



PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE
CANBERRA - 22 SEPTEMBER 1988

Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen

This year, Australia celebrates two hundred years of European settlement of this continent.

This anniversary has given the Australian people the opportunity to celebrate their achievements, and the achievements of their forefathers, in building a free, prosperous and harmonious community in this land. And we celebrate too the achievements of the Aboriginal people who settled and cared for this land for more than 40,000 years before 1788.

As part of our bicentennial celebrations, we have been delighted to be visited by so many of our friends from overseas - not just the tourists who are appreciating the tremendous appeal of Australia as a holiday destination; not just the business people who are realising Australia's potential as a source of exports and a place for investment and joint ventures; but also the Government leaders, ministers and parliamentarians who have visited us.

It is for this reason that the 34th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference is an important event for Australians. You are all very welcome guests.

Visits such as yours serve to strengthen the already strong ties of friendship that exist at the Government level - and by extension, that exist at the people-to-people level - between Australia and the rest of the world.

One of the highlights of the Bicentennial year was the opening of this new and permanent Parliament House which will serve as the home for the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia for the next two centuries and more.

It is a building, we say modestly, which is a magnificent parliamentary home. It's already become a major attraction for Australian and overseas visitors. This Great Hall and the other formal spaces of this building have already served as the focus for the formal hospitality extended to the Heads of Government and Heads of State who have visited Australia for the Bicentenary.

Most importantly, this new building provides the most tangible sort of proof that Australians place great and enduring value on the system of parliamentary democracy.

Australians know the truth that people are best governed when they govern themselves. It is from the people, through the institution of Parliament, that Governments derive legitimacy and it is through those Parliamentary institutions that democratic Governments remain responsive to the public will.

This Parliament reflects the diversity of the entire Australian society and responds to the needs of the whole Australian community.

So in our Bicentennial year, in this new Parliamentary building, we are proud hosts indeed to this Conference.

As parliamentarians all, we have a heavy responsibility on our shoulders.

It is the responsibility to conduct ourselves - in our Parliaments, in our communities and in the world at large - in such a way as to build up rather than erode the stature of the institution of parliament.

It is the responsibility to honour those who have fought in war and in peace to build and to ensure the survival of the democratic principle.

It is the responsibility to understand the danger of taking that principle for granted - in a world in which so many people live subjected to despotism, in many cases never having experienced the liberties and dignities of a democratic society.

As members of parliament we are of course separated by differences of individual and party opinion. But long after those legitimate differences have been resolved or forgotten, the institution of parliament must live on.

So our greatest obligation, our heaviest responsibility is to ensure that our parliaments do endure, that they are not eroded, are not allowed to wither, and do not succumb to those forces which seek to repress diversity of view point and which seek to suppress liberty of expression.

My emphasis tonight on diversity is appropriate in view of the diversity of the Commonwealth of which we are all members.

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Just as Parliaments promote tolerance and understanding by bringing together people of different backgrounds, circumstances and views, so is this true of the Commonwealth at large.

There can surely be no more disparate group of nations than those that compose the Commonwealth itself. We represent nations of every part of the world, of every continent, of different traditions.

As Prime Minister, I have the pleasure every two years of attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings. I am very much looking forward to next year's meeting in Kuala Lumpur, which will be my fourth CHOGM. At each meeting I have been impressed by the determination shown by leaders to come together in a constructive way to address issues of international significance.

This ability of the Commonwealth to bring together individuals and nations of extraordinary diversity is apparent of course at all levels, not just Head of Government. Your conference this week is a significant and valuable example.

There are always people who claim that out of such diversity can only come weakness and an overall approach based on the lowest common denominator.

But the continuing resilience and relevance of the Commonwealth puts the lie to such claims.

One need look no further than the Commonwealth's activity in regard to Southern Africa.

In Zimbabwe, the Commonwealth was instrumental in the negotiating process which culminated, as it should have, with the majority black population gaining power.

In South Africa, the Commonwealth has played an important role in the struggle to destroy the abhorrent system of apartheid. Australia was proud to offer the services of our former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser for the Eminent Persons Group on southern Africa and while the group's work was disregarded by the intransigent South African government, we remain convinced that the negotiating concept they proposed provides the best basis for a settlement in the region.

I want to express my confidence in the Commonwealth's work. I am confident we are working in the only acceptable way towards the only acceptable goal - and I am confident that our work and pressure, together with the work and pressure of other people of good will in the world - will be rewarded, eventually, with success.

We can only hope that the South African authorities will come to their senses in time to avert catastrophe. As we have said before, the authorities could begin this process by immediately and unconditionally releasing Nelson Mandela.

Ladies and Gentlemen

For the success of occasions such as this, and of the programs which result from them, much credit is due to the Commonwealth Secretariat, and our Secretary General, Sonny Ramphal.

In his three terms in office as Secretary General, Sonny Ramphal has contributed greatly to the well-being of the Commonwealth family and to developing and maintaining Commonwealth initiatives. He is now looking to move on at the end of his current term in 1990 and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the leadership he has shown over his years in office.

This cannot of course be a campaign speech, but you would not be unaware that we believe there is a candidate for this position who, because of his experience in the Australian parliamentary tradition and the wider Commonwealth, has impeccable credentials.

None of our many visitors to this magnificent new Parliamentary complex during our Bicentennial year is more welcome than you are, our fellow parliamentarians from around the Commonwealth.

We welcome you, and wish you well in the remainder of your deliberations and for the rest of your stay with us in Australia.

I now propose a toast to our distinguished visitors to the 34th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference.

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