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PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP
TO THE DAIL**

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Let me say it is a pleasure to be in the great city of Dublin; a rare feeling, as ever, to be in Ireland from whence came my own people, so many of my fellow Australians and so much of my country; and an honour to address the Dail.

I wanted to come to Ireland as Prime Minister of Australia for the good reason of history.

While I am here, I will be talking to the Prime Minister and other Ministers and business people about trade, particularly in relation to the GATT Round. I will be putting a particular point of view.

We are both now players in the international economy and inevitably we have overlapping economic interests.

We will be talking about investment in Australia.

I will be talking about the European Community and APEC - the forum for economic co-operation in the Asia-Pacific region.

Necessarily, I want to talk about related social issues, particularly unemployment which is a problem afflicting both our countries and virtually all the developed countries of the world.

I want to hear Irish views on these matters and I want to put my own.

But I am also here for the less tangible but utterly inescapable and irresistible attraction of history.

Now, I have a feeling that the people in this chamber might inwardly groan every time a politician of Irish ancestry comes through here and signals that he or she is going to give them a history lecture.

It would not surprise me if you are thinking - here we go again, he is going to tell us about the Irish past, or

our literary tradition. He is bound to quote Yeats at us; or tell us about 1798 again, or give us his views on our character.

I would dearly like to spare you this.

As a post-colonial country ourselves, some of us remember the presumptions of visitors.

Yet the fact remains that Ireland is possibly unique in the world for the hold it has on the consciousness of other countries.

I know when my predecessor, Bob Hawke, addressed this Parliament several years ago he spoke about the feeling he had when he arrived at Shannon Airport - he said he felt he had come home.

And Bob Hawke is nowhere near as Irish as I am. If Bob felt at home, it must be I never left.

And when President Robinson last year made what has become a quite famous tour of Australia, I found myself unconsciously repeating this theme at a luncheon in her honour in Canberra.

Because Australians do feel uncannily at home with the Irish.

They do feel a great affinity which apparently transcends ancestral connections.

And this seems to me to speak of the immense power and importance of history and memory and language and culture.

I am not talking about some quaint showcase of the past. I am not talking about museums, or curious glimpses of faded agrarian life, or even Georgian architecture.

I could look at Georgian architecture all day, myself.

But the attraction of Ireland is an elemental thing: it fulfils a need in us.

It is almost as if one can say that if Ireland did not exist, countries like Australia would have to invent it.

And perhaps we should.

I mean politicians or governments of all complexions and bureaucrats and business people, all those of us in a position to influence policy, should know what it means to ignore history and heritage and language and culture.

Yet there is always a tendency in political thought towards orthodoxy rather than those broad and less readily defined concerns.

On the way here via the United States and Britain I was reading Sean O'Faolain's book The Irish - believe it or not.

At one point, writing about Wolf Tone, he says:

One feels that his laughter and his humanity would have blown all these away - (he means orthodoxy, sectarianism, puritanism, cant) - would have defined political liberty not merely in terms of comfort but of gaiety and tolerance and a great pity and a free mind and a free heart and a full life.

O'Faolain of course was talking about Ireland, which I do not mean to do.

I mean to talk about my own country.

Many of the Irish who played leading parts in Tone's rebellion of 1798 were transported to Australia - among them prominent leaders of the rebellion like Michael Dwyer, Joseph Holt, James Meehan and Michael Hayes.

I might add inter alia that a concentration of 1798 veterans took up land to the south-west of Sydney in such numbers as to earn the place the name of Irishtown.

It is now called Bankstown and it is where I was born, grew up and spent most of my life.

It is my hometown and the heart of my political constituency - and the most obvious ethnic groups these days are Lebanese and vietnamese.

The curious thing about the 1798 convicts is that in the colony of New South Wales the expectation that these Rebels would rebel was never really met.

The profound opportunities for economic independence which Australia provided for men and women of ordinary means, combined with the liberal humanity of individuals like Governor Macquarie, put paid not just to their rebelliousness, but to the notion that the Irish were born rebels - that they were irredeemably hostile to society.

Or at least it should have put paid to the notion.

As the Australian historian, Patrick O'Farrell, has said, the MYTH of rebellion continued but the reality was generally rather different.

In 1818 Michael Hayes, wrote: "There is room here for some millions if they were allowed to emigrate. What a happiness it would be to the unfortunate Irish tenantry were they here to participate in these blessings."

It has been a theme in the correspondence of migrants ever since.

One hundred years later a huge sign was erected in London's Aldwych near the site of Australia House. It said:

"Go to Australia. You will have a hearty welcome, a generous return for your energy and enterprise and a climate that is the healthiest in the world."

Australia has always held out this great promise - that it could take the poor and the oppressed and give them the liberty, economic independence and the material comforts denied in their own country - and beyond that, by these "blessings", winnow from their hearts and minds all the ancient bitterness and unreason.

As if Australia could do what a Wolf Tone might have done.

If there has been a continuous theme to Australian history - one mission - it is perhaps this one. If there is one standard we have set ourselves, it has been how well we have lived up to this promise.

The theme begins with the British and Irish convicts. It follows the trail of migration through to the present day. It includes not just the Irish but the Italians and Greeks and the Lebanese and Jews and Latvians and Vietnamese and the Chinese and Cambodians.

People, in fact, from more than 150 countries of the world.

It has been a difficult ambition to live up to.

Consider the appellations the country has gone by over the years. It has been known as the "better country", the "land of the better chance", the "working man's paradise", the "social laboratory of the world", "Australia Unlimited", and, although it was originally meant ironically, "the Lucky Country."

Occupying a land so vast, with such bountiful resources, such a splendid climate, such free institutions - being heirs to a land seemingly so blessed, may be why Australians are sometimes rather severely self-critical.

In fact, depending on which columnists one reads - and there seems to be no consensus even among the several of Irish extraction - one would think sometimes that we live in a diabolically impoverished and inadequate place.

It is a constant of political argument in Australia - and cultural argument - that we have failed to deliver our

unlimited potential; indeed, that our great good fortune in possessing a vast continent had made us complacent.

There is a view, I think, that those things we have achieved might have been more the product of good luck than good management.

It is not a view I share.

With rare exceptions, we have delivered liberty. If material prosperity has occasionally been hard to come by, and there have been enough instances of conflict to indicate that the resentments were not entirely swept away, Australia has always been and remains by any standards, both a prosperous country and a tolerant one.

I do not know any way to measure the extent to which an immigrant culture has been responsible for this; how much it has both obliged us to practise tolerance and provide opportunity, or to what extent we can say that a migrant culture, of its nature, will demand these things and value them.

It's a familiar question for Australians - how much we are a product of our circumstances, and how much we are what we have made ourselves to be.

In truth, by the act of migration the country was made; by that voluntary act, and by the emigrants' ambitions it was built.

As a politician I know that little of a lasting nature happens by virtue of some latent moral or political force. As a general rule we don't get blown where we want to go - we have to take ourselves there.

In politics, as in much else, it requires imagination and a political will - which in my view is the same as saying a will to exercise political power. And that depends on having not just the Irish rebel's sense of injustice, but the nineteenth century Irish emigrant's ability to imagine a better life. And to find it.

Indeed I would like to think that I had more of the qualities of the emigrant.

Better a politician who not only confronts an unsatisfactory reality, but has the wherewithal - the will and the skill - to change it.

Better one willing to go to sea - but not in a boat without oars.

In Australia in the 1980s we embarked on a voyage of economic reform. We deregulated the economy and opened it up to the world.

In doing this we did what the emigrant does - we confronted necessity.

Had we not done this, the modern world and the opportunities it offers would have passed us by.

It took political will. More than will, it took persuasion and persistence and the ability to resist the temptation to turn back.

Sometimes it does feel as if one has gone to sea in a boat without oars. Sometimes there are mutineers. Sometimes one thinks it would have been easier to stay put in the first place.

Those convict vessels on which the rebels of 1798 made their voyage sometimes took nearly twelve months to get to Australia.

It must have felt like an eternity.

The process of economic reform can feel the same way - one day flying along with the sails threatening to rip apart, the next day becalmed.

And then, of course, there are the days when the ship is immaculately on course and travelling at a manageable rate and you are thinking not of home, nor even of the journey, but of the destination.

The destination was and remains an internationally competitive economy: which means, among other things, one less dependent upon our mineral and agricultural commodities and more capable of manufacturing products for global markets, particularly the markets of the Asia-Pacific region - which is to say the fastest growing markets in the world.

And we have gone a long way towards reaching this goal.

Our economy has been completely transformed. Exports have doubled. Service and manufacturing exports have more than tripled and are now equal to rural exports.

Our economy is much more diverse and the fastest growing sector of it by far is elaborately transformed manufactures.

A decade ago less than half of our exports went to our own region. Today two-thirds go to east-Asia. Three-quarters of all Australian exports go to the Asia-Pacific region, a region of two billion people producing half the world's output and engaged in half the world's trade.

These figures basically describe Australia's future.

They mark the stages on the journey towards an economy of which it will never be possible to say - they got it by chance, it fell into their lap.

It will only be possible to say that, like the emigrant, we recognised necessity when we saw it and we did what had to be done.

Of course we were not the only country in the world to reform our economy in the 1980s. Much that we did was done elsewhere in the world as countries realised that, in the modern era, if they did not change they would fall behind.

There is no doubt that we have been served well by the economic reforms we made.

And we are all the better for having also made social reforms.

A large element of the improved international competitiveness we achieved was got by means of an Accord between the Government and the trade unions.

The Accord dramatically reduced industrial disputation, held wages to competitive levels, made a major contribution to reducing inflation to a rate among the lowest in the OECD, and sponsored a creative and co-operative culture in the workplace which is radically increasing levels of productivity.

Implementing the concept of the social wage in the 1980s meant that in the 1990s we have a first class health system; a social net as extensive and sophisticated as any in the world; legislation affecting the rights and well being of women as advanced as any in the world; and through positive government programs assisting ethnic groups and encouraging cultural diversity, a multicultural society of infinitely more richness and strength - including economic strength.

In other words as the Australian Government has stepped out of the market place in many regards, it has stepped into its social responsibilities.

As I said, we did not put to sea without oars. Or lifeboats, and a safety net, or expanded opportunity including, as of this year, an extensive system of child care and a home care allowance.

It is essentially for the same reason that we have made the biggest effort in our history to at last deliver the basis of social justice for indigenous Australians.

I mean the reason of social unity and social justice - of extended opportunity which new world countries like our own are intended to provide.

For the great casualty of immigration was Aboriginal Australia.

The destruction of this extraordinary ancient culture, and the brutality and injustice inflicted on the first Australians can never really be set to rights, any more than the injustice and dispossession which occurred in this country can be.

But we can heal wounds and spare new generations from the hurt and bitterness of the past.

We can include Aboriginal Australia in the social equation as never before, and the culture will be ever so much stronger, and the self-esteem of all Australians so much greater.

It seems to me a perfect example of the fact that necessity does not of itself lead to change.

There has been a moral and social necessity to right these wrongs inflicted on Aboriginal Australia for generations - what has led to change is will. Will and the imagination necessary to conceive of something better.

So this last decade of Australia's national life has been a decade of quite remarkable change. The next decade shows every sign of keeping up the pace.

And, if we have learned a lesson in the course of the journey, it is that the pace will be best maintained and the change will be more effective if the people are included.

No political principle was so thoroughly confirmed for me in recent years as this one: that one succeeds best by trusting to the people's best feelings. I believe it is the essential weapon of the political reformer.

Change will never be made by heading the negatives - the conservatism, or myopia, or prejudice or pedantry which exists in any society. Those prone to nervousness could dictate to a reform agenda.

Change will be made by leaping over them - by talking of something better. Of all the lessons of the emigrant for the politician this is the most fundamental.

And I believe it is the lesson contained in those words I quoted about Wolf Tone - that political reform means to enlarge life.

It means offering an alternative to cant and narrow orthodoxy and all the debilitating constraints in which history is forever wrapping us, and to which conservative self-interest always appeals.

Political reform means offering to the people what emigration offered to the Irish in the nineteenth century, to Europeans after World War II, to Cambodians and Vietnamese in recent times - I mean quite simply the prospect of a better life in a better country.

And this takes me back in turn to those lessons we learn from Ireland.

That if we are drawn to Ireland by the history and the language and culture - not to say by the beauty of the place - then governments ignore these things at their peril.

And for that reason there is a link between culture and reform, between the arts and reform, between the life of the mind and reform.

It is why, I think - like the extension of social policy - the extension of policies encouraging cultural development are essential in times of dramatic economic change.

They feed the national imagination, encourage people to contemplate alternatives - and of course they soothe the savage beast in us.

You see what lessons can be drawn from Ireland. Real, hard, political lessons.

Not that we were thinking of Ireland when we drew them. The parallels only begin to present themselves as we approach the old shores.

Nor were we thinking of Ireland when we thought of the republic.

Rather we were thinking that we are a country separated from these islands by twelve thousand miles and 200 years of experience.

That we are a people comprised of more than 150 nationalities and for some time now we have been encouraging all of them to retain their cultural identity.

That our people live extraordinarily varied lives on an extraordinarily varied continent.

And that the time had come in this last decade of our first century as a nation to put a border round this tapestry of our national life: time we enshrined the immigrant's traditions of courage and faith together with those traditions of democracy, tolerance, fair play and greater opportunity which are the best traditions of Australia.

It seemed to us that a republic might acknowledge and enshrine the values of a people who have been willing to imagine something better, willing to confront the need to change, to make their way on a new frontier - and who have learned that these things are best done together.

And to those who want to hold back, who fear change, who say it is not the right time to do this, we might say - what if our forebears had said this? What if they had lacked the imagination and the will? What if they had stayed put?

Well, I would not be an Australian and nor would most of the 17 million others.

And I would not have had the extraordinary opportunities my country has given me - among them the immeasurable privilege of coming to the land of my ancestors as Prime Minister of Australia and addressing this national parliament.

Thank you.