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## PRIME MINISTER

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### STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER ANTARCTIC POLICY

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In August last year, together with the Prime Minister of France, I launched an initiative within the Antarctic Treaty System to promote the protection of the Antarctic environment. We proposed that Australia and France work together to ban mining and to achieve a Comprehensive Environment Protection Convention which would preserve forever Antarctica as a nature reserve and a land of science.

The thirty-eight nations of the Antarctic Treaty System are currently negotiating in Vina del Mar, Chile, on the future of Antarctica at a Special Consultative Meeting of Antarctic Treaty Parties. We cannot expect that all our objectives will be met at this one meeting. But the mere fact that Treaty Parties have embraced the need for a meeting devoted to environmental matters is a mark of progress.

The decision my Government took in May last year not to sign the Convention for the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resources Activities was a bold one. Not only was it made in the face of almost total opposition from other nations of the Antarctic Treaty System, it also presented us with a challenge to develop an acceptable alternative for the long-term environmental management of the Antarctic region.

We made this difficult decision because, at the end of the day, we identified a fundamental flaw in the Minerals Convention - the fallacy that 'safe mining' was an option in the Antarctic.

In fact, the Minerals Convention provided an incentive to mine, and to that we responded with a resounding "no" - the risks to the Antarctic environment are too great and too unpredictable. In short, the Minerals Convention was based on an illusion - the illusion of human infallibility in a region which hosts the most delicate and fragile ecosystems in the world.

In place of this illusion, our aim is to make a reality of plans for an internationally binding agreement to protect the fragile continent against the threat of mining forever.

And it is already becoming clear that we have greater reason for confidence than ever before that our efforts will succeed.

Those who continue to hold to the hope that some form of exploitative minerals regime will be established are now a fast dwindling minority.

The concept that mining will be prohibited, at least for the foreseeable future, now has common currency amongst Treaty Antarctic Parties. Support for a permanent ban is growing.

But this is only half of our achievement so far. Together with the idea of a mining ban, Australia recognised that a comprehensive regime for environmental protection was also needed. When Australian and French negotiators put this proposal to Antarctic Treaty Parties in October last year, it was met with steely opposition. Now, as Antarctic Treaty Parties meet again, the need for a new international agreement to deal with Antarctica's environment has near universal acceptance.

Not only do we have agreement to the Australia-France proposal from Belgium and Italy, others such as Sweden, India, Poland, Finland, Denmark, the EC, Greece, Romania and New Zealand have adopted positions very close to our own. Indeed, even among those countries which we expected would provide the staunchest opposition to our position such as the United States and the Soviet Union, there is now ready agreement with many of our views.

The United States administration has declared its support for a new environmental instrument, and legislation prohibiting mining in Antarctica by U.S. citizens has now passed through Congress, and become law in the United States. In the Soviet Union, President Gorbachev has given support to the protection of the Antarctic as a wilderness preserve.

This support reflects the impact that our ideas are having in other countries, and the level of support which the preservation of Antarctica has within these other communities. The world wide environment movement - not least the WWF - has played a large part in this success, and I pay tribute here to their substantial role.

That does not mean, however, that securing agreements which fully satisfy our aspirations will be easily or readily achieved.

As I said at the outset, when Prime Minister Rocard and I launched our joint initiative we did so in the full realisation that we had a considerable task ahead.

The speed with which we have been able to achieve this significant turn-round of world opinion is a testimony not only to the priority which we have accorded our goal, but the absolute correctness of our views, and the growing international sympathy for an environmentally sound future.

Nevertheless, in spite of the inherent good sense of our proposals, some continue to have misconceptions about elements of our position. Some have asserted that our initiative may undermine the special role science has in the Antarctic region.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Antarctic is a global scientific laboratory. Its near pristine condition provides a baseline against which we can measure environmental effects on other continents, including our own.

Our proposal to make Antarctica a 'nature reserve - land of science' encapsulates the symbiotic relationship between science and environmental protection that we envisage for the continent. The draft convention that we and France have proposed places science in a pre-eminent position over all other activities in Antarctica.

Because of Antarctica's vulnerability, its importance to science in a pristine condition, and its wilderness qualities, few now question the need for careful environmental management. The challenge that we face today is to develop, within the existing Treaty System, a new and comprehensive regime to manage human activity in the region.

Some have mistakenly painted this ambition to find a new approach as a challenge to the Treaty System itself. Let me re-affirm that our intention and our expectation for the initiative are that it will strengthen and enhance the Treaty System.

The record of the Treaty is a proud one.

Since the time when the continent challenged men like Amundsen, Scott, Shackleton and our own Sir Douglas Mawson to discover its secrets, Antarctica demanded an unrivalled level of international cooperation. This has become the hallmark of the continent, and the special international regime which has evolved to manage activity there.

Emerging as it did in an era of cold-war hostilities, and covering a wide spectrum of interests including developed and developing countries, aligned and non-aligned, North and South alike, the Treaty System has provided a firm foundation for the coordination of scientific and other activities on the continent, and the framework for stability and peace in the region. With its assurances of peaceful activity in the Antarctic and freedom of scientific research, the Treaty is an agreement in which Australia has much at stake.

It is with this in mind that I wish to make absolutely clear that the maintenance of the Treaty System is an essential element in the proposal that Australia and France are pursuing.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that the Antarctic Treaty was developed in an era vastly different from our own. Many of the environmental problems that we now face were simply unheard of in the 1950s. The Treaty itself makes no reference to environmental protection or to the challenges that mineral resource exploitation of the region would bring. Our aim, therefore, is to improve the Treaty System by adding comprehensive environmental protection to its already impressive list of achievements.

There are encouraging signs of a growing understanding of the need to protect Antarctica.

What we aim to achieve at this first meeting in Chile is agreement to a process of negotiation, a process which will lead to agreement on rules which will protect Antarctica forever, an agreement in solemn, legal form governing all activity in Antarctica by all nations and all their citizens.

We do not pretend that this process will be uncomplicated. We will naturally need to take into consideration the views of others. But I want to make absolutely clear at the outset that our basic aims for the protection of this special environment will not be compromised.

These aims embrace the following fundamental pillars:

First, no package for protection of Antarctica's environment would be acceptable which does not include a prohibition on mining - a prohibition which is effective, which is comprehensive, and which ensures that mining will never occur. The logical corollary of this requirement is that the Minerals Convention cannot be part of the outcome. It is simply illogical and unrealistic to try to outlaw mining in a mining treaty.

Second, any new arrangements for the protection of the Antarctic must be comprehensive. The uniqueness of Antarctica and its importance to the global environment make fragmented and informal approaches to environmental management inadequate. Any agreement must ensure the protection of the environment against the whole range of activities which may threaten it. A piecemeal approach, taking in only selected threats to the environment is not enough. Nor can we accept any approach which would provide a nebulous framework, but leave the essential measures for environmental protection for later agreement. Any agreement must provide protection immediately on its entry into force, and across the gamut of foreseeable activity.

The protection we seek must be rigorous. We must be certain that it will allow no activity which would in any way jeopardise the fragile ecosystems of the continent. The standards adopted must afford Antarctica the highest levels of protection.

Finally, for these measures to take effect, we need organisational arrangements that will work effectively and efficiently. Measures must be legally binding, they must enshrine the principle of prior impact assessment, and there must be a capacity to modify and, if necessary, halt harmful activity. Where an accident occurs, there must be provision for emergency response and effective remedial action, and liability for damage to the environment. A permanent institution, or some means by which ongoing monitoring of Antarctic activity is ensured, is also a necessity.

By taking these steps, the Treaty System will demonstrate its ability to adapt to the challenges that environmental problems bring, and will promote its credibility in the effective management of activity in Antarctica. If and only if it can meet the challenges that environmental awareness brings with it, the Treaty System will demonstrate its continued relevance and ensure its survival into the twenty-first century.

A great strength of the Treaty System is its consensus approach to issues. Australia does not seek to change this. At the same time all of us should be concerned if calls for consensus are used as a smokescreen to avoid an open-minded examination of issues and to disguise an unwillingness to take account of major changes in community and international concern.

We trust that, with goodwill on all sides, the next steps toward our goal will be achieved without drawn-out argument, and that the Chile meeting will be a success. I want to make clear, however, that we will not be prepared to sacrifice principle for the sake of a short term solution. We are not afraid of finding ourselves again in the minority, if others fail to see the need for progress.

Central to this effort to pursue the Australia/France initiative over the coming months is the need to generate informed debate about our proposal and to promote a wider understanding of the importance of the Antarctic region and its preservation.

It is with these objectives in mind that I wish to outline today details of the establishment of a new Antarctic Foundation to be based in Hobart. I announced the proposal in February, and \$1 million was allocated in this year's budget for this purpose.

It has long been recognised that Hobart is a world-renowned centre of Antarctic expertise. The Foundation will enhance this role, and complement the activities pursued there by the Antarctic Division, the Secretariat of the Convention

for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, the Institute of Antarctic and Southern Ocean Studies at the University of Tasmania, and the Fisheries and Oceanography Division of the CSIRO.

The Foundation will underline Australia's deep commitment to Antarctica, and will promote the importance of the Antarctic environment. It will underscore the special relationship we have with Antarctica, forged by the ties of history and proximity, and cement the already strong affinity that Australians feel for the continent. It will ensure that Australia's interests in the continent receive specific funding and conspicuous attention. Further, it will demonstrate to the world our commitment to fulfil our special responsibility for the Antarctic region and its ongoing protection. Consistent with these aims, the Government has in mind that among the first tasks of the Foundation would be the development - in consultation with the Antarctic Division of the Department of Arts, Sport, Environment, Tourism and Territories - of a Conservation Strategy for the Australian Antarctic Territory.

I am very pleased to announce that the Foundation will be chaired by Sir Ninian Stephen. He will bring to the organisation his considerable energy, intellect and environmental conviction. This role will complement his invaluable efforts as Ambassador for the Environment. And he will be assisted in it by a Board of the new Foundation which will reflect the involvement in Antarctica of both the Federal and Tasmanian Governments, as well as the broad community interest in the continent.

Antarctica has long fascinated and excited. Not only is it the world's last great wilderness and a unique sanctuary for millions of seals, whales, penguins and sea-birds, its awesome size and dramatic beauty are unparalleled. Antarctica is a land of extremes and one of the most inhospitable places on the earth. The world's coldest, driest and windiest continent - and yet its most vulnerable.

As we renew our efforts to protect Antarctica, I am fully aware of the debt the community owes to our new pioneers - pioneers not of new lands but of new ideas. The World Wide Fund for Nature has been at the forefront of the new environmental consciousness which is the hallmark of this decade. To you, as environmentalists, I extend my congratulations and my best wishes for your continuing endeavours.

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