



9
EMBARGO: 6:00 pm

PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

SUNDAY, 27 SEPTEMBER, 1981

ADDRESS TO THE NATION

During the next few days, the leaders of 41 countries will be arriving in Australia to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. This meeting is held once every two years and this will be the first time ever that Australia has acted as host.

In recent years these conferences have been held in places as dispersed as Zambia, Britain, Canada, Jamaica and Singapore. Now it is the turn of the Pacific and of Australia.

These leaders will be coming from all parts of the world: from Africa and Europe, from North America and the Caribbean, from the Indian sub-continent, from South East Asia and the Pacific. They will represent an enormously diverse range of countries: countries as old as Britain and as new as Vanuatu and Belize; as populous as India with its 700 million and as small as some of the island states who number their people by the thousand. The leaders of some of the richest countries in the world, as well as some of the poorest, will be present. Together they will represent a quarter of the people living on this earth.

How important it is for them may be gauged from the fact that they are prepared to allocate a whole week of their time for it. There is no other international meeting of any kind which brings together so many Heads of Government for so long.

It will be a week of hard work on serious issues - issues of the utmost importance to Australia.

Of outstanding importance is the need to improve relations between the developed and the developing countries of the world, and to alleviate world poverty. Over a thousand million people in the world have an annual income of less than \$200 Australian. I ask you to reflect on what this means. It means constant hunger and, for many, starvation. It means living without any of the normal services which you and I take for granted: water supplies, roads, electric power, medical services, education and decent housing. It means living without hope.

.../2

These conditions result not only in great hardship; they also cause instability and tension, and they frustrate the economic advancement of the whole world. For Australia, changing them is not only a matter of humanitarian concern, but one of self-interest - enlightened self-interest. You cannot have a stable world while poverty on this scale endures. Economic take-off in the developing world would also provide more markets for the products of the developed world.

Our approach to these matters at the conference will be specific and practical. We shall be discussing proposals to deal with the problems of food and energy, of trade and aid. And we shall be working to mobilise the international political will necessary for progress.

The conference will also be discussing questions related to southern Africa. Africa may seem far away to some, but if this century has taught us anything, it has taught us that seemingly remote conflicts, unless attended to in time, can threaten the peace of the world and cost Australian lives. We have learnt bitter lessons about the danger of things just being allowed to take their course, lessons carved on the honour rolls of every Australian city and country town.

The largest single group of ~~countries in the~~ Commonwealth are those from Africa. Their history has been polluted and poisoned by racialism, which deems men inferior or superior according to the colour of their skins and nothing else. Let us be clear and frank about this. We are not talking simply about racial prejudice as a social fact. That is bad enough and it is deplorable that it exists to some extent in most countries. But whereas we and most other civilised states seek to combat such prejudice, and even to compensate for it by positive discrimination in favour of the disadvantaged, in South Africa the whole weight of the state and of the law is used to perpetuate it and to strengthen it. That of course, is a fundamental difference.

Namibia takes on special significance in this context, because it is South Africa, the home of apartheid, which is frustrating its independence. That frustration must end and I have no doubt that the conference will want to advance the course of Namibian independence.

This conference is of vital importance to us in another respect. Australia on the edge of the Pacific, has paid a great deal of attention to the newly independent island states. These face special problems: isolation, smallness, scarce physical resources and a shortage of human skills and experience. Despite their best efforts these factors make progress hard. Many cannot afford to maintain embassies throughout the world and their contacts are therefore limited. This meeting will give them an opportunity to have their views heard, to have other people understand their needs and priorities. It is appropriate that a meeting held in the Pacific and in Australia should do so.

From what I have said I think you can see the importance that Australia attaches to the Commonwealth is not a matter of sentiment, of habit or historical loyalty. I say again, it is a matter of enlightened self-interest. In the Commonwealth, there is an instrument which we, together with our fellow members, can use to combat the elements of insecurity, instability and conflict in the world. We have an obligation to our nation and to our children to see that it is so used.

With this particular conference the Commonwealth assumes an added importance for us as a nation. The conference will bring some 2,000 people to the conference centre at the Exhibition Buildings, including delegations and officials, from Commonwealth countries, and correspondents from all parts of the world. Many of these would never come here but for this conference.

I know there are some inconveniences. We have tried to explain the problems with traffic. You understand the need for security and these are needs that cannot be avoided in this modern world. We already know that Australia is not immune from terrorist attack and we have to take every possible precaution. But I ask you to bear with us for the few days of the conference, knowing that we are doing everything we can to minimise the inconvenience.

During this time, there will be an international spotlight turned on us. Journalists will not just be reporting on the conference, they will be reporting on Australia: what they see of it and think of its people, what their feelings are about Melbourne and Canberra.

The conference facilities that will be provided will be as good as, if not better than, those provided for any Commonwealth conference. But the way visitors are treated in their contact with Australians - in hotels, shops, taxis and restaurants; speaking to Australian journalists, or just asking for help in the street - will be at least as important in determining what impressions they will carry with them when they leave Australia.

Melbourne, in particular, will be Australia's front window on this occasion. It is indeed a great opportunity for a great city and I am sure Melbourne will do Australia proud.

I know you will see this occasion as a great opportunity for Australia; an opportunity to convey to the world that we are a friendly and aware people who genuinely believe in the equality of nations. I hope it is an occasion you all feel a part of and take pride in.