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PRIME MINISTER

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

75TH ANNIVERSARY OF AUSTRALIA HOUSE
LONDON - 17 SEPTEMBER 1993

It is a great honour to welcome you here to commemorate the 75th anniversary of this most famous Australian institution - Australia House.

For once at least the word "historic" can be used without the risk of exaggeration or cliché.

For this building has played a unique and remarkable role in Australia's modern history, and in the history of our relationship with Great Britain.

Australia House was built during a dramatic and defining moment in Australia's evolution as a nation, the First World War.

It has stood through the Second World War; through the growth of Australia from an all but infant nation, through all the changes in our association with Whitehall - from the Statute of Westminster in 1932 to the Australia Act of 1986 - through the growth to maturity of our relationship with the United Kingdom.

This is not only the oldest Australian overseas mission, it is also the oldest diplomatic mission building in London. The architects who designed it were Scottish; the materials, English stone combined with Australian marble and timber - all of it highlighted by the works of Australian painters and sculptors.

The building was opened by His Majesty King George V before an audience which included a quite extraordinary gallery of Australians -- the Prime Minister, William Morris Hughes, former Prime Ministers Andrew Fisher and Joseph Cook, and our greatest General Sir John Monash.

In opening the building, the King said:

It will not only serve those useful purposes for which it was designed, but will also call to mind for all those who pass by the immense opportunities and limitless resources of the great continent under the Southern Cross.

And of course this is precisely what Australia House has been in the seventy-five years since: the Australian promotion house; the place that issued the passports; for countless thousands of British people, the first contact with the country they made their home - not to say, a reminder of home for thousands of Australians living in or visiting Britain.

Those British migrants were told in various terms over the years that Australia was indeed a land of unrivalled opportunity and vast resources. There were politicians in those days who imagined that by this stage in our history Australia would be supporting a population in excess of 100 million with an economy the size of the United States.

Yet, if these predictions have turned out to be a little inflated, the fact remains that the human opportunities Australia has provided are beyond measure, that those opportunities still exist and, in my view at least, there is still no better place on earth to live.

Indeed, it is a very much better place now than it was in 1918, or 1948, or 1958, or at any other time in our history.

Better for many reasons.

Better for the principles Australians have stuck to down the years and the traditions they have developed which continue to underpin the social and political ethos of Australia: principles and traditions of democracy and fairness which, translated into policy, make Australia in the 1990s one of the truly advanced democracies in the world.

Better also because Australians have not interpreted all their traditions as immutable and inviolable. So Australia in the 1990s is much broader, much more open, more tolerant, more diverse - infinitely richer because new generations of Australians chose to welcome settlers not just from the United Kingdom, but from all the countries of the world.

And better because, like our population, our economy is part of the world economy. And particularly because it is part of the most rapidly growing, and assuredly most promising region in the world - the Asia-Pacific. So immense are the opportunities there, the words of King George V hold truer now than they did when he spoke them here at Australia House seventy-five years ago.

Necessarily, with these developments in the composition of the Australian people and their society, and the aspirations and imperatives facing the Australian nation, a new sense of identity will emerge.

And if we give expression to it through the reform of those institutions which were appropriate and effective in the past but not so appropriate and effective now, we will be that much stronger.

Let me say here in London, as I have said many times in Australia - it is not because our affections for Great Britain are reduced, or the friendship between us frailer, or our respect and admiration for the culture and institutions Britain has bequeathed us in any way diminished, that now, in this last decade of our first century as a nation, we are considering the option of becoming a republic.

It is not because the machinery is broken that we wish to change it. It is because a great many Australians - in all likelihood a majority of Australians - believe the machinery is no longer the most appropriate.

I believe - the Australian Government believes - that most of the people of Great Britain, if they were asked about the issue, would agree with us. I believe they would find it unexceptional and inoffensive that Australians should consider taking this step at this stage of their history.

Indeed, I am quite convinced that were Australians to choose the republican option, this expression of their identity which has inevitably changed so much in the past century, our friendship with Great Britain would be stronger, as any friendship is stronger for being more mature.

But the decision on this will be made by the Australian people. It can only be made by the Australian people: the people descended, as mine are, from these islands, and those from all the countries of Europe, and the Middle East and Asia and throughout the world.

I find it very hard to believe that if Australians decide that their country should be in future a Federal Republic of Australia, anyone of good faith in this country will not consider it a wise judgement as well as a democratic one.

And let me take this opportunity to say that we appreciate the way Prime Minister Major and his government have handled this issue.

The Prime Minister echoed my own comments when he said earlier this year that each of our two countries had been "driven by the imperatives of geography, economic interest, social change and political vocation to give a new priority to its region", that this is "perfectly natural" and constitutes no threat to the strength of our friendship, the memory of shared experience or the future of our exceedingly healthy and flourishing trade and diplomatic links.

What we are talking about is a new relationship - as I said, a mature relationship.

And I think that maturity was perfectly expressed by the British Foreign Secretary in Australia earlier this week when he said that the matter of the republic is one between "the Government, people, Parliament of Australia and the Queen of Australia", and that the relationship between us is one between "two modern countries, with a great deal of shared modern interest" and should remain quite unaffected by our discussion about the republic.

And that is what will happen, I am sure. The issue is complex and sensitive and cannot be rushed. In the meantime friendship and commerce between Great Britain and Australia will continue to grow.

I consider it an immense privilege to stand here today in a place steeped in the history of our two countries, an organic part of the relationship between us, and a place with which surely millions of Australians have had some connection.

It is a privilege because this building, and the people who have worked here, have played a dynamic role in Australia's nationhood. Australia House has always been, by its nature, a contributor to the growth and development of Australia.

So it seems to me particularly appropriate that on this all too brief visit to Great Britain I should be able to make this the occasion for these remarks.

I thank all those who have made this occasion possible and all of you who have come along today.