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PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
WORLD CONFERENCE ON RELIGION AND PEACE
MELBOURNE - 22 JANUARY 1989

Your Excellency,
Your Eminence,
Your Grace,
Honourable Presidents of the WCRP,
Respected visitors and fellow Australians.

On behalf of the Australian Government and people may I extend a very warm welcome to participants in the Fifth Assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace.

Australia is honoured that you have chosen Melbourne as the site for your Conference, particularly as, after previous Assemblies in Kyoto, Leuven, Princeton and Nairobi, this is your first Assembly in the South East Asian and South Pacific regions.

I have no hesitation in asserting that you will find in this city and this country an atmosphere which is most conducive to discussion of the difficult but vital issues summed up in your theme for this meeting - "Building Peace Through Trust - The Role of Religion".

I say that with pride because there can be few countries that display a greater commitment to peace and tolerance, at both the official level and in the daily lives of its citizens, and both in international and domestic affairs, than does Australia.

A formal demonstration of this fact was evident in the unique religious service which was held as part of the opening of Australia's new Parliament House in Canberra last year.

It was a moving and important affirmation of the multicultural nature of our society that, in one of the most significant ceremonies of our Bicentenary Year, senior representatives of Christian denominations, along with leaders of the Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist and other faiths, and with representatives of Aboriginal Australians joined together to bless the new House and its proceedings.

Official ceremonies such as this are important in that they are a reflection of the realities of our society. And indeed Australia today is a multicultural and tolerant society in which people of many faiths and ethnic backgrounds live and work together in harmony.

Four out of ten Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas - half of them from non-English speaking backgrounds. Our population is drawn from over 130 nationalities and cultures. Almost all the major world faiths are established and practised in Australia, complementing the profound spiritual traditions of our country's original inhabitants.

Churches and temples, synagogues and mosques, worshipping places and sacred sites play a significant part in the daily lives of many Australians.

More broadly, Australians have shown themselves remarkably successful at building a society which is capable of finding peaceful means to deal with potential conflicts. Differences of opinion are of course - as they should be - firmly entrenched and vigorously expressed - not least in politics. Cultural diversity is proudly maintained and articulated.

But we have been much better at resolving those differences through peaceful and constructive means than we are at building barricades and shedding blood.

I do not pretend that dark and divisive forces and under-currents do not exist in Australia, as they do in all countries. But I take pride in the capacity of Australians in daily life to find the common ground, the mutual interest, and to build on those shared values, rather than perpetuating differences in a way that advantages no-one and disadvantages everyone. In that way we are giving daily meaning to those traditional and justly famous impulses of the Australian character towards egalitarianism and a fair go.

This capacity is as apparent in our international relationships as it is in our domestic arrangements. We have not been afraid to fight in defence of freedom. But we are proud too of our record of contributing to the negotiations of the great international councils, our role in keeping the peace in trouble spots around the world, our efforts to achieve disarmament.

Over the last twenty years your members have also carried out valuable work in pursuit of world peace and in the protection of human dignity. Your mission is all the more impressive because it has brought together representatives of the world's major religions, united in these common causes of crucial importance to the improvement of human existence and, ultimately, to the survival of life on this planet.

So as Prime Minister I am grateful for your invitation to open this Conference. It provides an opportunity to welcome you to Australia as individuals and representatives of groups that are deeply concerned about important issues facing mankind; it allows me to offer the perspective of the Australian Government on some of those issues and to compare our views with yours; and it provides the opportunity perhaps to suggest ways in which we can do more to achieve the goals we share.

The first thing that has to be noted before such an audience is that, since the last meeting of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, held in Nairobi in 1984, there has been a considerable improvement in the international environment in which we operate.

No one should pretend that all of the rivalries and tensions that have characterised the international political and economic systems since the conclusion of the Second World War have been resolved.

Nevertheless, there are grounds for viewing the current world outlook with some optimism.

In many dimensions, peace is being built through trust.

Between the superpowers, we have seen the gradual emergence of a constructive relationship which has led, for the first time, to negotiation of an arms control treaty which eliminates an entire class of nuclear weapons.

Within the Soviet Union itself, we have seen with President Gorbachev's programs of perestroika and glasnost a long overdue and still incomplete, but nevertheless very encouraging, movement away from the repression and inflexibility that for too long characterised the Soviet system.

Noteworthy improvements in human rights, including the fundamental right to profess and practise religious faiths, are in train. We acknowledge what is being done to improve the lot of Soviet Jews and Christians. We look to further progress.

Of course much remains to be done by the Soviet Union and its allies, and their current levels of performance are variable. We in Australia, as I have said on a number of occasions, will judge the Soviet Union by its deeds, not words. The same applies to the East European allies of the USSR.

Yet these developments are starting to bear fruit in a number of areas. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan is coming to an end. The Gulf War is over. The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia may be drawing to a close.

With all this, we now look to resolution of that most intractable of regional disputes, the Arab-Israeli dispute in the Middle East.

The super-power relationship provides a favourable international background.

Important regional participants, particularly Egypt and Jordan, are demonstrating flexibility and good will.

The recent statements by the Chairman of the PLO are major steps in the right direction.

We hope that the new Government of Israel will respond positively to the improving environment.

All of us here, I am sure, want to see the day when Israel and its neighbours can live in peace and constructive harmony, and when the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territories achieve the self-determination and human rights which are legitimately theirs.

In all this, Australia has sought to play an active and constructive role. We do not pretend, as a middle-ranking nation, that we have a decisive influence on dangerous and complex global issues such as these.

But because the goals of world peace, arms control, human rights and social justice are of fundamental importance we do have a responsibility to act to the limit of our capacities. This we proudly claim to have done.

We have been actively involved in making an effective contribution to the cessation of the nuclear arms race and to the reduction in the size of the nuclear arsenals.

We have actively supported initiatives to end all forms of testing of nuclear weapons; to ban chemical weapons; to prevent an arms race in outer space; and to encourage restraint in the international arms trade. We gave high priority to observing the International Year of Peace in 1986 - and in this we were joined by many Australian churches - and we are still seeing the fruits of those labours.

I quote with pride the words of the Secretary General of the United Nations Conference on Disarmament, Mr Komatina, who told me in Geneva in 1987 that the cause of international peace and disarmament would be further advanced if other nations had shown the same political commitment and technical expertise as Australia.

The Australian Government has also attached high priority to the protection and promotion of human rights. Human rights know no boundaries; we regularly raise our concerns about human rights abuses with a wide range of countries, including our regional neighbours and close allies as well as countries further afield.

The standards we espouse are established by international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We actively participate in the monitoring of existing human rights standards, and their future extension, by international agencies such as the United Nations. In calling on all countries and governments to observe these internationally-accepted standards, I know I speak with your full support. The role of churches throughout the world in advancing the cause of human rights, often in situations where churches and church people themselves face repression, has been an inspiring and constructive contribution to individual freedoms.

I want to take this opportunity to welcome the recently concluded East-West agreement covering human rights negotiated in Vienna. This positive development is a sign of the importance of Human Rights in international affairs today, and of the growing improvement in relations between the world's two major ideological camps.

Maintaining an active human rights policy is not an easy course for any government. There are dangers of seeming to interfere in the internal politics of other nations, or of giving offence to those with whom we wish to maintain friendly relations. But our end objective is to help individuals suffering from abuse, and I believe that Australian involvement in human rights issues does have this effect.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Within this broadly optimistic overview, there are of course a number of persistent and intractable problems which will continue to engage our attention in the years ahead. Let me deal with one of the most important ones today: the tragedy of South Africa.

I want to express a special welcome to the large representation at this Conference from Southern Africa and the attendance by such strong exponents of justice in that region as Archbishop Trevor Huddleston.

The Australian Government stands proudly at the forefront of nations opposed to the abhorrent regime of apartheid, which continues to impose fundamentally unjust measures on the majority of South Africa's people on the untenable basis of race. The continuing political polarisation in South Africa, and the repression and violence that result from it, are both morally unacceptable and, ultimately, can only work to the disadvantage of all South Africans, white and black.

Successive Australian Governments have condemned the policies of apartheid and called for the initiation of a genuine process of negotiation between authentic representatives of South Africa's people and the establishment of a non-racist democratic system.

In this, we recognise the vital role played by the South African churches. Names such as Desmond Tutu and Alan Boesak have become synonymous with courageous and principled moral leadership in the face of threats and repression.

In the absence of the South African authorities coming to the negotiating table, the Australian Government believes that comprehensive mandatory economic sanctions are necessary. Australia has been urging South Africa's major trading partners to adopt such a policy since the effectiveness of sanctions depends very much on their widest possible adoption.

In the meantime, Australia has put into effect the full range of sanctions adopted by Commonwealth countries and, through the Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on Southern Africa, is examining ways to widen, tighten and intensify economic and other pressures on South Africa.

We also decided last year to increase substantially our program of assistance to Southern Africa to a total of \$A100 million over the three year period 1987-90.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It would not be appropriate if I limited my comments in this address to the international scene. As host country to this Conference, Australia can expect to come under scrutiny for the way we manage our domestic affairs. I have already said that you will find a positive atmosphere in this country for your discussions. I want to pay tribute to the positive role the Australian churches have played in creating that atmosphere.

In countless thousands of ways the churches of Australia are working to create a fairer and a better society.

From the earliest colonial times churches have played an important part in the development of Australian society. Their early involvement in teaching laid the foundations for our dual education system.

Today, with their hospitals and nursing homes, their services for the homeless and disabled, their charitable work on behalf of those who cannot help themselves, Australia's churches are proving through their actions the depth of their commitment to social justice.

My Government proudly acknowledges that service and commitment as an essential adjunct to its own programs, and to those of the Australian States.

This is a very appropriate occasion too, to place on record my thanks to those Australian churches which suggested and developed last year's important Parliamentary initiative on behalf of Australia's Aboriginal and Islander population.

At the start of our Bicentennial year, just over twelve months ago, the Heads of the Australian Churches issued a statement entitled "Towards Reconciliation in Australian Society". This excellent initiative led directly to the first action of the Australian Parliament in our new building - the passing of a resolution acknowledging the prior occupation of Australia by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and their subsequent dispossession and dispersal, and expressing the determination of the Parliament and of the Government to promote reconciliation with those people.

Finally, and of great importance, I want to recognise the vital role of the Australian churches in promoting the values of racial equality and tolerance in Australia.

In a Statement to the Nation in August 1988, the Uniting Church in Australia affirmed:

"... We rejoice in the vision of a multicultural society where ... peoples may live together in unity and diversity, maintaining different cultural traditions, yet forging a common destiny based on commitment to the ideals of equality of opportunity, tolerance, justice and compassion."

Those words would find endorsement in the hearts of all Australians of good will.

There are, regrettably, racist elements in our community who have tried to poison the atmosphere of our community life; some churches and individuals have at times been victims of these unacceptable and ugly extremists.

However the articulate moral leadership provided by the churches has been an important factor in encouraging the maintenance and growth of cultural tolerance throughout the community.

Australians are simply not prepared, as a community, to adopt or endorse racist practices and procedures in any area of our public life. The churches can take special credit for the endurance of this fact.

So in this international forum I want to pay special tribute to the outstanding and forthright defence, by the Australian churches, of the values of tolerance during the recent debate on immigration and multiculturalism.

My friends,

There are many great challenges that still lie before us.

In too many parts of the world, too many people still live under appalling conditions of poverty and hunger.

Too many innocent civilians suffer in too many senseless regional conflicts.

And, despite recent progress in arms control and notwithstanding the promise of further reductions in the arsenals of nuclear weapons, we still face the awesome prospect that all our achievements, and all the achievements of those before us, may be obliterated in nuclear armageddon.

To some, these challenges seem insuperably complex.

But that must not be our response.

We must not succumb to the paralysis of despair; we must not shed our obligation to ourselves and to future generations because progress towards building a saner and a safer world seems unattainable, or glacially slow.

Progress will be slow. But we must learn never to abandon the gradual, hard, grinding task of constructive negotiation, positive collaboration, peaceful growth.

Today I have spoken a great deal about what this Government has done, and about what you and your constituent members have done, to build peace through trust.

Let me now declare this Conference open by expressing the hope that where, in the future, you feel political leaders can and should do more, you will not fail in your obligation to make your views known.

Equally, it is my hope that where we see eye to eye we will be able to continue working towards those precious goals that we share.
