



PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE BICENTENNIAL EXHIBITION,
SHIPWRECK!
PERTH - 7 JANUARY 1988

Premier Burke
Your Excellency
Mr Chairman
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

This is a remarkable and indeed, unique event -

- not just in the context of Australia's Bicentenary Year, and the vast range of activities associated with the Year
- and not only in the context of Australia's maritime history
- but, in its wider context as a tribute to the indomitable human spirit
- our tribute, our salute, to the countless thousands of men, women and children who, over the course of four centuries braved the mighty oceans and perished around our shores.

This remarkable Exhibition bears the simple and poignant title - SHIPWRECK!

That, in itself, is a striking reminder of one of the central messages which the commemoration of the Bicentenary is designed to bring to the people of Australia, and especially to our children.

And that message, or at least an important part of the message, is about the appalling hardships, the dangers, the difficulties and the suffering involved in the early part of the European chapter in the story of modern Australia.

And this Exhibition conveys that message in a manner which is as moving as it is memorable.

I need only mention two of the displays to make the point.

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There is the display dealing with the Batavia, wrecked off the West Australian coast in 1629 - more than 350 years ago.

That, in itself, is an incredible story of human evil, of tyranny, of cruelty and fanaticism.

Yet, at the same time, a story of human endurance, courage, loyalty and faith.

At both those levels, it is almost a parable of the human condition.

And here I again make the point, so relevant to the Bicentenary - that we have to recognise that, throughout human history great achievement has been all too often accompanied by great wrongs - and that our history is no exception.

I mention a second example from this Exhibition.

The wreck of the Sirius.

Sirius was Governor Phillip's flagship in the First Fleet.

It then became the supply ship for the struggling colony at Sydney Cove - its lifeline.

The wreck of the Sirius off Norfolk Island in 1790 struck an almost mortal blow to a settlement already on the brink of starvation.

Yet it did survive.

And its survival against appalling odds is an epic story of human endurance and the achievement of the human spirit.

Yet it was the achievement, not of history's heroes, but the achievement of outcasts and exiles.

And it is through reflecting on these things that all of us will be able to learn and understand better the true meaning of the Bicentenary.

And that is why this Exhibition is so important.

So superb an Exhibition is of course a remarkable achievement in itself.

SHIPWRECK! is one of three Australian exhibitions of the four projects the International Cultural Corporation of Australia is managing for the Australian Bicentennial Authority. This is in itself noteworthy, because in the past Australia has tended to import major exhibitions from overseas.

It is part of the biggest program of Gallery and Museum exhibitions ever staged in Australia. This is consistent with the spirit of the Bicentennial Arts Program which celebrates the achievements of Australia's performing and visual artists.

And it is the first national recognition of the international pre-eminence of the marine archaeologists of the Western Australian Museum and the Queensland Museum.

The Australian public has never before been afforded such an opportunity to see the fascinating results of the work of our marine archaeologists, or to see the early European history of our continent through this evidence of the past. Jim Leslie has mentioned some of the people and organisations who have contributed so much.

I add my thanks to his, and, I wish also to acknowledge the support of scholars and governments in Europe and, in particular, the Government of the Netherlands.

I congratulate the organising museums - the Museum of Victoria in association with the Western Australian Museum and the Queensland Museum (Mr Bob Edwards, Director, Museum of Victoria, The Hon Mr Justice Kennedy, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Western Australian Museum, and Mr John Bannister, Director, Western Australian Museum are here today).

On behalf of the people of Australia I thank the lenders of priceless exhibits, particularly the Rijksmuseum and The Royal Coin Cabinet in The Netherlands.

Among the Australian contributors, Australian Airlines is the major sponsor of the Bicentennial Exhibition program.

Other national sponsors include the new Australian National Maritime Museum.

I also thank Western Australian supporters, members of the National Planning Committee for the exhibition, and of course the International Cultural Corporation of Australia.

Especially welcome has been the assistance given by a consortium of Dutch companies:

ABN Australia Limited
 Amro Australia Pty Ltd
 Heineken Australia Pty Ltd
 Holdhuys Australia Pty Ltd
 KLM Royal Dutch Airlines
 Nedlloyd Australia Pty Ltd
 Phillips Holdings Industries Pty Ltd
 Royal Nedlloyd Groep NV
 Seabridge Australia Pty Ltd

In particular, let me mention some of our Dutch friends whose personal contribution has been critical.

I pay personal tribute to his Excellency Mr Joris Vos, Ambassador of The Netherlands, who rallied Dutch support for the project; to Professor Ernst van den Bogaart of the Schiff Commission, Department of Foreign Affairs in The Netherlands who provided valued scholarship and assistance with Dutch loans; and to Mr Hank Ebes, a special consultant and print collector who conducted the delicate negotiations to borrow the Caspar Boudaen Cameo and arranged for the Batavia Replica Sloop to tour Australia in 1988.

Let me make one final point.

One of the greatest treasures of the Exhibition is the plate which Dirk Hartog inscribed and nailed to a post near Shark Bay in 1616. It was taken to Holland in 1697 and returns now to Australia for the first time.

The plate is the oldest known European artifact associated with Australian history.

But the point I make is this:

The exhibition presents an extraordinary inheritance of world cultural property.

Europeans set their mark on this continent 372 years ago.

But the oldest artifact made by the Australian aborigine - the oldest so far discovered - is 18,000 years old.

As it travels throughout Australia, this Exhibition will give our people a new perspective and new insights into their history.

But there are other perspectives, other insights, that can enrich our understanding, if only we will look and learn.
