



PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OPENING OF GREEK-AUSTRALIAN CONFERENCE
MELBOURNE - 13 MARCH 1987

Thank you for your invitation to open the Greek-Australian conference here in Melbourne today.

I must at the outset extend a special welcome to our distinguished guests from Greece. The Greek Government has made a significant contribution to the success of this conference by sending to us the Deputy Minister for Culture responsible for Greeks Abroad, the Minister for the Aegean, and the Deputy Minister of Education Culture and Health. Welcome also to other members of the Greek Parliament, university professors and other Greek visitors. Your presence is indeed a pleasure and an honour for us.

Seeing you here brings back warm memories of the hospitality extended to me by Prime Minister Papandreou and the Greek Government and the very valuable talks we had in Greece last year.

That visit, which stands out as a highlight in my period as Prime Minister, was a splendid confirmation of the close friendship and cooperation between Greece and Australia. May I ask our Greek visitors to convey the regards and respect of the Australian Government and people to the Greek Government and people on your return.

No one could visit Australia today without appreciating the exceptional contribution Greek people have made to this nation. There are well over 300,000 Australians whose first language is Greek, in addition to those of succeeding generations who have maintained the language of their forebears. Many Australians cherish their Greek origin as well as their Australian identity. And for us all the Greek tradition is an essential component of our shared cultural heritage.

Today, Greek Australians are in a unique position to bring together the best of both worlds - the Greek love of freedom and the Australian passion for equality of opportunity.

Since the beginning of European settlement Australia and Greece have shared many experiences. Greeks first arrived in this country in 1829 - convicts who had been transported for piracy in the Mediterranean. Since then the Greek contribution to this nation has been felt and appreciated in virtually every industry and occupation and in virtually every town and city - including, I am proud to say, in the Australian Labor Party.

Australians have had other strong links with Greece. We fought there in two World Wars.

While in Athens last year, I had the memorable experience of attending and speaking at the Anzac Day ceremony. I recalled then, as I do now, the Battle of Crete, where Australians stood side by side with their Greek and other allies defending Greece against the Axis invaders. Those dramatic days have left enduring friendships, not only among those who fought, but among men and women of succeeding generations.

Greek Australians and Australian ex-service personnel are joining to erect an Australian-Hellenic Memorial in Canberra to commemorate these shared experiences.

Our Government was happy to be able to make a site available near the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and I look forward to launching the appeal to raise funds for the Australian - Hellenic Memorial early next month.

The very significant Greek-Australian component of our population makes it especially important that Greece be well represented in our Bicentenary celebrations next year. A Greek Australian Bicentenary Committee has been established in Athens to co-ordinate Greek participation. We are keen to explore ways in which some of the exciting proposals that emerged from the Committee's first meeting last month might be implemented. We look forward too to the participation of representatives from Greece in the many commemorative sporting, academic, cultural and other events and activities which will be a special feature of life in Australia in 1988.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Australian community represents an almost unparalleled diversity of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious origins and identities. We have been a multicultural community since at least 1788. Today, one in five Australians was born overseas, one in three has parents born overseas and immigrants make up a quarter of the labour force.

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In recognition of this diversity, the Australian government has developed and adopted multiculturalism as a key social policy. The concept has been articulated as a legitimate element of the national political agenda since the early 1970's, for which we acknowledge the contribution of an earlier Labor government.

Multiculturalism has developed as a social policy which significantly affects all Australians. It is predicated on the notion of equality of opportunity for all, not isolated privilege for some.

The basic principles of multiculturalism have most recently been enunciated in the Government's Review of Migrant and Multicultural Programs and Services.

This stated that, first, all members of the Australian community should have an equitable opportunity to participate in the economic, social, cultural and political life of the nation.

Second, all members of the Australian community should have access to an equitable share of the resources which governments manage on behalf of the community.

Third, all members of the Australian community should have the opportunity to participate in and influence the design and operation of government policies, programs and services.

And finally, all members of the Australian community should have the right, within the law, to enjoy their own culture, to practise their own religion, and to use their own language - and should respect the rights of others to their own culture, religion and language.

Multiculturalism thus does not deny the importance of promoting social harmony and a distinctive national identity. Indeed multiculturalism is essential if we are to promote a sense of unity as a nation. After all, few things are more divisive or destabilising than attempts to impose inequality or repress individuality. That way lies discord and disunity.

Multiculturalism is more than mere rhetoric. All Australians, irrespective of background, have the right to participate fully in national life and it is incumbent on government to identify and remove barriers to that process, and to make the resources of the community fairly available to all Australians. The Government must, further, ensure equitable access to its own services.

We must support people in exercising not only their obligations but also their rights to influence the shaping of decisions and programs that affect them. Consultation will continue to be a guiding principle of this Government.

I recently appointed my colleague Mick Young as Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. He has long had a keen interest in Australia's migrant community - not least as shadow Minister for three years.

Mr Young will be assisted in this portfolio by Minister Clyde Holding.

I have also asked Mr Young to assist me in my portfolio duties on Multicultural Affairs.

Today I wish to announce further steps in my Government's enhancement of multiculturalism.

I am establishing two bodies dealing with multiculturalism - the Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs and the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

The Advisory Council will be reporting directly to me and to Mr Young.

The Council is to be chaired by Justice Sir James Gobbo of the Victorian Supreme Court. Sir James has had a leading role in serving Governments and community groups. He is exceptionally placed to advise on the policy of multiculturalism - and to help further its acceptance and expression in today's Australia. Sir James will undoubtedly be more than ably assisted by his Deputy, Mr George Wojak, who also has an acknowledged record of service across all sections of the Australian community. He is currently President of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia.

I expect the Council to play a key role in providing advice on ways to promote Australia's continuing evolution as a multicultural community.

The Council will be supported in its role by the new Office of Multicultural Affairs being established in my Department. The Head of the office is Dr Peter Shergold. Peter has been Associate Professor in the Department of Economic History at the University of New South Wales. He will already be known to many of you through his research expertise and his work with the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils as well as his direct responsibilities in setting up the Ethnic Archives at the University of New South Wales.

These decisions are significant.

For we cannot assume that the ideals of multiculturalism will win by default.

All of us who believe in these values must be prepared to defend them.

Reactionary forces in various guises are now engaged in a concerted assault on the basic decencies which are fundamental to Australia.

Attempting to appeal to fear, uncertainty and ignorance, they are seeking to redistribute public wealth from ordinary Australians to the greedy few; to put a strait-jacket on our great institutions of organised labour; to realign our foreign policy with the diminishing centres of racism and apartheid.

And I have no doubt that they also have multiculturalism in their sights.

People who should know better purport to find something sinister in the Bicentennial concept of "Living Together". Presumably they look back fondly to the origins of European settlement in Australia brilliantly and starkly described in Robert Hughes' 'The Fatal Shore'.

As Hughes points out, the establishment of that era not only sought for example, to subjugate our Irish ancestors. Their treatment of Australia's Aboriginal community had much harsher and more tragic consequences. It is only in the past 20 years that Federal Governments of both major parties have taken real steps to redress the balance.

Yet there are those today who would still impose an assimilationist, monolithic standard to which all groups should conform, who would withdraw assistance from those groups who need it, who have no concern for access or equity, who, as I have said, even balk at the humanity in the notion of 'Living Together'.

One of our great achievements as a nation is that we have transcended our intolerant, divisive origins. I am proud - we can all be proud - that Australia has developed into a cohesive and essentially very decent and humane society, in which people of different ethnic backgrounds, religions, races and languages are able to get "a fair go".

This Government will do what must be done to defend and advance this vital process.

That is why I believe our initiatives on multiculturalism are important and timely.

And that is why it is very appropriate that the Victorian Government in conjunction with the Greek Government and the Greek communities of Victoria should have organised this Conference to discuss and assess the needs and concerns of the Greek community in the 1980's.

I congratulate you on this initiative and wish you success.
