



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OPENING OF HERMITAGE EXHIBITION
SYDNEY - 9 MARCH 1988**

One of the highlights of my visit to the Soviet Union late last year was the tour Hazel and I were able to make of the Hermitage in Leningrad, home of one of the world's great art collections.

The Hermitage is one of the largest and most venerable art collecting institutions in the world. As people lucky enough to have visited it can testify, its international renown is well deserved. Its size was conveyed to me by the director of the Gallery in these terms: that if a visitor spent only one minute before each item of the collection it would still take eight years to complete the viewing.

During my visit, I was pleased to pay tribute to the Soviet authorities responsible for making available to Australia in 1988 this wonderful exhibition of paintings and drawings. It gives me pleasure to repeat those thanks now.

This very fine gesture to mark the Bicentenary is one to which I attach particular significance as an indication of the importance the Soviet Union attaches to relations with Australia.

The exhibition has been made possible under the Cultural Exchange Agreement between our two countries, an agreement under which a range of admirable and innovative activities have over the years enhanced mutual understanding between Australian and Soviet citizens.

In return for this exhibition and other Soviet cultural contributions, the Australian Ballet and an Aboriginal art exhibition will this year tour the Soviet Union. In 1989 a return exhibition of French art works from this gallery and the National Gallery of Victoria will be shown in the Soviet Union.

The Bicentenary has provided a good opportunity to build on the contacts between our peoples. Australians were thrilled to join the Soviet cosmonauts in their space station during the telecast of "Australia Live", which marked the opening of the Bicentennial Year on 1 January. We are happy too, to welcome the Soviet Union as one of the 50 or so Governments participating in World Expo 88 in Brisbane.

Within Australia, the director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales Edmund Capon deserves our thanks and congratulations for his work in creating the exhibition.

It gives me particular pleasure to declare the exhibition open and in doing so I offer congratulations to all those responsible, both in Australia and in the Soviet Union, for their work over a number of years to bring these Leningrad masterpieces to Australian audiences.

With the benefit of my partial preview of this exhibition in Leningrad, I can assert with confidence that it will prove a memorable experience for all who see it in Australia
