



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER - OPENING OF FIFTH BIENNALE OF SYDNEY - 10 APRIL 1984 - SYDNEY

I THANK THE COMMITTEE OF THIS FIFTH BIENNALE OF SYDNEY FOR GIVING ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO ATTEND AND TO OPEN THE EXHIBITION. I WISH PARTICULARLY TO COMPLIMENT THE COMMITTEE'S CHAIRMAN MR FRANCO BELGIORNO-NETTIS.

FRANCO'S DRIVE, COURAGE AND FORESIGHT HAVE BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN ESTABLISHING THE BIENNALE OF SYDNEY AS AUSTRALIA'S MAJOR EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY ART - AND AN ARTISTIC GATHERING OF INTERNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE.

YOU COULD SAY THAT HE AND HIS COMPANY, TRANSFIELD, CHOSE NOT TO TAKE THE SOFT OPTION IN ART PATRONAGE. TOO OFTEN IT IS LEFT TO GOVERNMENTS TO FUND THE NEW, THE INNOVATORY SO THAT PRIVATE PATRONAGE MIGHT PLAY SAFE.

IN SAYING THAT I DO NOT DECRY THE EFFORTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF OTHER PRIVATE SECTOR SPONSORS WHO HAVE CHOSEN TO SUPPORT A RANGE OF DIFFERENT ARTISTIC ACTIVITIES. THEIR SUPPORT IN RECENT YEARS HAS GROWN SIGNIFICANTLY AND IS VERY DESIRABLE AND HEALTHY. NO - I MERELY WISH TO GIVE SPECIAL CREDIT TO THOSE WHO ARE WILLING TO SHOW CONFIDENCE IN BACKING THE NEW, THE UNFAMILIAR, AND THE SOMETIMES UNPREDICTABLE. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN SUCH ENTERPRISES IS AFTER ALL IMPORTANT.

GOVERNMENTS, OF COURSE, ARE EXPECTED TO AND SHOULD ENCOURAGE THE FULL RANGE OF ARTISTIC ACTIVITIES - THE ESTABLISHED, THE INNOVATIVE, THE MINORITY ART. IT IS THEREFORE ENTIRELY PROPER THAT THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL SHOULD HAVE FINANCIALLY SUPPORTED THE BIENNALE, AND THAT THE EXHIBITION "THE MODERNS", WHICH HAS JUST MADE WAY FOR THE BIENNALE IN THIS GALLERY, SHOULD HAVE BEEN INDEMNIFIED BY THE COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT WHILE IN AUSTRALIA.

ONE MIGHT SAY THAT IN THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS A SOCIETY SHOULD SPONTANEOUSLY NURTURE ITS OWN ART AND ARTISTS. INDEED, THERE IS NO INTRINSIC REASON WHY GOVERNMENTS SHOULD HAVE TO INVOLVE THEMSELVES DIRECTLY WITH PROMOTION OF THE ARTS.

BUT THAT THIS STAGE HAS NOT YET BEEN REACHED WAS BROUGHT HOME TO US ALL BY THE RECENT REPORT TO THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL 'THE ARTIST IN AUSTRALIA TODAY'. THAT REPORT IDENTIFIES MANY DIFFICULTIES WITH WHICH THE AUSTRALIAN ARTS COMMUNITY MUST CONTEND. WHAT COMES THROUGH QUITE CLEARLY - AND THE REPORT HAS HIGHLIGHTED - IS THE NEED TO IMPROVE RECOGNITION OF THE PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF THE ARTIST BY OTHER SECTIONS OF SOCIETY.

AT ONE LEVEL THIS MEANS PROVIDING VISIBLE SUPPORT FOR CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC ENDEAVOUR. IT ALSO MEANS RECOGNISING THAT ARTISTS ARE WORKERS, AND AS SUCH, ARE ENTITLED TO RECEIVE A FAIR LIVING WAGE, EARNED BY THEIR EFFORTS WHICH GIVE OUR DAILY LIVES STIMULATION AND PLEASURE.

QUITE DELIBERATELY THE GOVERNMENT HAS PROVIDED SUBSTANTIAL ASSISTANCE UNDER THE COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM FOR THOSE COMMITTED TO ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL ENDEAVOURS. IT SEES SUCH SUPPORT AS BEING IMPORTANT TO FULFILLING THE GOVERNMENT'S AIMS IN THIS AREA.

THE REPORT TO THE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL ALSO ALLUDES TO THE DOUBLE BIND WITH WHICH THE ARTS COMMUNITY MUST WRESTLE. IN THIS ANALYSIS, THE ARTS COMMUNITY FOR ITS PART IS SEEN AS WANTING TO BE GIVEN A FAIR GO - TO RECEIVE CREDIT AND ESTEEM FROM SOCIETY EQUAL TO ITS CONTRIBUTION - TO BE ACCEPTED WITHIN THE COMMUNITY FOR THE VALUE OF THE CONTRIBUTION IT MAKES. THE ARTIST, HOWEVER, ALSO WANTS RECOGNITION THAT HE OR SHE IS 'DIFFERENT' AND HAS A RESPONSIBILITY, - COMPULSION - FOR CHALLENGING SOCIETY, ILLUMINATING ITS SHORTCOMINGS, QUESTIONING ITS VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS.

AGAINST THIS BACKGROUND I WOULD SUGGEST THERE IS A RESPONSIBILITY DEVOLVING PARTICULARLY ON THE COMMUNITY TO RECOGNISE AND TO UNDERSTAND THE PREDICAMENT OF THE ARTIST. WHETHER IT CAN EVER BE RESOLVED IS ANOTHER MATTER.

GOVERNMENT ACKNOWLEDGES ARTISTS AS ESSENTIAL MEMBERS OF SOCIETY AND SEES THE NEED TO HELP PROVIDE AN ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH THEIR CONTRIBUTION IS RECOGNISED AND THEIR INDEPENDENCE RESPECTED. HELPING ARTISTS TO FUNCTION EFFECTIVELY IS ONE OBJECTIVE. ANOTHER IS TO ASSIST THE GENERAL COMMUNITY TO RECOGNISE, TO EVALUATE, THE ARTISTS' CONTRIBUTION.

THE EXCELLENT REPORT TO THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT BY ITS FEDERAL CULTURAL POLICY REVIEW COMMITTEE PUT IT QUITE WELL - "THE BEST TEST OF AN ARTIST'S WORK LIES IN ITS EXPOSURE TO THE CULTURAL GAZE OF DISCRIMINATING AUDIENCES. AUDIENCES HAVE TO BE DISCRIMINATING IN ORDER TO PROVIDE THE ARTIST WITH CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSES. AND AUDIENCES NEED TO BE OPEN TO NEW EXPERIENCES IN ORDER THAT ORIGINAL WORK MAY EMERGE".

NEARER HOME, MY COLLEAGUE BARRY COHEN RECENTLY PUT SOMETHING OF THE SPIRIT OF THIS PROPOSITION TO HIS STATE COUNTERPARTS AT THE FEBRUARY CULTURAL MINISTERS' CONFERENCE. IN HIS SUCCINCT WORDS "IT IS OUR BUSINESS TO STIMULATE THE IMAGINATIVE ASPECTS OF PEOPLE'S LIVES". HE WENT ON TO STRESS THE IMPORTANT CATALYTIC ROLE SCHOOLS COULD PLAY IN THIS PROCESS.

THERE IS A NEED TO CREATE A BROAD BASE OF SKILLS IN OUR YOUNG PEOPLE. NOT ONLY DO THEY NEED TO BE GIVEN THE SKILLS TO PARTICIPATE IN OUR WORLD OF INCREASING TECHNOLOGY AND RAPID CHANGE - BUT EMPHASIS MUST ALSO BE PLACED ON THE HUMANITIES IN THE EDUCATION PROCESS.

YOUNG PEOPLE MUST BE EQUIPPED WITH AN OPENNESS OF MIND AND EXPRESSION, ESSENTIAL IN A HEALTHY PLURALISTIC SOCIETY - ESSENTIAL FOR RESPONDING APPROPRIATELY TO CHALLENGING IDEAS WHETHER THESE ARISE FROM WITHIN THE ARTS OR SOME OTHER AREA OF SOCIETY'S ACTIVITIES.

I HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO USE THE WORD 'CONSENSUS' FROM TIME TO TIME - WHEN REFERRING TO THE MIDDLE GROUND WHERE CONTENDING GROUPS SHOULD MEET WHEN CONFLICT OF INTERESTS SURFACES. IN THE ARTS I WOULD MAKE AN EXCEPTION - IN FACT WE SHOULD ALL BE A LITTLE WORRIED IF THERE IS TOO MUCH 'CONSENSUS' AND NOT A LITTLE CONTROVERSY IN THIS AREA.

IT WOULD BE A POINT OF SOME CONCERN FOR ANY SOCIETY IF IT FAILED TO RESPOND - EITHER POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY - TO WHAT ITS ARTISTS ARE SAYING, OR IF THE ATTITUDE 'IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT - IGNORE IT' BECAME TOO PREVALENT. IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, THE ARTIST SHOULD EXPECT US TO SAY SO, AND MORE IMPORTANTLY TO ASK OURSELVES 'WHY NOT'? INDIFFERENCE WOULD BETOKEN A SOCIETY BEREFT OF SPIRIT.

PARADOXICALLY IT MAY WELL BE THE VERY TIME WHEN THE ARTIST'S MESSAGE SHOULD BE HEEDED MOST THAT A SOCIETY FEELS COMPLACENT ENOUGH TO IGNORE IT.

THERE IS A PARTICULAR DANGER OF THIS SITUATION ARISING IN MODERN SOCIETIES WHERE TECHNOLOGY HAS GIVEN THE MASS MEDIA TREMENDOUS INFLUENCE IN FRAMING A SOCIETY'S ATTITUDES.

THIS INFLUENCE IS NOT MACHIAVELLIAN, NOT PURPOSEFULLY PLANNED - IT IS INHERENT IN THE FORM. TELEVISION - FOR EXAMPLE - VERY OFTEN WILL MIX IN APPARENTLY HAPPY JUXTAPOSITION THE CATAclySMIC AND THE BANAL - THE VITAL AND THE TRIVIAL. THE IMPORTANT ISSUE MAY SO EASILY BE IGNORED BY FIXING ON A SIDELIGHT, AN IRRELEVANCY. IF VAN GOGH, FOR EXAMPLE, WERE A TV STUDIO GUEST, I FEEL THERE WOULD BE AN IRRESISTIBLE TEMPTATION TO FOCUS ON HIS 'EAR' RATHER THAN HIS 'ART'.

NEVERTHELESS, I AM OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE OF OUR SOCIETY - ART, TECHNOLOGY AND ALL. I AM OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE PART OUR ARTS COMMUNITY WILL PLAY. THIS IS BASED ON THE FINE ACHIEVEMENTS IN SO MANY AREAS OF THE ARTS BY SO MANY TALENTED AUSTRALIANS.

I THINK WE SHOULD ALL BE VERY EXCITED BY THE OPPORTUNITIES AUSTRALIANS HAVE TO GIVE BACK PROGRESSIVELY MORE TO THE INTERNATIONAL ART HERITAGE FROM WHICH WE HAVE SO EAGERLY BORROWED. WE ARE BEING INCREASINGLY BLESSED BY THE INCORPORATION INTO OUR LIVES OF A WEALTH OF INFLUENCES OF DIVERSE AND RICH CULTURES FROM SO MANY PARTS OF THE WORLD.

BY DRAWING ON THIS RICHNESS AND DIVERSITY AUSTRALIA HAS THE CHANCE TO PROJECT A UNIQUE IMAGE AND VOICE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

IT IS, HOWEVER, ON THIS FIFTH BIENNALE OF SYDNEY THAT WE NOW FOCUS OUR ATTENTION. WE WELCOME THE OVERSEAS ART FRATERNITY WHO WILL SHARE IT WITH US AND HELP TO MAKE IT LIVE. IT IS NOT A STATIC, STERILE EXHIBITION, BUT SOMETHING LIVING, AN OCCASION WHEN THE FULL FORCE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IS BROUGHT INTO CLOSE FOCUS.

I AM PLEASED ALSO THAT IMPORTANT COMPONENTS OF THE EXHIBITION WILL SUBSEQUENTLY TOUR SO THAT SOME OF THE SPIRIT OF THE BIENNALE CAN BE EXPERIENCED THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY.

THE BIENNALE THEME IS PRIVATE SYMBOL/SOCIAL METAPHOR AND IN FORMALLY OPENING THE EXHIBITION I INVITE THE COMMUNITY TO COME AND SEEK OUT THE SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS; TO CONFRONT THEM AND BE CONFRONTED BY THEM; BUT, ABOVE ALL, TO ENJOY AND BE STIMULATED BY THE VITALITY OF THE BIENNALE.
