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PRIME MINISTER

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH AT LAUNCH OF
THE CONVICT WORKERS
OLD MINT, SYDNEY
FRIDAY, 13 JANUARY 1989

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to be here today to launch Convict Workers. The occasion, and the historic setting of the Old Mint in which we stand, provide me with an opportunity to reflect on the Bicentennial Year, and on the sense of our history which it engendered.

The Bicentenary was not, nor was it ever intended to be, merely a birthday party. Re-enactments of historical events served to direct attention to our past. So too did the publication of hundreds of new history books stimulated by the Bicentenary.

As a young nation, concerned with our place in the world, we need to examine our national identity, and to search out our roots - not out of an antiquarian interest in the past but as a means of discovering our present and assessing our future. The Bicentenary helped us to understand our origins, to think honestly about our strengths and our weaknesses as a nation, and to plan for the challenges ahead.

It is a matter of record, and regret, that not all Australians took that opportunity. For reasons of political convenience rather than conviction, some sought to replace a sense of history with a misplaced sense of nostalgia, through the deceptive slogan, "One Australia"; pride in our developing national identity was supplanted by a crude and divisive nationalism, which hurt thousands of Australians and left many of the wondering whether they were truly at home in this country; and a simplistic view of an avowedly conformist past provided a bleak vision of our "future directions".

Fortunately, most Australians used the time productively. 1988 saw a nation-wide 'historic records search' designed to locate those records of our past which remain in private hands, treasured as heirlooms by the families that created them. A wealth of written material was uncovered: diaries and letters and account books which will help us to re-write

our history. The project symbolized the fact that our development as a nation is based on the lives of ordinary Australians going about their everyday business. Our past has been made, as will our future, by those who until now have rarely featured in our history textbooks - by those who reap our harvests, dig our ores, build our manufactured goods, provide our services, bring up our families.

The lives of so-called ordinary Australians are enormously complex and varied, as are their backgrounds. Some trace their roots, with increasing pride, to the rich diversity of Aboriginal cultures which existed on this continent for at least 40,000 years before the convict workers arrived. In a splendid twist of irony, the Bicentenary has succeeded in making Australians more aware that our history did not begin in 1788.

Other Australians, with equal enthusiuasm, trace their heritage to those who were transported to these shores or who come as free settlers seven or eight generations ago.

But now, as throughout our history, a large proportion of Australians are immigrants. The institutional structure which today characterises Australia - parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech - were ideas transplanted in a new world by wave after wave of British and Irish settlers. Increasingly that structure - and the ideas of fairness, equity and tolerance which it nourished - has provided a home for settlers from continental Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Out of that creative interplay of diverse cultures in a new nation has evolved an exciting, vibrant and innovative society - a multicultural society presented so convincingly in Jim Jupp's Encyclopaedia of the Australian People, another important Bicentennial project to which a number of the authors here today contributed.

But rich and significant as are the day-to-day lives of Australians, too often they are made inarticulate by history. I am often frustrated by the fact that my every word and deed is liable to interpretation - and dare I say misinterpretation - by media commentators, and my actions - significant or trivial - preserved for posterity. Yet it is equally frustrating that the Australians whom I meet, whose concerns are of such consequence to the making of political decisions, and whose interests gave rise to the great party which I am now so proud to lead - that those same Australians are too often absent from our history.

The difficulty is that interpretation is to a large extent shaped by the written records at hand, in which the voices of Australian workers are often heard only at second hand. Thankfully convicts did leave records - criminal records. And the book which I launch today, through application of a computer technology unimaginable a generation ago, uses those records to paint a portrait of our first European workers which bears little resemblance to the stereotype of Fagin that is usually encountered in our history.

Convict Workers forces us to re-assess the foundations of those values which we recognise as distinctively Australian. In a mere two hundred years we have developed from a British open prison to an independent nation enmeshed in the economies of Asia and the Pacific Rim. And that remarkable development has coloured the way in which we have viewed our past.

In 1888 convictism was still viewed as a stain on our history, a deep embarrassment to an affluent society in which workers were building one of the world's first Labor parties. After all, only twenty years before had the last fleet of convicts been landed in West Australia.

By 1938, the transported criminals had been retrospectively pardoned. Australian schoolchildren were taught that those who were really guilty remained back in Britain: the convicts were victims, pushed into poaching or theft by poverty, and often sent to Australia for their political persuasions.

In my generation a new historical vision emerged, expounded most brilliantly by Manning Clark. I was taught that we had to be more honest about our past - and that honesty meant coming to terms with our unsavoury beginnings, and recognising that those transported were unskilled hardened criminals.

But, as Manning Clark himself emphasized recently, each generation has the task of re-interpreting its history, of viewing the past from a new present. Convict Workers is just such a radical challenge to prevailing orthodoxy.

It is perhaps not surprising that during a period in which our immigration policy has become such a matter of debate that Convict Workers examines transported criminals as migrants. Nor is it surprising that our contemporary concern with improving education and training opportunities for Australian workers finds expression in a book which assesses our convict forbears, both women and men, in terms of their human capital - not just as thieves but as youthful workers possessing remarkably high levels of literacy, work skill and physical fitness; not just prisoners undergoing punishment but as a well-organised, efficient labour force.

I doubt that the controversial findings of this book will be accepted readily. Nor should they be. What the book does achieve is a sophisticated re-examination of our beginning as a convict society, and the impact of that experience on our values today. It makes us look more critically at conventional wisdom. Here we discover not just 20,000 thieves and villains, but 20,000 workers - cooks and carpenters, plasterers and ploughmen, soldiers and sailors, gardeners and governesses, and even, I note with some enthusiasm, a cricket-ball stitcher. Many, perhaps most, of those transported for criminal offences not only had manual skills of value to building a new colony but also had ideas as to the sort of society that they wanted to create when they regained their status as free workers.

There can be no doubt that many of the conclusions of this book - that convict diet was nutritionally high, that working conditions were good, that the lash was used in moderation - will arouse considerable controversy. But more fundamentally this book, by presenting transported convicts as migrants and workers, allows Australia's history as a penal settlement to become an integral part of the economic history of an immigrant society, rather than being treated as an unsavoury aberration that preceded free settlement. On that score alone the book is to be welcomed.

To Steve Nicholas, the Editor of Convict Workers; and to his fellow authors Kris Corcoran, Barrie Dyster, David Meredith, Debbie Oxley, John Perkins and of course to Peter Shergold who is doing an outstanding job as Head of the Office of Multicultural Affairs in my Department; I offer my congratulations for a stimulating reinterpretation of our past. I am delighted that Cambridge University press are now publishing in Australia, and have chosen this book as the first in a series of studies in Australian history. If later volumes are as provocative as this the press will have contributed to a significant re-evaluation of our past by the time that we celebrate our next important anniversary - our centenary as a nation - in 2001.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to launch Convict Workers.

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