



## PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
LAUNCH OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S DEATH PENALTY POSTER  
CANBERRA - 6 DECEMBER 1989

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I am proud to be associated with the celebrations this week of Human Rights week and with the launch of this poster against the death penalty, just as I am proud to be a patron of the Amnesty International Parliamentary Group. This poster we are launching today bears the signatures of the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Australian Democrats. So it provides clear evidence of Australia's commitment to this most important campaign against the death penalty.

The campaign to abolish capital punishment has gained an extraordinary momentum since the Second World War. In 1948 - during Doc Evatt's Presidency of the UN General Assembly - the international community expressed its deepest values in the form of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that

"Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."

In 1966, the UN adopted the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the preamble of which sets out that

"recognition of the inherent dignity and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace".

Article 6, which deals with the death penalty, declares that

"Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life".

Those beliefs - that humans have an inherent dignity and an inherent right to life - have been behind all opposition to the death penalty. And the International Covenant has had an important role in leading more and more countries to abolition.

Australia ratified the Covenant in 1973, under the Whitlam Government, thus abolishing the death penalty for all offences. There are now 35 totally abolitionist countries around the world.

The launch of this Amnesty International poster coincides with a further significant step in the international campaign against the death penalty: the debate in the UN General Assembly which will lead we hope to the adoption late this week of the Second Optional Protocol to the Covenant.

Countries which become party to this Protocol formally indicate the abolition of the death penalty within their jurisdiction. So it is another step down the path to total abolition, and I would like to commend the Federal Republic of Germany which first proposed it at the General Assembly in 1980, and all the Australian officials and representatives of non-government organisations, especially Amnesty International, which have worked so hard for its adoption this week.

Of course changes to statutes and to international conventions only reflect changes in the attitudes of men and women around the world. Our task is to raise public awareness of the compelling arguments against the death penalty, until it is abolished in every country. I can assure you that my Government will continue to raise the issue of capital punishment with countries where it is still practised, as well as working at a multilateral level to secure adherence to the ICCPR and its Second Optional Protocol.

My own view is that the taking of life as a punishment cannot in any circumstances be justified. I reject the implied infallibility of a legal system that claims the capacity to take a life on the basis of its finding of guilt. And I reject the bleak vision of human nature that sees the death penalty as appropriate punishment. The death penalty allows no possibility of legal error and offers no hope of personal rehabilitation.

So in the battle for hearts and minds, it is my profound hope that the campaign to abolish the death penalty will attract ever-increasing support, including through the publicity given to it by Amnesty during Human Rights Week.

You can be assured of my strong support for this campaign and of my hope that it will succeed.

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