

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON. R.J.L. HAWKE, A.C.,
M.P., TO THE NATIONAL FINALS OF WORK SKILL AUSTRALIA
9 MAY 1983

I am delighted to be with you on this great occasion - the national finals of the Work Skill Australia skills competition.

Here today are the cream of Australia's young tradespeople - you have successfully competed in competitions all over Australia to reach these National Finals, the first in Australia.

This national program of skill competitions - Work Skill Australia - is a new and exciting landmark in Australia's trade training.

It began only last year. Yet despite its short history, it has already had enthusiastic support from thousands of our young apprentices right around Australia.

These National Finals are a marvellous tribute to that support.

But as well as congratulating you, the competitors, let me pay another tribute.

This is to the judges and the professionals - hundreds of you - who've worked so tirelessly to make these Skill Olympics the great success they so clearly are.

You all deserve our congratulations.

I'm fortunate to have witnessed a small part of the development and work that has culminated in these National Finals.

The task of Work Skill Australia - promoting enthusiastic , highly skilled tradespeople - is as vital as ever.

Our capacity as a nation to lift our standard of living depends very much on the talent, initiative and skills of our young tradespeople.

The skills you are demonstrating today are central to our industrial society.

Those skills are very often hidden - in the factories and the workshops away from the public gaze.

But today they are on display.

Your skills are being recognized in a way they so thoroughly deserve.

There is one special reason why those skills should be recognised and fostered.

Unless we can maintain intakes of apprentices at sufficient levels, we do risk serious shortages of skilled labour in the years ahead as economic recovery gathers momentum.

The lead time for the training of apprentices is substantial - 4 years in most cases.

Employers, and indeed the whole community, need to take a long term view to supporting apprentice intakes to ensure the Australian workforce does have the skill it needs for the future.

Work Skill Australia was itself a project of the Evatt Foundation, which I had the privilege of helping set up.

I was also an inaugural member of the Board of Work Skill Australia in my former capacity as Shadow Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations.

My colleague, Ralph Willis, as the Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations, will today join the Board, so enabling continued involvement by my Government.

The Board of Work Skill Australia has representatives from unions, employers and government.

It is an example of the kind of cooperation between these three groups so essential to our nation's progress.

That spirit of cooperation between government, unions and employers was shown strikingly last month in Canberra at the National Economic Summit Conference.

The Summit Conference was an overwhelming success.

It marks a new beginning for Australia, a first step toward our great goals of national reconciliation, reconstruction and recovery.

In particular, the Summit focussed on the need for Australia to respond to the challenges before us in a cooperative and innovative manner.

Nowhere is the need to consider new approaches more evident than in our apprenticeship and training systems.

Despite our great economic problems, today is a day of celebration.

Work Skill Australia, by raising the status of skill training as a career and promoting higher standards, is helping to create that long term outlook.

The task of improving our trade training system is a major challenge for Australia. The main source of our skilled labour is, of course, apprenticeship training.

The apprenticeship system has served Australia well.

Even so, it has some glaring faults.

One, in particular, is that the opportunities provided for young women are far too limited.

Of Australia's 140,000 apprentices, only about 5 per cent are women.

If the traditional female area of hairdressing is excluded, less than 2 per cent of apprentices are women.

This is just not good enough!

Quite apart from the question of equity and fairness, it makes no sense for us as a nation to so blatantly squander the potential of our young women by largely excluding them from apprenticeship training.

It is incumbent, first of all, on employers to consider much more closely the employment of female apprentices, including in so-called non-traditional trade areas.

It is also appropriate for young women themselves to consider the possibility of apprenticeships across the whole gamut of trade areas and for those women who do enter these fields to be given the full support of their parents, employers and work colleagues.

Ladies and gentlemen, Work Skill Australia has made its mark extremely quickly.

This is shown no better than in these National Finals here today.

These finals are a first for Australia.

And I am able to formally announce that they will soon be followed by another first - the fielding of the first Australian team at the International Skill Olympics in Austria this August.

That team will be represented by some of you here.

I take this opportunity to wish every success to those of you who will represent Australia at that splendid International event.

I also invite the Australian team to visit me in Canberra before the departure for Austria - if you can fit it in.

Because of the great importance we attach to Work Skill Australia, the Federal Government has decided to make a special grant of \$100,000 to the project, intended particularly as a contribution to the Australian team's participation in Austria.

Looking further ahead, Work Skill Australia has already obtained the option of holding the 1988 International Skill Olympics in Australia.

I believe this event would be a tremendous boost to the recognition of trade training in Australia, as well as a major event in the nation's Bicentennial Celebrations.

Discussions are already taking place with the Bicentennial Authority to develop this proposal further.

Let us make it our challenge to foster and develop the skills and talents of our workforce so that by 1988, the Bicentennial Year, we can show the world we stand among the very forefront of industrial nations.

I congratulate all of you on the great success of these first National Work Skill finals and, once again, wish those of you who will compete in Austria later this year every success.