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PARLIAMENTARY STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
ON HIS OVERSEAS VISIT TO EUROPE,  
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
AND THE SOUTH PACIFIC FORUM  
17 AUGUST 1989

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Madam Speaker

I seek leave to report to Parliament on the two overseas visits I undertook during the Parliamentary recess: to France, the United Kingdom, the United States, the Federal Republic of Germany and Hungary between 16 June and 3 July; and to the South Pacific Forum in Kiribati, between 9 and 12 July.

Both missions advanced Australia's interests and re-attested Australia's high international standing.

The visit to the United States enabled me to renew a warm personal association with President Bush and to consolidate Australia's close contacts with the new Administration.

My visit to Britain and West Germany re-affirmed our strong and significant association with both countries; and, in the case of Britain, furthered the common endeavour to place the historic and traditional relationship between our two countries firmly in the context of modern realities.

My visit to France confirmed the transformation which has occurred in French-Australian relations since the change of Government in France last year. I should mention here, Madam Speaker, that the Prime Minister of France, Mr Rocard, will be our honoured guest in Canberra tomorrow.

The visit to Hungary - the first by an Australian Prime Minister - took place at a time of profoundly significant change in that country and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

Throughout this mission, the focus was placed on the advancement of Australia's commercial and economic interests. The reasons for this, Madam Speaker, are plain. The United States, Britain, France and West Germany are all among Australia's 12 largest trading partners. Together they account for around 30 per cent of Australia's total two-way trade and nearly 50 per cent of the total stock of foreign investment in Australia. Most importantly, the visit took place at a time when the whole world trade community is coming to grips with the implications of Europe 1992 - the creation of a single market in Western Europe.

It was within this framework that I addressed major business and official gatherings in each of the countries I visited. It was for these reasons I was joined in Paris, Bonn and Budapest by a delegation of senior Australian business executives. In London, more than 100 representatives of Australian business attended the Trade and Investment Conference which met under the auspices of the British and Australian Governments. At all these meetings they were able to observe at first hand the dimensions of change taking place in Europe, with all the challenges and opportunities it offers Australian industry. I pay tribute to the contribution which the Australian business representatives made to the success of my visit.

In Paris, London and Bonn I reiterated publicly and privately Australia's concern about the Common Agricultural Policy and protectionist practices covering other commodities, such as coal.

In all these capitals I made it clear that, despite our concerns on specific matters, Australia wholeheartedly welcomed the growing unity of Europe, as a force for peace and progress in the world. Prime Minister Rocard, Prime Minister Thatcher and Chancellor Kohl each stressed their government's commitment to making the single market a free and fair market place for all. Australia values these assurances.

And, Madam Speaker, I assure the House that Australia will be following developments very carefully, and staying in very close communication with EC member Governments and the European Commission, as we approach 1992 and beyond.

In Washington, I re-affirmed Australia's strong desire that the United States should continue to play a leading role in achieving a successful outcome to the Uruguay Round, especially in respect of agricultural trade. While accepting that the American Export Enhancement Program was not intended to harm non-subsidised agricultural exporters like Australia, I stressed that Australia had nevertheless found itself in the crossfire of an escalating subsidy war and that our grain exports, in particular, had been adversely affected as a consequence. I am pleased to report, Madam Speaker, that the United States Administration agreed to examine my suggestion to seek a linkage between the provisions of the 1990 Farm Bill and the outcome of the Uruguay Round. Such a linkage would help achieve our declared common objective of a more open international trading system.

In Washington, I was also able to have useful discussions about Australia's regional economic initiative. As honourable members will know, the United States Administration endorsed this initiative. Specifically, Secretary of State Baker endorsed my proposal for greater regional economic consultation and co-operation as 'an idea whose time has come'. The United States will be represented at the ministerial-level conference in Australia, planned for November.

My discussions at all levels underlined the fundamental and far-reaching changes underway in East-West relations. Nowhere was this more evident than in Hungary. The great significance of the changes in Hungary is that they are being shaped by the Hungarian leadership, in response to the clear wishes of the Hungarian people. This difficult, complex and, may I say, Madam Speaker, courageous course is based upon the recognition of the inescapable link between economic reform and political reform. President Bush, who was in Hungary two weeks after my own visit, stated publicly that he shared my view, as I had put it at the White House, that "the West must do everything we can to encourage the positive developments in Hungary".

To give practical substance to our hopes, Australia has agreed to negotiate a Double Taxation Agreement with Hungary, to explore the possibility of an investment protection agreement and to seek ways of providing access for Hungary under the Australian System of Tariff Preferences.

Madam Speaker

On peace and disarmament questions, I can report that each of the countries I visited welcomed Australia's initiative in holding a Government-Industry conference on chemical weapons, to be held in Canberra next month. This conference will provide a unique opportunity to develop strategies for a comprehensive Chemical Weapons Convention to prevent the spread of this hideous scourge.

Madam Speaker

Over the range of issues I discussed in each capital - Southern Africa, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Indo-China and the Pacific - the tragic events in China and Lebanon loomed especially large. President Bush, Chancellor Kohl, President Mitterrand and Prime Ministers Thatcher and Rocard all shared the Australian Government's feeling of obligation to express, as they have all done forcefully, condemnation of the brutal suppression of human rights which has occurred in China. Like myself, these Western leaders will be watching closely the fate of all those prominent in the pro-democracy movement; and also other Chinese leaders, particularly Secretary-General Zhao.

All the leaders with whom I spoke are concerned about the continuing tragedy in Lebanon. This is a matter of special concern to Australia because of its impact on our Lebanese community. As I said in the Parliament on 15 August, Australia firmly and unequivocally supports the Arab League initiative aimed at bringing the main protagonists to the negotiating table. We stand ready to support any United Nations initiative on Lebanon and I am in continuing communication with President Bush and President Gorbachev on this tragedy.

We applaud current French diplomatic efforts on Lebanon and I look forward to detailed discussions on the situation there with Michel Rocard tomorrow.

Madam Speaker

Consistent with my Government's strong policy for the protection of the environment, it was appropriate for me on this journey to seek support for Australia's initiative for a comprehensive Environmental Protection Agreement covering the Antarctic, the world's last and greatest wilderness. This I did. I found ready support in Paris and a sympathetic understanding of Australia's position in both Bonn and Budapest. I regret to state that neither Britain nor the United States is yet ready to support the position on which I believe honourable members of this House stand together. But I am confident that growing community awareness and concern world-wide, will ensure that governments everywhere become more responsive to the need to address this question, and ultimately come together in a common resolve to protect this precious part of our endangered planet.

In Paris, Prime Minister Rocard and I agreed to the formation of a Working Group to pursue environmental matters of common concern. The Working Group had its first meeting in Paris last week and I fully expect that Prime Minister Rocard and I will be able to announce further steps after our talks tomorrow.

Madam Speaker

I should now report to the House on the twentieth meeting of the South Pacific Forum which I attended at Tarawa, in the Republic of Kiribati, on 10 and 11 July. The Forum coincided with the Kiribati's celebration of its tenth anniversary of independence and I was honoured to represent Australia at this special anniversary.

Two matters of fundamental importance dominated the Forum - the serious threat posed by drift net fishing in the Southern Pacific Ocean; and the implications for these island nations of the "greenhouse effect".

It is no exaggeration to say, Madam Speaker, that for some of our neighbours and partners in the South Pacific these two issues represent, almost literally, matters of life and death.

I now table the Communique adopted by the Forum and the Tarawa Declaration on Pelagic Drift Net Fishing.

Madam Speaker

The Tarawa Declaration set out the member nations' profound concern at the damage being done to the economy and the environment of the South Pacific region by this indiscriminate, irresponsible and destructive fishing technique.

Pelagic drift nets vary in length between 30 and 60 kilometres - I repeat 30 and 60 kilometres - and reach a depth of some 15 metres. They have aptly been described as "walls of death". The threat they pose to Southern Pacific fish stocks and other marine species has been compounded by massive increases in the number of fishing vessels from Japan and Taiwan using drift nets. The scientific evidence available to us at the Forum indicates that the present indiscriminate use of drift nets threatens the very existence of the Southern Pacific tuna fishery, and therefore, the very livelihood of the people who depend so deeply upon its existence.

The Tarawa Declaration seeks to ban pelagic drift net fishing from the region and calls for a meeting of regional experts to develop a convention to achieve this objective. This meeting will be hosted by New Zealand. The conclusion of a convention of this nature raises complex legal and related issues. To be effective on the high seas, it will require the support, or at least concurrence, of the major fishing nations. The gravity of the threat requires urgent action; and Australia readily accepts its responsibility to take a lead in advancing this important objective of the Forum. It was with that responsibility in mind that I had already raised this matter in the United States and Europe, as part of Australia's efforts eventually to secure a world-wide ban on this fishing technique.

At the Tarawa Forum, members also expressed concern about the possible effects on island countries of rising sea levels resulting from global warming - the "greenhouse effect". Forum members welcomed my re-affirmation of Australia's decision to fund a project to establish a network of regional monitoring stations. The information these stations will provide on trends and fluctuations in climate and sea levels will provide an accurate data base on climatic change within the region. This project will require a long-term commitment on our part, if it is to produce worthwhile data; and I was pleased to be able to offer such a commitment to Forum members.

Other issues addressed at the 1989 Forum included the situation in New Caledonia, and administrative and program issues arising in the Forum Secretariat and regional bodies associated with the Forum. The Forum welcomed the positive measures being pursued by the French Government in New Caledonia to promote political, economic and social development in the territory, and urged all parties to continue to work towards the successful implementation of the agreements concluded in Paris in June and August 1988.

Madam Speaker

It is particularly pleasing to note that, even with the growth in Forum membership and the growing complexity of its affairs over the past 20 years, we still meet - in the words of the 1971 Communique - "as neighbours and partners" with great informality and a great degree of consensus. I am confident the South Pacific Forum will acquire further standing and authority as the pre-eminent regional organisation in the years ahead. And I am equally confident the Forum will enhance its special - indeed its unique - character and significance as a gathering of neighbours and partners in the South Pacific. The new arrangement for a post-Forum dialogue between Forum members and important outside countries with interests in the region - Canada, France, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States - which was initiated in Kiribati, will strengthen this development.

Let me conclude, Madam Speaker, by saying that far beyond the South Pacific, and far beyond our own great region, Australia's reputation as a good neighbour and a world partner in the cause of peace, progress and freedom has never stood higher. I am convinced that this cause - despite all the tragedies, perplexities and complexities besetting our age, can now enter a more hopeful period than any we have experienced since the Second World War. These visits which I have been privileged to undertake on behalf of the Australian people have re-inforced that fundamental conviction.

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