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PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
PRESENTATION OF THE IRISH BICENTENNIAL GIFT
CANBERRA - 12 JULY 1988**

Taoiseach and Mrs Haughey,
Ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure on behalf of all Australians to welcome to Canberra our very good friends, Charles and Maureen Haughey.

Charles Haughey is the leader not just of a nation with which Australia has a warm and valuable relationship but also of a people, a free people, with whom Australians have the deepest ties of kinship and of history.

I have the added pleasure, since my visit to Ireland last year, of welcoming Charles Haughey as a personal friend.

That gives me the responsibility, as his host over the next couple of days, of endeavouring to repay in Australia the hospitality extended to me on that visit to Ireland. That's an awesome responsibility but one which I look forward to meeting.

At the start of your visit, Taoiseach, let me say simply that we welcome you and your wife to Australia as some of our closest friends.

I know all Australians would want you to think of Australia as your second home.

Taoiseach,

You come to Australia in its Bicentennial year. This is a time when we are recalling the more than 40,000 years during which the Aboriginal people occupied and cared for this land. And we are celebrating too, the achievements of the past two hundred years since the arrival of the First Fleet.

They have been two centuries in which the Irish people have played a prominent and distinguished part.

Just over two hundred years ago, a small party of prisoners and prison guards set off from the British Isles to establish in Australia what was planned as merely an extension of the overcrowded British prison system.

But when they arrived at Port Jackson, the First Fleet pioneers found not a prison compound, but a wide continent.

And they founded not a jail but a nation.

Two hundred years later, Australians are proud of the way that nation has grown and prospered, and are determined to protect and enhance the heritage we have received - a heritage of peace, independence, liberty, prosperity, egalitarianism.

That heritage is the result of the commitment and vision of many people from many lands.

But it is particularly appropriate that our Bicentennial should see this visit to Australia by the Irish head of Government.

For Australia owes an incalculable debt to the thousands of convicts and free settlers who came from Ireland to Australia over the last two hundred years.

For many of them, seeking an escape from famine and hardship, Australia offered work, food, land, gold.

For many others, of course, there was no choice about making the voyage to Australia. They were exiled as a punishment for criminal acts - many of which today of course appear so petty - or as a retribution for attempting to express through rebellion the stirrings of Irish nationalism.

For all of them, the passage to Australia must have been a wild venture into the unknown.

But they came in such numbers, and they carried with them in such great supply, the beauty and the passion of Irish culture, and on arrival they worked with such diligence, that before long Australia was familiar territory to the people of Ireland.

Indeed, as I said in my address to the Dail, Ireland is the most anti-imperialist of nations. But it does hold sway over a great spiritual empire, an empire won not by force of arms but by force of Irish character. And Australia is proud to be one of its principal provinces.

It is no misrepresentation to say that, from the arrival of the First Fleet, the Irish constituted Australia's first ethnic minority. As members of a rich and tolerant multicultural society, Australians acknowledge that the long struggle of the Irish for identity, acceptance and full participation on an equal footing had a dramatic effect in strengthening our sense of, and our commitment to, justice and equality of opportunity.

Taoiseach,

Given all this, it is not surprising that Ireland's contribution to the Australian bicentenary has been generous and full hearted.

The Asgard II participated in the Parade of Tall Ships. The Irish Gold and Silver exhibition is currently touring Australia. A large number of other artistic and scholarly links have been initiated.

But Australians today are receiving another Irish gift - this remarkable and valuable set of computerised records of some forty thousand people transported from Ireland to Australia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This gift will be of great historical value for the many scholars engaged in the work of understanding our past.

But its chief beneficiaries I believe will be the many Australian men and women of Irish descent who in seeking to discover their own family histories will find in this gift a resource of outstanding value.

These convict records are to be lodged here in the National Library, where they will be available for all to use. In recognition of two hundred years of Irish presence in Australia, the Library has mounted the exhibition we are about to see.

I trust you will accept my thanks, Taoiseach, on behalf of the Australian people, for the generosity of the Irish people, and the hard work of the Irish Bicentennial Committee, for this splendid gift.

Taoiseach,

The first play performed in Australia was George Farquhar's, The Recruiting Officer. For the production in 1789, a prologue was written - some say by the Irish convict George Barrington, who was transported to Australia as a pickpocket.

Whoever actually wrote the prologue had a cynical view of things. He described the convicts as "true patriots all",

... "For, be it understood,
we left our country for our country's good...
And none will doubt but that our emigration,
Has prov'd most useful to the British nation."

Perhaps it was true at the time that the process of transporting convicts to Australia was of benefit to Britain.

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But what is certainly true today, taking the long view afforded by our Bicentenary, is that the tide of advantage has turned. It is Australia that gained most from the arrival of the convicts, including most particularly, those from Ireland. Over the years Australia has continued to derive new vigour and new skills from the steady influx of new settlers from Ireland.

To correct the prologue, then, we should say the Irish left their country for Australia's good. Their emigration has proved most useful to the Australian nation.

Sir, your gift of these convict records is a fitting and lasting Bicentennial gift.

But the even larger and more enduring Bicentennial gift has already been given to us - the great contribution of the Irish people over the last two hundred years to building our nation, forging our character and enriching our future.
