



PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP

THE AGE OF ANGKOR, AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL GALLERY,
21 AUGUST 1992

The Honourable Lionel Bowen and Mrs Bowen, Mr Pich Keo, Ministerial Colleagues, Mr and Mrs Hoare, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I am honoured to be invited to open this exhibition.

It is a very significant exhibition - an historic one.

I know what imagination, hard work and persistence have gone into it.

And part of my duty this evening is to acknowledge the debt we owe to those who conceived the idea and worked intensively through the past year to make it a reality.

In particular Mr Pich Keo, the Director of the National Museum in Phnom Penh.

Mr Keo welcome to Australia; on behalf of the Government and everyone here, I thank you for your part in this.

Your staff and many others in Cambodia also deserve our thanks.

Mr Hun Sen, I know, gave the project his personal backing.

I look forward to the opportunity to personally deliver our thanks when I visit Phnom Penh next month. While I am there, I hope I will have a chance to visit the National Museum.

I also want to congratulate Michael Brand, the curator of Asian Art here at the Australian National Gallery, both for his vision and his stamina.

I know that in such things as this there is a long way to travel between vision and realisation: I know also that it takes a lot of team work to get there.

So, for the sake of brevity, I congratulate the people on the team - including the RAAF who took them to Phnom Penh along with the empty packing crates, and brought them back with the exhibition.

I must also pay tribute, of course, to my colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Gareth Evans.

Gareth's outstanding contribution to the implementation of a peace process in Cambodia is well known to everyone here.

His support for this proposal is a measure of his admiration and affection for Cambodia and its people.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Cambodia, rightly I believe, sees the protection of its cultural heritage as a vital part of the current reconstruction.

The culture of a people unites them. I always think of it as a great healer.

And Cambodia has tragic wounds to heal.

Just as a nation's cultural heritage unites its people, so can cultural exchanges such as this one bring people of different cultures together.

It is because we want to expand our understanding of Cambodia and other countries in the region where we live that Australia seeks to develop cultural, as well as economic and political, relationships.

Much has changed within a generation: among Australians today there is an awareness and appreciation of Asian cultures which was unimaginable twenty years ago.

Travel, migration, trade and communications have played their parts in bringing us closer together.

So will cultural exchanges - and in this context the Australian National Gallery is to be congratulated for its efforts to raise the profile of Asian art in Australia.

There is still a long way to go, but the Australian Government and its agencies are actively pursuing programs aimed at heightening the level of mutual understanding through culture and art.

This, then, is an exhibition of great consequence.

Not only does it comprise magnificent and unique works of art, but it is the first time these works have left Cambodia.

We are delighted that Australia should be the first country in the world to have that honour.

Yet the significance of the exhibition goes well beyond that. It strengthens the bond between our two countries, our two peoples.

Australians have been shocked and saddened by the terrible crimes and suffering inflicted on the Cambodian people.

This exhibition might be taken as a symbol of our hope that Cambodians are at last succeeding in their struggle to regain the opportunity for better lives.

As we admire these works, I think we should also pause for a moment to recall that the peace process - on which these hopes depend - still faces severe difficulties.

Along with many others who are contributing to and supporting the United Nations presence in Cambodia, the Australian Government is committed to doing all it can to help the peace process succeed.

In addition to our significant contribution of military and civilian personnel to the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, this financial year Australia will provide approximately 15 million dollars in humanitarian assistance to Cambodia.

We have much to gain from coming to understand the societies of Asia - and we have much to give.

This evening I am happy to announce a small contribution we may be able to make towards the rehabilitation of cultural life in Cambodia.

In an effort to help preserve the important symbol of Khmer culture and unity which these works of art represent, the Australian Government and the Australian National Gallery have agreed to contribute towards a public appeal to raise \$700,000 for urgently needed repairs at the National Museum of Cambodia.

To help launch the appeal, which will be run at the Gallery in the course of the exhibition, the Department of Administrative Services will provide \$250,000 in technical assistance, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade will provide \$50,000, and the Gallery will provide \$25,000.

Our aim is to raise the remaining \$375,000 through a public appeal, with the Government matching public contributions on a two for one basis.

I understand that a promising start to the public appeal has already been made, with Qantas offering to pay the cost of flying 12 specialists involved in the Museum project return from Australia to Bangkok.

In addition to this appeal, the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau has agreed to provide training and development for the staff of the Museum at a cost of \$150,000 over two years.

This training will concentrate on developing skills in the conservation and restoration of stone and bronze works, as well as photographic exhibits.

Further assistance will also be possible within Australia's established sponsored training program for Cambodia which will allow Museum staff to study in Australia in conjunction with the Gallery.

Ladies and gentlemen

As I said, it is a privilege to be present at this opening - as it is to see these works.

I sincerely hope we are the first among a multitude.

Once again, let me congratulate all those who have worked so hard to bring this great project to fruition.

It represents, as I have said, a significant moment in our cultural history.

I wish it every success.

And I hope in years to come it will be seen to symbolise peace at last in Cambodia.

Thank you.