



PRIME MINISTER

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH NOTES FOR LAUNCHING OF BRUCE
STANNARD'S BEN LEXCEN: THE MAN, THE KEEL AND THE CUP
CRUISING YACHT CLUB, SYDNEY, 26 SEPTMEBER 1984

The launching of this book gives me enormous pleasure from three points of view. First, it enables me to salute the achievements of Ben Lexcen, an original Australian genius. Second, it gives me a chance to pay tribute to Bruce Stannard, whose magnificent radio commentaries and reports and whose unwavering confidence in Australia II, notwithstanding her early travails, made such an important contribution to the nation's experience of the America's Cup Challenge. Third, we have an opportunity to relive the enormous sense of national achievement which we all felt 12 months ago today. In the laconic words of Bruce Stannard's book:

"Race Seven
24 September (abandoned)
Rerun 26 September
Australia II defeated Liberty by 41
seconds"

Behind those laconic words, however, there was a great awakening of Australian patriotism unparalleled since the War. Whatever our differences all Australians could be extraordinarily proud of that achievement. On that 26 September last year, this country was united. All Australians were indeed brought together.

But the Australia II triumph also represented something far wider. It was a symbol that this country was on the road back. Australia was on the move. Australia was winning again.

The Australia II victory showed that Australian drive, Australian determination, Australian ingenuity could take on the world's best and triumph. And it was the triumph of Australia II that epitomised the new national spirit of confidence, commitment and achievement.

That wider significance of the Australia II experience makes this book even more worthy of consideration. Because it is Ben Lexcen's struggle and eventual triumph that encapsulates what the Australia II achievement was all about. And indeed because without Ben Lexcen there would have been no Australia II victory.

Ben Lexcen emerges from Bruce Stannard's pages as original and remarkable a man as his yacht designs have been radical and innovative. I had expected that he must have been born on Sydney Harbour or at least somewhere by the sea. In fact, he is a boy from the bush, born in Boggabri in north-western New South Wales.

For those who see sailing as a silver-tail sport, it will come as a surprise to learn that Ben was born to hardship. He had a very tough childhood and, in fact, spent some time in a boys home. Life there was pretty hard but it had one enormously important benefit, both for Ben and for Australia: some unknown benefactor had donated to the home hundreds of old yachting magazines, from which he developed a fascination for boats and sail.

Ben, like my Treasurer, Paul Keating - another genius destined to come into his own in 1983 - left school at 14. He worked as a metal worker at the Railway Depot at Cardiff near Newcastle and there taught himself to sail, design and build sailing boats and, as Bruce says, developed skills which a naval architect with a university degree would never dream of employing. Ben's sailing career is very much the story of sailing over the last 30 years in Australia. He began his sailing in those classic Australian craft, the VJ and VS. Later he made revolutionary design changes to those supreme and unique Australian racing machines, the 18-footers. At the same time, he showed his expertise in international classes, such as the Soling and the Flying Dutchman, in which he won the title of Australian Yachtsman of the Year in 1967.

From dinghies Ben graduated to, and showed his mastery in, ocean-going craft, designing such outstanding boats as Mercedes III and Apollo. Many of Ben's designs achieved superb results in international ocean racing.

With this basis, he graduated to the supreme yacht racing test. His work on Apollo marked the beginning of his relationship with Alan Bond and his involvement in the America's Cup campaigns, unsuccessful (occasionally bitterly so) in 1974, 1977 and 1980 and finally brilliantly triumphant in 1983. This is not a time, of course, to dwell on the losing challenges but they were very important in preparing the ground for the 1983 success. What emerges from Bruce Stannard's account of the early campaigns is the way in which the Bond team, and Ben particularly, learned

from their own experiences and from the innovations of other challengers, not only those from the United States.

The other striking lesson is the way in which the team had the guts to bounce back after some frankly pretty disastrous results. We should remember that in 1974 and 1977 the Australians went down 4 nil. One can only be impressed by Ben's honesty in blaming himself for the loss of the last race in 1980, when he believes he gave Jim Hardy bad tactical advice, and his realistic optimism after winning the one race in 1980 that Australia had the ability to win the America's Cup.

Bruce Stannard's book properly gives importance to the famous Lexcen winged keel. Without this inspired invention, Australia II's results may well have been very different. Indeed, Ben Lexcen is fairly critical of her basic hull design and in view of his realism, honesty and determination to do better this suggests that the challengers in 1987 will have a real job on their hands. With the keel, Australia II, not only, in Ben's poetic words, "looked like a giant Plesiosaur with wonderfully rounded flippers," but, under the superb seamanship of John Bertrand and the crew, put up a performance which took her into sailing history and caught the imagination of Australia and the world.

The romance and mystery of the keel are an integral part of the story of Australia II. And every romance and mystery requires a villain. At this point, enter the New York Yacht Club. It has been suggested occasionally that I am somewhat prone to resort to litigation but with due modesty I doubt if I could compete with the ingenuity and total commitment which the NYCC showed in its attempts to keep Ben's magic keel out of the water. Basic to their case, of course, was the suggestion that he had received improper foreign assistance in its design. Again, Ben's colourful words say it all; "They are accusing me of cheating I have a mind to admit it all and tell them that I really owe the secret of the design to a Greek guy who helped me out. He's been dead for 2000 years but invaluable. Bloody Archimedes."

Bruce Stannard's technically informed and vividly written account of the seven races has all the excitement and professional competence which he brought to his radio and press commentaries at the time and crown what is, I believe, an outstanding book on Australian yachting and, as I have indicated, a great Australian character.

In the story of Ben Lexcen I see one very important lesson for contemporary Australia: It demonstrates the importance of applying our native ingenuity and innovative capacity, while staying abreast of international technological

developments. Even as a child, he kept himself informed of, and learned from, what was being done by such great international designers as Nat Herreschoff, Uffa Fox and Manfred Curry. As a man, he was in no way ashamed of, or in any sense, hypocritical about, his use of the tank testing computer facilities in the Netherlands.

Ben Lexcen's achievement lies in absorbing that international technology and going beyond it. Just as he helped to revolutionise the Australian 18 footer class in the 1962's, so has he revolutionised the international 12 metre class in the 1980's. And his achievement has brought success to Australia at the summit of international competition.

Ben's is an example which Australians in all fields of endeavour can look to, as our country faces the challenges of the late 20th Century. Australia II represents the latest state of the art in 12 metre yachting. That obviously involves a great deal of absorbed international technology and know-how but no-one can deny that Australia II is a magnificent Australian technological achievement any more than we can deny that Ben Lexcen is a unique Australian genius and original character. All credit to Bruce Stannard for telling the story of both of them.
