PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
SIXTEENTH NATIONAL CONFERENCE
OF THE AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS:
"ANTARCTICA'S FUTURE: CONTINUITY OR CHANGE"
HOBART - 18 NOVEMBER 1989**

I welcome the opportunity offered by the Australian Institute of International Affairs to address this important conference and to put to you first hand my Government's position on the controversial and fast moving debate about the future of Antarctica.

The Australian Institute of International Affairs has a long and proud record of informing public debate on issues of foreign policy importance to Australia.

Your topic for this, your sixteenth conference, is one that has particularly captured public interest and imagination over the past year.

It is of course very appropriate that we should be discussing Antarctica's future here in Hobart, a city with an important role in sustaining Antarctic research activity today, and a city with strong historical links to scientific exploration in Antarctica - stretching back to the departure of Dumont D'Urville's first expedition from here almost 150 years ago in January 1840.

That Antarctica has become the focus of such current international interest should be no surprise.

There is something about Antarctica that lifts the spirit and stimulates the mind.

Antarctica is the only one of the seven continents that cannot sustain human life; the only one where a near-pristine environment remains.

It is the last great wilderness.

Earlier this century, the continent challenged intrepid men like Amundsen, Scott, Shackelton and our own Sir Douglas Mawson to discover its secrets.

And their accounts of this remarkable place, in turn, fired public interest and imagination.

Inspired by the glacial splendour that surrounded the Antarctic land mass, Mawson's response was to write that "in the soft glamour of the midsummer midnight sun, we were possessed by a rapturous wonder - the rare thrill of unreality".

This unspoilt image of Antarctica is surely a vivid one.

But evocative images of rapturous wonder are not sufficient to sustain public policy, particularly in the area of international relations.

Because on any issue that involves the competing views of different countries, the international community properly brings to bear rigorous scrutiny.

The decisions the Antarctic Treaty parties make about Antarctica in the next few years will have very real consequences for the future management of the continent, and arguably, for the future health of our planet.

The Antarctic Treaty system, like the land mass it relates to, is unique.

And it has much to commend it.

Since it was put in place thirty years ago, all the nations claiming sovereignty in the Antarctic have agreed not to enforce their claims against each other.

And, over a period characterised by international distrust and conflict, the Treaty has prevented the continent from becoming an object of discord by maintaining it as a demilitarised area.

Instead, scientific co-operation has flourished: for the Treaty not only encourages research, but obliges an exchange of scientific information.

Under the Treaty, human activity is carefully managed and high standards of environmental behaviour have been established.

Why then, given these successes, has this Treaty been placed under scrutiny?

Why has it been so heavily, and often wrongly, criticised in forums as the United Nations?

Some of the criticism is misguided.

Those who argue, for example, that the Treaty is an association of privileged nations locking up a wealth of undefined resources for their own exclusive use and benefit, ignore the fact that the thirty nine current members include countries that span almost every cleavage that might characterise difference in the world: North-South; East-West; superpowers, middle powers and small powers.

Any state can accede to the Treaty and, provided that it maintains a substantial research program in Antarctica, can become a Consultative Party.

I believe the Antarctic Treaty System can and should survive into the 21st Century - but to do so it must demonstrate it can deal responsibly and openly with the protection of the Antarctic environment.

Antarctica provides the habitat for and sustains many living species, on its shores and in the teeming oceans that surround it.

Even more importantly, it plays a crucial role in global climate matters, influencing our weather, the ocean currents and sea level.

It is also our most valuable laboratory for measuring the greenhouse effect and changes in the thickness of the ozone layer.

For all the strength of natural forces at play there, the Antarctic environment is paradoxically fragile.

Upsetting this delicate balance could threaten changes that would alter the world in quite dramatic ways.

We must therefore preserve the Antarctic environment. The question is how best to do it.

The most urgent and relevant action we can take is to ensure that this irreplaceable environment is never put at risk by mining.

That is why Australia has decided not to sign the Minerals Convention.

This position is based on two simple propositions.

First, the Antarctic environment is extremely fragile and critically important to the whole global ecosystem.

Second, mining in Antarctica will always be dangerous, and could be catastrophically so.

In the light of those propositions, we are convinced that the Minerals Convention is basically flawed.

It is based on the clearly incorrect assumption - current in the 1970s - that mining in the Antarctic could be consistent with the preservation of the continent's fragile environment.

But any mining operation, with its accompanying infrastructure and bulk transport needs, would have a lasting and major impact on the area in which it takes place.

I do not believe that the risk of accidents can ever be totally eliminated - either by paper regimes or by advances in technology.

The recent oil spills at the United States' Scott-Amundsen and McMurdo Stations, although minor, demonstrate that it is hard enough to prevent mishaps with existing, much lower level, non-resource-based activity.

The Minerals Convention might provide for some a dangerous illusion of environment protection.

But by permitting immediate prospecting and setting out a path by which mining might proceed it will in fact be working in precisely the opposite direction.

So with France, Australia is pursuing the initiative of a comprehensive environmental protection convention which will establish Antarctica as a "Natural Reserve - Land of Science."

I am aware that our decision has caused considerable anxiety amongst those Antarctic Treaty members who believed that the coming into force of the Minerals Convention was not just a correct outcome but a foregone conclusion.

And I'm also aware of assertions that our opposition to the convention is purely tactical, or has been adopted for short-term electoral reasons and will be reversed as soon as convenient.

Let me urge anyone who might still harbour that fantasy to abandon it.

Because the reverse is true.

I am convinced that more and more countries will come to share the position that President Mitterrand, Prime Minister Rocard and I have outlined. Already we are receiving strong support from countries such as Belgium, Italy, the Federal Republic of Germany, and India.

In the end, that position will prevail - because it is correct, and because it is being endorsed by international public opinion which, in the coming months and years, will only gather further momentum and strength.

The current discussions taking place about the Minerals Convention, and the guidelines, codes of conduct and other measures that Treaty parties have already put into place - including the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources - attest to the environmental sensitivity that has characterised the management of Antarctica under the Treaty system.

Australia and France are not challenging the Treaty system, or the operation of the consensus principle that has underpinned its operation.

But we <u>are</u> challenging Treaty members to accept that times have changed since the 1970s, that our levels of knowledge have changed, and that we need to continue to justify the Antarctic Treaty Parties' management regime in Antarctica.

In taking the initiative on this issue, we are seeking to achieve a goal that we believe would yield important benefits - <u>mutual</u> benefits for all the people of the world.

Australia, as a middle power, puts great store in multilateral forums, because they are the best vehicles for tackling global problems that are too broad and complex for individual nations to resolve alone.

So, we are leading the efforts to liberalise world trade in the Uruguay Round; initiating moves to establish closer economic co-operation in our Asia Pacific region; hosting the recent Government and industry conference against chemical weapons; actively exerting international pressure on the abhorrent system of apartheid.

- diverse issues, but all requiring serious and concerted efforts by many nations if the global community is to reap the benefits they promise.

It is with that attitude and that aspiration that we approach these vital decisions that must be made about the future of Antarctica.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The intrepid voyages and scientific activities of Jacques Cousteau, from whom we will hear shortly, have inspired our generation, just as those of Dumont D'Urville, Amundsen and Mawson captured the imagination of our forebears.

If we don't measure up in our decisions to protect the Antarctic environment, we can be certain that people like Jacques Cousteau will be there to tell us so.

I am firmly convinced that one of the greatest legacies our generation can leave to the future may yet be one of the simplest: one continent unspoilt, a testament to our own recognition that in other corners of the world we have already gone too far.

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