

And this brings me to my next point about the Bicentenary.

I deeply hope that, from it all, will emerge a new understanding, a new appreciation of the role of immigration and immigrants in our nation's life and growth.

There is nothing trite about saying that we are a nation of immigrants.

But, if we once grasp the fact that the original inhabitants represent some 2000 generations, how utterly insignificant, then, becomes the difference between those of us who claim a few generations in our Australian genealogy, and those of us who were born overseas - wherever born or however recently arrived.

None of us is entitled to claim real "Australian-ness" on the basis of ancestry alone.

Each generation of immigrants - each source from which we draw our immigrants - brings enrichment and strength to our national life and culture.

In determining the relationship we have with each other and our capacity to work together as a community, birth and background are not the fundamental considerations.

And I hope the realisation of this will emerge as one of the best results of the Year of the Bicentenary.

And in that way, I deeply hope that the commemoration of the Bicentenary will be seen, in retrospect, as part of a great act of bonding between all Australians, whatever their national or racial origin.

I said before that those of my generation had lived to see a transformation of attitudes in this country.

Beyond question, the major factor behind that change has been the immigration program, instituted by the Chifley Government and followed through by all successive Australian Governments.

I have no hesitation in saying that the most important factor enabling the Australia of today to meet the new challenges of our time is the strength, flexibility and adaptability we have been able to achieve in the post-War years.

One word describes it all - the vigour of this nation.

And so much of that vigour derives from the willingness we have shown to welcome into our midst people and families from every quarter of the globe.

I believe this has been a major element in the capacity we have shown, as a nation, in the past two years, to respond to the challenges and difficulties imposed on us by events and trends overseas.

It is my firm conviction - and the guiding principle of my Government - that above all else what we Australians want for our future is a just, fair and tolerant society.

Legislation and policies are not the only way by which this will be reached.

Give and take between groups is needed to produce such a society.

And I use "give and take" as an expression of the Australian way - the fair-go.

And our history has shown clearly that "give and take" - the fair-go - is most readily attained if the economy is expected to grow and if, in turn, the fruits of that growth are seen to be shared fairly.

That is the key to Australia's future - the understanding that prosperity and equity are at once mutually dependent and mutually supporting.

That is why my Government gives equal prominence both to getting economic policy right and to promoting social justice.

As a nation - and as a Government - we have had to make hard choices.

And there are hard choices and hard decisions to come.

Because of world events, we have had to look very critically at the way ahead - what we are doing as a nation, where we are going as a nation.

We have had to begin a long and difficult process designed to shift our economy and to shift the future directions of our economy.

We have had to move to make our economy less reliant on trade in mining and agricultural commodities - which has stood us in good stead when the going was good.

That was the historic foundation of our prosperity.

In the halcyon days of the fifties and sixties, we failed to build more strongly on those foundations.

Now, we have had to make our economy more reliant on other activities, which we can do just as well, but not so easily - in the fields of processing, manufacturing, high technology, and services.

In that change of direction we have already come a long way - much further, much better than the cynics and sceptics and knockers would have predicted a mere two years ago.

It is unfortunately true, I may say, that there is a surprising amount of negativism amongst self-appointed commentators in this country.

I do trust that, in those circles, the cultural cringe is not going to be replaced by the cultural whinge.

As I go around the country, I hear stories - great stories - about the new things that are being done, about the exciting things that are happening - stories of innovation, initiative, enterprise, a new awareness of new opportunities.

There is example after example of Australian producers of manufactured goods of the most sophisticated kind, taking on and beating the best, in the world's most competitive markets.

And so often, those success stories come from Australians who have made a new start in Australia.

The great need now is to keep the process of innovation, initiative and enterprise going.

Much has been said in recent years about the new directions in which the Australian economy must head and the great opportunities which are open to us here on the edge of the fastest growing region in the world - the Pacific Rim.

I will not repeat on this occasion the analysis which has brought us to this point. But as we look ahead it is appropriate for me to re-state some points which are crucial to our ability to sustain growth through trade.

The first - and perhaps most obvious - is that Australia has a particular interest in promoting an open world trading system.

I and my Ministers have given the message of free trade, and the massive advantages to world living standards which can be derived from it, in every international forum open to us.

But we cannot expect to reap the benefits of free trade without sustained effort on our part - efforts to pursue trade promoting policies ourselves and efforts to place our industries in the best position to be able to exploit our emerging opportunities.

It is true that we have already taken massive and successful steps to improve our competitiveness, lift our exports (especially in non-traditional goods and services or markets), contain the growth of our indebtedness and promote an export culture in Australia.

The role of the union movement - the willingness of workers to create jobs through sustained wage restraint, an unprecedented attack on outmoded work and management practices, including under the auspices of the current two tier wages system, and reduced industrial disputation, has been indispensable.

So, too, has been the willingness of entrepreneurs to try new ventures, to innovate, to exercise initiative, to set new and higher standards for product quality and reliability of supply and to take risks in order to reap the rewards of trade.

But the task is far from complete - indeed given our rapidly changing world, and especially the massive changes in prospect among the giants of our region such as China and Japan - that task will never be complete.

The reality is that our prosperity will not be handed us on a platter. We will have to match and better the productivity, the product quality, the creativity and the entrepreneurial flair of the world's best across all sections of the economy, even those not directly engaged in trade.

That is a task for all of us. It is not one which we can take lightly. It is one which can be facilitated by the actions of Government but in the end must be executed by individuals.

None of the reforms introduced so far by my Government have been painless. Equally, we can predict with virtual certainty that none of the reforms which we will find it necessary to make in the months and years to come will be painless. But we know that unless the right reforms are put in place, on time, we could sentence ourselves and our children to a much diminished future prosperity.

The path we have followed for the past five years - through the deregulation of our financial system, the restructuring of significant industries, the dismantling of artificial investment barriers - points the way ahead for Australia in the 1990s and beyond.

The fact is that Australia now faces the uncertainties of the future with three major advantages.

First is a track record of having weathered a series of storms and of having found timely and correct solutions.

Second is an economy which is increasingly competitive, dynamic and export oriented - and thus more able to cope with changing world conditions.

Thirdly, and far the most important advantage, the skills, intelligence and resourcefulness of our people.

For the rest of this century the development of this most important of all our resources must be, and will be, Australia's highest priority.

So we can enter our third century with confidence.

It is a confidence based on a sober assessment of the difficulties and problems, and of our resources to meet them.

But most of all, it is a confidence based on our confidence in ourselves.

I have said that the essential ingredient in making an Australian is, simply, a commitment to Australia and its future.

There is one even higher commitment to make, and I make it again on behalf of the Australian Government and Australian people.

And that is the unremitting commitment to seeking a secure and peaceful world.

Without that, all our other efforts and achievements will, ultimately, have been in vain.

In this memorable year in our history, we stand, in the counsels of the world, higher than we have ever stood.

Our voice on the vital issues of peace is heard and respected in Washington, in Moscow, in Western Europe, in Beijing, in Tokyo and in the great region to which we belong.

Australia's voice has been at the forefront of those urging the super-powers towards meaningful negotiations leading to the agreement on intermediate nuclear arms.

The prospects for real progress in disarmament between East and West are better now than at any time in the post-war era - that is since the dawn of the nuclear age.

We must not relax now.

Rather we will intensify our efforts.

There are further developments of enormous significance, now shaping the world in which Australia will live in its third century - the momentous changes taking place in the People's Republic of China and in the Soviet Union.

Australia is well placed to play a constructive role in encouraging these developments of immense consequence - and hope - for humanity.

Ladies and gentlemen, and through you, all our fellow Australians:

We stand together on the threshold of the third century of one of the most remarkable experiments in nation-building ever attempted in the course of human history.

No beginning could have been more unpromising.

And certainly, we have many Australian achievements - huge achievements - to celebrate.

But as I have always acknowledged - at home and overseas -we Australians have mistakes to rectify, amends to make and wrongs to put right if Australia is to achieve its full promise of what it can be and should be - simply the best and fairest nation on Earth.
