



PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Speech by the Prime Minister
Supermarket Convention and Exhibition
Sydney - 10 September 1990

The story is told that in earlier days of mass migration to Australia, in the immediate post-war years, a passenger liner of intending settlers arrived in Fremantle, in Western Australia - their first port of call in their new homeland. Uncertain of what this strange place Australia would hold for them, a small party boldly ventured forth from the ship to see what they could find, be it desert, danger or delights. Great was the joy, you can be assured, when those who had remained on board heard the cry come up from the returning group of pioneers: "Don't worry! This place is all right! They have shops here!"

The story speaks volumes about the nature of immigration - the uncertainty mixed with courage of those who decided to build a new life in a distant land.

But the story should also tell this audience something important about shops - even though, I admit, it predated the emergence of supermarkets. Your business is not just about the exchange of goods; it is a symbol, or more precisely a proof, of a prosperous and well-ordered society.

Wherever social disorder or gross economic inefficiency exist, its symptoms can be detected in empty supermarket shelves or long queues of people waiting for food - potent images for news cameras seeking to describe both the underlying disruption and the inconvenience it causes ordinary citizens.

By the same token, the evidence of social well-being and economic efficiency is easily found in those crowded shopping centres where the necessities of life can be purchased in abundance and where choice and competition determine their sale.

I was delighted recently that, as part of his visit to Australia, the Soviet Prime Minister, Nikolai Ryzhkov, had chosen to inspect an Australian supermarket warehouse. Soviet agricultural producers are capable of quality production, but more efficient handling, storage and long-distance transport of their goods would significantly help both Soviet producers and consumers. In our talks, I agreed with Prime Minister Ryzhkov that Australia would send to the Soviet Union a high-level team of experts, from both the private and public sector, to advise on the development of more efficient techniques; the team is about to leave shortly.

In that regard, Australian expertise is a valuable and sought-after attribute - a pointer to the reason why the Australian Supermarket Institute is a worthy host for such a large international convention as this.

By Australian standards, our wholesale and retail industry is a very significant sector, accounting for about 18 per cent of Australia's GDP and employing more than 1.6 million people, which puts it on par with our manufacturing sector.

Like other parts of the Australian economy, this industry will benefit greatly from the program of micro-economic reforms on which my Government is currently engaged.

Reforms in such areas as road and rail transport, the waterfront and electricity generation will deliver direct benefits in the form of much lower operating costs and lower prices to consumers.

At the same time, the industry has experienced some of the inefficiencies that have arisen from the Australian Federal system of government - such as inconsistent food labelling standards across States, different licensing arrangements and rival industrial awards.

I have set in train a major effort to ensure that local, State, and Federal Governments cooperate better so as to eliminate those anomalies and to build a firmer foundation for economic efficiency in the next century.

I emphasise such issues today not solely because of their direct significance to the members of the Australian Supermarket Institute. They have a broader significance too - a relevance to the kind of issues that should be on the agenda of any gathering of people from the Asia-Pacific region.

Our region is increasingly a focus of spectacular economic growth.

Larger regional GNPs, stronger regional investment figures, higher standards of living - all bear witness to the dynamism, the energy, the exuberant growth, that are the striking characteristics of the economies of the Asia-Pacific region.

Australia, with 8 of our top 10 export markets in 1988 being in the Asia-Pacific, is as good an example of regional interdependence as any in this region. And it is that interdependence, that complementarity of our economic characteristics, that has made and will continue to make the region such an exciting one.

Such factors have led to optimistic predictions about this being the dawn of the "Pacific Century".

It's a fine notion. But we would be wrong if we believed that growth in regional activity and prosperity will just automatically continue. To ensure the prediction is fulfilled, we will need to continue the hard work and to display the flexibility that has been the basis for our regional success so far.

So the Australian program of micro-reform and of improving our Federal partnership - indeed the totality of the economic reforms of this Government since 1983 - must be seen in a broader context, as integral parts of Australia's effort to ensure we improve our efficiency, our productivity, and our competitiveness.

And it was with such requirements in mind that I proposed, in January of last year, the establishment of a new forum for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation.

It was my belief that the time had come for us as a region substantially to increase our efforts towards building regional cooperation, and seriously to investigate the areas it might focus on and the forms it might take.

The first meeting of APEC, held in Canberra last November, was an expression of the dynamism of our region and a tangible demonstration of our commitment to see what more we could do to enhance regional prosperity.

I am delighted with the progress that has been made subsequently to advance APEC's goals - both for what this progress means for the region and, in particular, for what it means for Australia.

With our historical roots in Europe, and our reputation - let me concede it was sometimes in decades past a well-earned reputation - for economic and cultural insularity, Australia has not been seen by some in the region as an integral part of the region. Indeed, sometimes Australians haven't seen themselves in that light either.

But those days are gone - gone forever. Increasingly our domestic attitudes - and certainly, at the level of my Government, our domestic and foreign policy-making - recognise the truth that our future is thoroughly interwoven with that of the Asia-Pacific region.

None of us is immune to the need for economic flexibility and structural adjustment, and Australia's own commitment to reform - our determination to achieve greater enmeshment with our region - shows we recognise that as a fundamental fact of life.

This is ultimately why conferences such as this are important - because through consultation, through sharing our expertise, through adopting new techniques and adapting to new challenges, the dynamic process of regional enmeshment is advanced and strengthened.

So it is my very great pleasure to congratulate the organisers, to welcome all the participants, and to declare open the Australian Supermarket Institute's Convention and Exhibition.

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