



## PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
LAUNCHING OF PROFESSOR PATRICK O'FARRELL'S BOOK  
"THE IRISH IN AUSTRALIA" - UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES  
SYDNEY - 15 OCTOBER 1986

Mr Horton, Ambassador Small, Irish Australians, ladies and gentlemen

Professor O'Farrell in his introductory remarks to The Irish in Australia says: "There is a nice irony in the situation of the Irish Government joining the congratulatory celebration of the Bicentennial of the foundation of a British colony to which many Irish were sent as prisoners for activities in pursuit of Irish independence".

He goes on to say that "it is delightfully appropriate that it should do so by assisting the publication of a book that draws attention to the contribution of those compulsory Irish Australians, and those who came free, to the building of the nation that resulted from that foundation".

The willingness of the Irish Government to subsidise this book is indeed, as President Hillery said in Canberra last year, recognition of the involvement of Irish men and women in the development of Australia for nearly two hundred years. I understand that the Irish Government's contribution to this project not only allowed Professor O'Farrell to bring to fruition his life-time's study of the Irish in Australia, but has also enabled the book to be sold at a very attractive price.

This book, whose beautiful presentation is a great credit to the New South Wales University Press and to the Australian printers, Globe Press, is destined to have an even wider impact.

Flowing from it is a documentary mini-series on the Irish in Australia, being filmed here and in Ireland with the co-operation of the Irish Government network, which will be shown on ABC-TV and in Ireland, and I am sure will have as great an impact on Australians as such series as "Rush".

This book is only one of the Irish contributions to our Bicentennial. The Irish Government has established an energetic Irish Australian Bicentennial Committee to co-ordinate an exciting program. Aware of the growing interest by Australians in their heritage, the Irish Government is microfilming all the convict records - some 40,000 - in its archives, and will make these available to Australia as a Bicentennial gift.

Plans are also underway for other Bicentennial events such as visits by theatre and folk groups, exhibitions and displays of Gaelic football - the game which is owed much by our national football code.

The first Bicentennial Conference focusing on the historical links binding Australia and Ireland was held in Kilkenny in 1983, a major conference was held at the ANU in August last year, and another is planned to be held in Ireland next year.

All of this is a reflection of the interest of the five million Australians with some Irish in them - and the remaining eleven million who want to understand why - as well as of the indefatigable efforts of the Irish Ambassador to Australia, Joe Small, whose dynamism and encyclopedic knowledge of all things Irish-Australian has given a great impetus to the relations between our countries and especially to Irish participation in our Bicentennial celebrations.

I might mention here that in 1988 we in Australia will have a chance to reciprocate in a small way some of the warmth and interest that has been shown in Ireland towards our 200th birthday as a modern nation. Our Bicentennial year is also being celebrated as the millennium of Dublin and I hope it will be possible to co-operate with the organisers of that event to ensure that Australia's acknowledgement to Ireland is commemorated during the proceedings.

The Irish in Australia documents one of the dominant groups making Australia the country it is today. Professor O'Farrell points out that in our first hundred and fifty years the Irish questioned and challenged attitudes to the prevailing culture and religion. They sought and achieved a nation broad and tolerant enough to include them as they were, tolerant enough to accept those aspects of life they considered most important.

In achieving this, they too changed. Workers of Irish-Catholic descent were unlike their counterparts in Ireland, who were poorly unionised and - until recently - without significant political expression. The forces they largely generated made them strongly unionised and attached to a significant political party - and one cannot fault their political judgment in the party which they predominantly chose to support.

Professor O'Farrell's book chronicles the emergence of the Irish from a virtually sub-human status, based on the sort of prejudices satirised by Swift in his 'Modest Proposal', to which they were consigned by the establishment during Australia's convict days. Judge-Advocate Colonel David Collins, for example, in 1791 referred to the Irish as "a race of beings (for they do not deserve the appellation of men)" and as being "nearly as wild themselves as the cattle".

Some "beings"!

Long before the 200-year span of the book is up, the Irish have asserted themselves, established their equality, placed themselves firmly in the mainstream of Australian life. And the measure of their success in becoming central to the life of Australia, paradoxically, is their relative lack of involvement in the passions of Irish politics, as Professor O'Farrell notes in the latter part of his book.

In 1988 we will be celebrating two centuries of work and achievement.

It is a time to reflect on the distinctiveness of our society; to recognise the contributions of all the groups, all the individuals, who have lived and worked together to make this country what it is today. The role of people with Irish roots in coming to grips with many of the major issues which have confronted us over these years will be rightly recognised as central. I need only mention the long debate over State aid to education, the conscription controversies of the First World War, the interaction between labour and capitalism and, developing from this, the foundation and achievements of the Australian Labor Party. Need I say more than to note that the two Prime Ministers for whom I have the greatest regard - Curtin and Chifley - were both of Irish descent.

For it was through the struggles of our early years that our national character was born, and that the promise of this land was first realised. People from all parts of the world have been drawn to this country with the promise of a life of freedom, of opportunity, of a chance to make a contribution in this just and fair society which the early Irish Australians, and many others, sought to achieve.

The Irish in Australia is one of the first Bicentennial histories and one that any Prime Minister would have been proud to launch. But coming from a Ministry of Bowens, Keatings, Youngs, Ryans, Kerins and Duffys what choice did I have?

Australians of Irish origin will obviously have a particular interest in Professor O'Farrell's work but it will also be welcomed by all Australians seeking to know why we are what we are.

And, I might add, by all Australians who appreciate superb prose. I have rarely read anything more moving than the final paragraph of The Irish in Australia, which surely will be anthologised in any representative selection of Australian writing in the last part of this century. I will content myself with the following excerpt:

"Ireland in Australia was both fact and dream. Its dimensions of fact coincide with the boundaries of the continent, but its dreams were unbounded, spanning the world - and more than the world. No man can fix the boundaries of the nation of the mind and heart. Least of all the soul. Nor call their territories complete".

In writing about the Irish, Patrick O'Farrell has expressed a truth which can be applied to all the nationalities who make up this great country.

It gives me enormous pleasure to launch this book, which in both its outstanding intellectual content and technical craftsmanship is genuinely Made in Australia.

I congratulate Professor O'Farrell, the New South Wales University Press and the Irish Government on the production of this elegant and devoted work of scholarship, which will serve as the definitive account of a vital part of the development of our nation and a most valuable contribution to Australia's Bicentenary.

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