



PRIME MINISTER

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OPENING DINNER
GOVERNMENT-INDUSTRY CONFERENCE
AGAINST CHEMICAL WEAPONS
CANBERRA 18 SEPTEMBER 1989**

Excellencies
Distinguished guests
Parliamentary Colleagues
Ladies and Gentlemen

Three quarters of a century ago, the nations of the world were plunged into the first truly global conflict.

The trauma, brutality and horror of that war are still scorched into the collective memory of us all.

Not least among the barbarisms that man inflicted on his fellow man in that first world war was the widespread use of poison gas - a weapon so destructive and indiscriminate in its effect that those who used it could not prevent troops of their own side - let alone civilians - being caught in the poisonous clouds.

Australia, then a very young nation, contributed its men and money unstintingly to the battles being fought, for the most part, on the other side of the globe.

Thousands of Australian soldiers died due to the effects of poison gas. Thousands more returned home with damaged lungs to endure, and not to enjoy, the peace for which they had fought.

The horrors of the chemical battlefields of World War 1 led the world community to express its outright rejection of chemical warfare in the 1925 Geneva protocol. That treaty - recently reaffirmed by 149 nations earlier this year in Paris - remains today the fundamental embodiment of the world's norms and restraints against chemical warfare.

But in recent years the world community has been appalled by the fact that despite the Geneva protocol, the unthinkable has again happened: large scale use of chemical weapons has recurred in our own time.

So it is essential that we complete the work of our forebears. We must ban not merely the use but also the very existence of chemical weapons.

That, delegates and friends, is what has brought you all this way to Canberra: the desire for a permanent and secure remedy in the form of a chemical weapons convention.

This gathering is an historic one - a world first.

It represents an effort to give new impetus in this long saga.

It represents a genuine endeavour to eliminate for the first time on a multilateral basis an entire class of existing weapons.

And in recognition of the sweeping nature of that effort, it is the first time that a major industrial group has been called on in its entirety to participate in the disarmament process.

Let me take this opportunity formally to welcome the representatives of the nearly 70 Governments present for this conference, and to welcome with equal warmth the representatives of the chemical industry, whose involvement will be so vital to the proper design and implementation of a completed Chemical Weapons Convention.

Together, the participation of governments and industry is a tremendous encouragement that the work our negotiators are undertaking in Geneva can and will be brought to a successful resolution.

Let me say at the outset that Australia is a proud host of this conference - and an unashamedly enthusiastic supporter of the proposed convention.

Nor do we come as recent converts to the cause.

We have, we say with pride, been active in the forums of the world - not least in the Conference on Disarmament - on this and other disarmament issues.

We have of course forsworn any recourse to chemical weapons and encourage others to do likewise.

Only last month, here in Canberra, officials from 22 nations of the Asia-Pacific region attended a seminar to discuss the details of the proposed convention and its ramifications and strategic benefits for our region.

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That seminar emerged from a proposal I launched last year to develop a regional initiative on chemical weapons - to support at the regional level the efforts being made at Geneva.

The Australian Government has also worked closely with our own chemical industry for many years, in the knowledge that drawing industry into the processes of formulating and implementing policy is the only effective way towards a chemical weapons ban.

Our experience of conducting trial inspections of chemical plants is one practical example of how cooperation with industry can jointly advance understanding of the technical issues awaiting resolution in the Convention.

So we host this conference thoroughly cognisant of the complexities involved in this issue - but let me hasten to add, realistically optimistic that these complexities can be resolved.

Delegates and friends

The prospect of a complete and lasting ban on chemical weapons is indeed a compelling one.

We have before us the chance to terminate this grotesque misapplication of the fruits of chemical science.

This would not only have inestimable value as a milestone in its own right; it would also be a tremendous demonstration, in the worldwide search for more comprehensive arms control and disarmament, of what can be achieved with goodwill, energy and patience.

Let each disarmament task be undertaken with the appropriate tools; let the nexus between this conference and the forums of nuclear disarmament be the bridge of greater confidence and trust that we can provide by the successful achievement of complete and verified chemical disarmament.

It would be a tragedy if any nation stood back from this convention through misunderstanding of its aims and requirements, or if any nation withheld adherence because it wrongly felt the convention was in some way inimical to its interests.

Delegates

No industry can operate in a moral vacuum, nor can its activities be insulated from the broader concerns of the society it serves and in which it finds its markets.

There is increasingly a feeling that industries must be held to account for the effects of their operations - most clearly evident of course in rising community concern about the environment.

The presence of so many distinguished leaders of the chemical industry at this conference amply demonstrates that in this vital industry you are taking your responsibilities seriously and acting upon them.

Because of course the chemical industry has nothing to fear, and much to gain, from the successful conclusion of a chemicals weapons convention.

A chemical weapons convention will not be inimical to the interests of the industry. It will not hamper legitimate trade in chemicals or the flow of chemical technology.

Exactly the opposite is true: a convention with credible verification will provide a vital safeguard, allowing the industry to manufacture and trade freely and confidently for any legitimate civil purpose.

In the absence of a convention, the chances of legitimate activities being placed under clouds of suspicion - of unreasoning fears being experienced about chemical technology - of honest traders being discriminated against - are much higher.

Central to the idea of a chemical weapons convention is true and visible even-handedness. So in this conference, we must act on the understanding that a solution that does not draw on a consensus of all interested parties, and that is not carefully crafted with all their concerns in mind, is, in the long term, no solution at all.

The challenge and the inspiration of this issue is that we must all work together. The nature of the task is that as equal partners, we will work towards a goal which will make us all equal beneficiaries.

The progress in Geneva gives us great hope and confidence that there is at hand an effective and comprehensive solution to the abhorrent threat posed by chemical weapons.

The Australian Government is convinced that the international community has before it a real opportunity to rid the world entirely of these weapons.

We are determined to do what we can to capture that opportunity.

My friends, when we look from this parliamentary building across the lake we see on the other shore the Australian War Memorial, wherein are inscribed the names of all those who gave their lives in battle for this nation.

Among them are those thousands of names of the victims of chemical weapons of the First World War.

Many other nations have suffered even more grievously than we, and more recently than we, from the scourge of this repellent form of weaponry.

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We must ensure there are no more victims of chemical warfare. We must ensure there are no more chemical weapons.

In conclusion, may I thank you all again, representatives of industry and government, for your presence and for your commitment to this important task and process on behalf of all mankind.