



**PRIME MINISTER**

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP  
TENTH ANNIVERSARY DINNER OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHINESE FORUM OF  
NSW, SYDNEY, 12 OCTOBER 1995**

I'm delighted to be here for the tenth annual dinner of the Australian Chinese Forum of NSW.

I know that many Labor leaders have participated in the activities of the Forum, and it's a tradition that I'm pleased to continue.

The Forum's activities in raising the profile of Australian Chinese - and encouraging them to participate fully in our national life - are very worthwhile.

Can I also commend the Forum's efforts in raising the political awareness of the Chinese community. I think it's vital that all elements of society engage in the democratic life of Australia.

Your Forum is playing a valuable role within the Chinese community.

That the Forum is one of several similar organisations in Sydney is a mark of the community's health and maturity.

Australian Chinese are one of our oldest and most respected communities.

By some accounts the first Chinese mariners made landfall on our northern coasts centuries before European settlement. Since the gold rushes of the mid nineteenth century you have lived the Australian story with us.

You have brought your ambition and energy. The lives you have built for yourselves have also built Australia.

You have built some of Australia's most successful businesses - and provided the labour and acumen on which many others were built. You have played key roles in Australia's public life, and continued the admirable Chinese philanthropic tradition. You have enriched the culture in myriad ways.

I think it should also be said that you were trail blazers of modern Australian multiculturalism. You saw through that long era of xenophobia and prejudice - you survived discrimination and violence. You have undergone traumas in our history which other groups have never known.

I think it is safe to say that Australia is now a much more tolerant and worldly place. If this is so then in no small way we have the Chinese to thank for it - and no group of Australians is more entitled to enjoy its benefits.

At the same time we all continue to benefit from Chinese culture and Chinese enterprise. We are now very much aware that cultural diversity is a major national asset, especially coupled with the social cohesion we enjoy.

We are a more enterprising people, equipped with more languages and talents and international, and especially regional, contacts.

Australian Chinese are succeeding brilliantly in an extraordinary range of activity - in business and industry, in medicine and science, in academia, in music and the arts, in sport. When a Chee Quee is scoring runs for New South Wales, you know you're making progress.

Societies are generally less than perfect - but Australia's way of living and working together works better than most.

No government decree makes it work. I think the success of multiculturalism derives principally from the country's democratic ethos coupled to a fundamental pragmatism. The last two generations of Australians have seen the necessity of immigration and learning to live with cultural difference - and in due course the experience has taught us to see the great advantages.

Governments can't legislate for a cohesive society. But there are some things governments can do.

Rather than requiring newcomers to Australia to shed their cultural identity, we have encouraged them to retain their links with their parent cultures. We have asked only that immigrants respect our basic democratic values and traditions, and that all Australians reserve their primary loyalty for Australia.

We have set ourselves the task of creating an inclusive society: we try to draw in all those who drift to the margins: we maintain a sophisticated social safety net to protect the low paid and those who fall on hard times; we provide health care, social security, education and community services. We take the view that the most successful countries in the world in the last half of this century are those which have adopted this kind of social democratic model.

We think that a country like Australia can run a dynamic globally integrated economy maintaining high rates of growth, without the creation of an economic underclass.

We take the view that such an underclass - whether it is based on economic, ethnic or any other factor - is ultimately damaging to the social fabric, to the way of life we aspire to and to our national ambitions.

This attitude has much in common, I think, with the decision taken a quarter of a century ago to finally reject the notion that ethnic origin should ever be a criterion for the selection of immigrants to Australia.

It is of a kind with the bill brought before the Commonwealth Parliament to unreservedly declare that racism is wrong and that racial vilification and incitement to racial violence is illegal.

I have said in the past that I look forward to the day when Australians will instinctively count among the great advantages of being an Australian the democracy and tolerance we enjoy here: who also recognise these things as being essential to our social cohesion and our national identity - and who see them as inviolable tenets of Australian life.

I believe we are coming rapidly to this conclusion. And I also believe that as a people we have come a long way very quickly towards recognising both the reality and the great potential of our engagement with Asia.

These days, most people are believers. But the story still needs telling.

Around two-thirds of all Australia's exports already go to East Asia.

Our merchandise exports to East Asia grew by more than seven per cent last year and are now worth \$41 billion.

And more than one million Australian jobs have been created by those exports.

By as soon as next year - when our exports to Indonesia and Malaysia will each exceed our exports to the United Kingdom - Australia's top ten export markets will all be APEC members.

At current rates, our exports to the region will almost double in value by 2000. All the signs are that our economic links with Asia will continue to strengthen.

But I want to emphasise as strongly as I can that this Government's commitment to closer relations with Asia is not the result of some crude economic determinism. It is not simply a matter of following the markets.

Asia is not a target of convenience for us. It is no fad, fashion or political gimmick.

The Leader of the Opposition may "blow hot and cold on Asia" as a commentator in the Singapore Business Times described it this week.

I do not think it was Mr Howard's intention, as the same article observed, to "stoke up a little paranoia about Australia's immediate northern neighbours", because Mr Howard would know better than anyone how dangerous and unpopular this ploy is.

What worries me is that the defence speech which inspired these comments in Singapore seemed to reflect a continuing ambivalence about Australia in the region. Often with Mr Howard one gets the feeling that while the words are there, the commitment is not.

Yet Asia is emphatically where this country's security and prosperity lie.

It is where an increasing number of our people come from.

And - unambiguously and wholeheartedly - it is where we want to be.

In an increasing globalised world it is true, of course, that Australia has important interests outside Asia.

It is also true that Australia has been involved in Asia over many years.

For the most part, our record of engagement is long and honourable, from our support for Indonesian independence, through the establishment of the Colombo Plan, to the development of our great trading links with Japan and Korea.

But it is also true, in a quite different way from the past - a deeper, more urgent and more intense way - that Australia's economic, strategic and political interests now coalesce in the region around us.

As I have said before, the simple fact is, if we do not succeed in the Asia-Pacific, we succeed nowhere.

In recent years, Australia has taken great strides into our own region. Our regional relationships have developed new depth and weight.

These advances haven't occurred by themselves. Our progress has required the efforts of this government and many other Australians.

It's a result of the choices we have made.

During the 1960s, Australia came perilously close to marginalising ourselves in the world.

The White Australia policy and the protective and regulatory barriers behind which our industry and financial institutions slumbered were all of a piece. They were all the product of a defensive and inward-looking cast of mind.

Just in time, we saw the need to open ourselves out to the world and to break through the protective walls which held our economy and our minds in check.

Just in time, we reformed our economy and faced it towards our own region.

We have transformed both the way we live and the way we relate to the outside world.

Foreign and domestic policy have come together - driven by the same imperatives, and towards the same ends.

Success at home and abroad are inextricably linked - each dependent on the other. Australia's domestic prosperity in part relies on our management of our external relations. And international success requires we implement domestic policies which increase Australia's competitiveness and ensure that we make the best use of all our people.

Our efforts on regional free trade, multiculturalism and education and training are all part of the same strategy.

It's a strategy to cope with and capitalise on change - profound and unrelenting change. The international system which has been our lot since the European settlement of Australia is being remade by technological revolutions and the global economy.

This transition provides Australia and its political and business leaders with unprecedented opportunities and heavy responsibilities.

And more choices.

We now have a chance to take part in crafting the new institutions and frameworks which will take the world into the next century. But opportunities like this are never around for long. Very quickly, new organisations will emerge and new patterns of international contact will fall into place and, once that happens, further change becomes very difficult to achieve.

I want to ensure that Australia helps to shape the new regional framework and that the changes which are introduced serve our interests as well as those of the wider region.

That is why I have been working hard at building institutions like APEC which will help cement Australia's integration into the region over the long term. My opponents have recently taken to saying that I have laid claim to founding APEC. Of course I have done no such thing. What we have done over the past four years is lift APEC to a new plane through the institution of Leaders' Meetings. This is what has given APEC its recent impetus.

In recent years Australia has been one of the moving forces behind the ASEAN Regional Forum which deals with security issues. We are building linkages between the ASEAN Free Trade Area and the Australia/New Zealand CER arrangement.

We have also matched our efforts to build regional institutions with new bilateral structures established over the past four years. Bodies like the Australia-Indonesia Ministerial Forum, the Australia-Korea Joint Economic Committee, the Thailand-Australia Ministerial Commission and the Singapore-Australia Business Alliance Forum are playing their part in multiplying and diversifying the strands of contact between Australia and the region.

And we are developing new areas of co-operation with countries like Vietnam, which has joined ASEAN and is beginning to participate fully in regional affairs.

China, of course, remains a very significant country for us. It is our sixth largest trading partner, and China has more foreign investment in Australia than in any other country - a mark of the deep complementarity in our relationship.

The growing weight of China in the region and the world is obvious and inevitable.

Australia has nothing to fear from this. We have been a firm supporter of China's full integration into world and regional institutions. We regard it as essential to engage China productively in the global economy.

That is one reason why we think APEC offers such promise.

It has taken time for people in the region to accept how greatly Australia has changed. But over the past twelve months or so, I believe we have begun to see a significant change in regional perceptions of Australia which matches the changes in Australian views of Asia.

In a way which has never been true in the past, our friends and neighbours have recognised that Australia - with our talented people, our rich continent, our secure democracy and strong diverse society - represents a substantial asset to the region as a whole. A substantial asset and a valuable partner.

This fresh view of Australia is well summarised in the joint statement about the Australia-Japan relationship which Prime Minister Murayama and I issued in May. Japan, it said, "welcomes Australia's decision to create its future in the region and reaffirms that Australia is an indispensable partner in regional affairs."

That same acceptance of Australia's position as a regional partner is widely reflected throughout the region.

One of the reasons behind this, I am sure, is the recognition by our neighbours that this Government has committed itself to the cause of engagement with Asia like no other government before.

Asia is not a rather exotic optional extra on top of our foreign policies. Asia stands at the very core.

This Government has chosen to engage the region and not to shrink from it.

We look for the promise and not only the dangers.

We work at our relationships with our neighbours and not just our old and powerful friends - as important as those old friends remain to us.

And, might I say, I choose to meet my responsibility and meet those regional leaders who visit Australia.

I'm confident this is the right mindset to bring to the formulation of foreign policies - the right mindset for Australia.

It's a departure from the approach which characterised Australia's external relationships for most of our history - and which still dominates the view of a few Australians.

According to that school, Australia is a European enclave in an alien part of the world. It assumes that we are only uneasy occupants of this continent - that we have never really been at home here - and that our survival depends on great and powerful friends from outside the region.

It is an approach which regards our region, at base, as a threat to be resisted.

I can understand this attitude. In the past it made sense. The European population of this continent was isolated. Threats, like that we faced from Japan during the Second World War, were genuine and it did require assistance from a great ally, whose security links with the region are unambiguously good.

But the world has changed a great deal in the past fifty years. What is needed now as our region develops and changes and as Australia becomes more integrated into the region economically and politically is a second approach - strategic relationships which will give us security in Asia rather than security from Asia.

That was why the defence policy which the Opposition Leader announced last week was so deeply disappointing. It levelled one clear criticism of Government policy: in Mr Howard's words, Australia's "security policy needs rebalancing to see if we have got the mix right between defence of Australia's concerns and the need to enhance regional engagement."

Mr Howard said there were "unresolved tensions between the Government's focus on defence partnership with the region versus the region as the potential source of threats."

This is code for Mr Howard's defining belief: that the threat to Australia is from our neighbours, that the big red arrows on the maps from the 1960s are still pointing south.

That what we need are better, closer, cosier relations with a distant paternal protector so that we can put off forever the task of coming to a full engagement with our region.

This is not what Australia needs. And I am convinced it is not what Australia wants.

By the turn of the century, by the centenary of our nationhood, I hope that Australia will be a country:

- in which our business people are a familiar and a valued part of the commercial landscape of the Asia-Pacific
- in which our defence and strategic links with the countries around us are deeper than ever
- in which more and more Australians speak the languages of our neighbours
- in which we are making full use of the great resource of the growing number of Australians of Asian background - especially Australian Chinese
- in which our national identity is clearer to us and our neighbours through the appointment of an Australian as our head of state
- in which our national culture is shaped by, and helps to shape, the cultures around us

We cannot go back to the old ways of dealing with our region. We cannot let the pressure die. We cannot let the momentum wane.

It is vital that Australians - and especially Australian political leaders - be at ease with our geography.

But that's an injunction I needn't deliver to this audience.

I don't have to lecture Australian Chinese about having a proper sense of place. You have been in this country for a very long time. While you continue to draw strength from two cultures - from two wells - your efforts continue to be part of Australia's national story and an increasingly major element of the national enterprise.

Australia welcomes all your efforts - in business, politics, the arts and sport. They add up to a great part of the national enterprise.

Thank you.