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PRIME MINISTER

**STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON P J KEATING MP
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES - THURSDAY 23 NOVEMBER 1995**

MOTION OF CONDOLENCE - PRIME MINISTER YITZHAK RABIN

I move:

That this House records its deep sadness at the assassination on 4 November 1995 of Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel; expresses its profound sympathy to Mrs Leah Rabin and her family and to the people of Israel in their bereavement; further expresses its hope that all the parties to the Middle East peace process will continue to follow the path of peace and reconciliation along which Mr Rabin had set out, and requests that this motion be conveyed by the Speaker on behalf of the House to the Government of Israel.

Like all Australians, I was horrified to learn of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Few people in international public life are called on to make decisions of such weight and consequence as those he had to make. And few have done so with such courage and clear-eyed vision.

Yitzhak Rabin was a remarkable individual. His life was dominated by his absolute commitment to the state of Israel and its people. From his birth in Jerusalem in 1922, he was at or near the centre of most of the events which created and shaped his country. His life was devoted first to the foundation of Israel, then to ensuring its survival.

For many years, Mr Rabin expressed this commitment through his distinguished career as a soldier. He fought in the 1948 war of independence, then served for more than twenty years as a member of the Israeli Defence Force. His military career culminated in his appointment as Chief of Staff of the IDF and its commander during the Six Day War.

After five years as Israel's Ambassador to the United States, Mr Rabin returned to Israel in 1973 to enter politics.

Just as his military career was driven by his unswerving commitment to Israel's security, so was his life as a political leader.

But although that deep commitment never changed, its form did - and quite profoundly.

During his second term as Prime Minister after 1992, Mr Rabin came to the view - cautiously, almost reluctantly, but irresistibly - that the cause to which he had committed his life - Israel's survival and security - was now served best by a sustained effort to negotiate a settlement with the Palestinians.

This did not represent any change in his fundamental beliefs. But he had the imagination and courage to recognise that military superiority alone could not deliver lasting security for Israel. And he understood that a change of approach of parallel importance was taking place among the Palestinian leadership as well.

This represented a fundamental shift in policy for Israel, and many Israelis were unsettled by it. It was possibly only Rabin, with his unassailable reputation as a defender of Israel's security, who could have carried most of the country with him in following this new path.

The breakthrough came with the signature on 13 September 1993 of the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles. In that document, for the first time ever, Israel and the Palestinians recognised each other as part of the same neighbourhood and accepted the need to deal with each other as neighbours. That historic recognition was symbolised when Mr Rabin shook the hand of PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat at the White House in September 1993.

That handshake was the beginning, not the end, of a process. And despite the intense political pressure he came under - pressure which went well beyond the normal and acceptable bounds of political debate - Mr Rabin remained determined to keep the peace process going.

Under his leadership, the peace treaty with Jordan was signed in October 1994 and then the Interim Agreement with the Palestinians, just two months before his death.

The worth and substance of Mr Rabin's achievements - not just for Israel but for the Middle East and the world - were recognised when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year, together with Mr Shimon Peres and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat.

The great shock of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination was not so much that it happened, because violence in the politics of the Middle East is tragically common. It was that he was killed by another Israeli. Because at the core of Israel's existence has always been its role as a sanctuary for the Jewish people.

His assassin has done more than rob us all of the life and potential of Yitzhak Rabin. He has cheated the Jewish people of the security of the beliefs to which so many Israelis had dedicated themselves. That Israel was a place where, above all else, human rights and human happiness were the foundation of the society.

Some good may come of his death if, as many of the country's political leaders and public figures have urged, it causes Israelis to reflect on the ways the political debate was abused and misused.

And much good will come of it if it reinforces the commitment of Israelis and their neighbours to press ahead on the difficult but unavoidable path he had set.

From my discussion with Prime Minister Peres, I know that he and the Israeli government are deeply committed to this task. As he told the Knesset yesterday:

'Our main objective will be to arrive, if possible by the end of this century, at a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. To create a Middle East without violence, without bloodshed, without terrorism, without wars, and without the factors which led to all of these - poverty, ignorance, backwardness and prejudice.'

The best way Australia can honour Mr Rabin is to continue to give our full support to the peace process. We shall continue to support the right of Israel to exist in security and safety, at peace with its Arab neighbours in the context of a comprehensive regional settlement. We shall also continue to help in whatever practical ways are possible, including through our participation in the Sinai peacekeeping force and United Nations peacekeeping operations and through our practical work on regional security and on water resources as part of the peace process.

When I met Prime Minister Peres after the funeral, he told me that in the fifty years he had known Mr Rabin, he had never seen him as happy as he was on the night he was killed. He was buoyed by the support of the vast crowd of 100,000 which had turned out to rally for the cause of peace. For the first time in his life, he had sung in public.

Yitzhak Rabin's life was a life that mattered. He changed, fundamentally and for the better, the society which he led and the region of which Israel is part.

But it is important to remember, too, that his murder was not just a political event. It was also human tragedy for the family of Mr Rabin and those who loved him. No one who saw his grand-daughter deliver that eloquent eulogy at his funeral could fail to be moved by this human dimension.

That is why, Mr Speaker, I am sure that I speak for all the Members of this House when I offer our deepest condolences to Mrs Leah Rabin and the other members of Mr Rabin's family.

I commend this motion to the House.