



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

FRIDAY, 27 MARCH 1981

SPEECH ON THE OCCASION OF THE HANDING-OVER OF THE ITALIAN EARTHQUAKE APPEAL CHEQUE

Mr Chairman, Your Excellency, Your Grace, Mr Premier,
Parliamentary Colleagues, other distinguished guests, ladies
and gentlemen.

Last November's earthquake in Southern Italy was one of the worst natural disasters to occur in the western world this century. The extent of the tragedy was immense: 3,000 people lost their lives, many thousands were injured, a quarter of a million people were rendered homeless. The impact of the devastation was compounded by the fact that it came with the onset of the full severity of winter. The magnitude of the disaster, the loss of life, and the hardship faced by the survivors touched people everywhere, and aid came from many countries throughout the world.

Australians always respond quickly and generously to calls for assistance, and there was never any doubt that we would play our part in the international effort to assist Italy. But there was a depth and quality of response from all sections of the community which revealed a very important element of the character of our society.

Australians of Italian origin responded magnificently and the rest of the community did more than just provide financial assistance to another of the world's disaster areas. There was a feeling that we had all been affected because a significant group in our nation had suffered a great hurt.

The earthquake was a disaster that touched not only Australians of Italian origin but all of us, of whatever background. The nation's response was akin to the sharing that occurs within a family, when one member of that family is going through a time of sorrow.

I believe that this response shows yet again that Australia is coming of age as a multicultural society. Today, we recognise the fact that Australians can retain a particular affection for the country from which they or their parents originally migrated and still be Australians in the fullest and best sense of the word. And, we are increasingly seeing that it also provides a further foundation for the cohesion and unity of our country based on shared feelings and concerns.

This is tellingly illustrated by a small event at the Victorian office of the earthquake appeal. An old lady, dressed in black, arrived carrying two collection tins, filled with donations. The volunteer staff began to speak with her in Italian and soon discovered that the lady spoke no English and no Italian. She was Greek.

I have no doubt that the appeal organisers have many other incidents demonstrating the way in which our society worked together.

Collections were arranged at supermarkets, street corners and schools; companies and unions, large and small, contributed directly to the appeal; executives and shop stewards worked together to assist collections at the workplace; churches of all denominations took up collections among their congregations; and entertainers and performers of the calibre of Kamahl, John Farnham, the Australian Opera and the Melbourne Theatre Company donated their services free-of-charge to the appeal.

Aside from monetary contributions, State and Territory Governments provided manpower and premises to the various State Appeal Committees. Here in Victoria, government premises were immediately made available on a 24-hour basis following the earthquake.

The Commonwealth Government made an initial donation of half a million dollars. We agreed to match dollar-for-dollar the grants made by the State and Territory Governments and we made donations to the appeal tax-deductible.

The Commonwealth has also facilitated the issuing of visas for intending migrants from the earthquake area. A senior officer from the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs worked as the Secretary of the National Committee and staff from my own department, the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs and from the Australian Embassy in Rome have maintained an advisory role and provided assistance to the National Committee.

It is no easy task to organise this wide range of activities and contributions and the splendid organisation and drive provided by the appeal committees at national and state levels deserves the highest recognition.

In Victoria, the State Committee was made up of over 60 people, drawn from clubs, organisations, interest groups, chambers of commerce, political parties, the clergy, student groups, businesses. This Committee worked together, in unison and co-operation. Its members fanned out into the suburbs, the factories, the clubs, the churches.

The example of Victoria is paralleled in other States, where telethons were organised, telephone ring-ins and door-knock appeals took place and a host of other activities were arranged to raise funds.

All this reflects not only the human concern that naturally follows such a disaster. It also demonstrates that there are no barriers when a community, comprising different groups and a variety of interests, is united in purpose.

To achieve the magnificent result, which is evident in the figures, has taken the effort and concern of hundreds of people who have voluntarily devoted their time and effort to the appeal and the contributions of hundreds of thousands of Australians of many backgrounds.

The total amount raised in Australia will be over \$4 million, with the figure in Victoria close to \$1½ million. This money will be spent on the construction of kindergartens and homes for the elderly. The use of funds for projects of lasting and identifiable value was adopted very successfully following the earthquake in the Friuli region of 1976. I am confident that the national committee will ensure that the money raised in Australia will be appropriately spent.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us hope that the wounds inflicted upon the Italian nation by events beyond human control will soon be healed and let us recognise and build upon two legacies which the tragedy has left.

The first is a strengthened bond of friendship between the peoples of Italy and Australia. We have responded at a time of need and our assistance will provide practical projects whose daily use will serve as a reminder of the links between our two countries.

The second, profound, legacy is that we have demonstrated that we are a nation in which there is unity in diversity. We have shown that when it counts we are able to work together in support of the particular concerns of a part of our community. This is a quality of which we can be justly proud, and it is a sign of national maturity. There can be no doubt that it is a quality on which we can rely to tackle any task which Australia may face in the years to come.

It has been my honour to serve as the patron of this most important appeal. Thank you.