



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDATION OF
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
CANBERRA - 28 MAY 1991**

Ministerial and Parliamentary Colleagues
Members of Amnesty International
Friends

Thirty years ago today an article appeared in a London newspaper written by a British lawyer, Peter Benenson. A defence lawyer for political prisoners in Hungary, South Africa and Spain and a human rights campaigner, Benenson began his article with these words:

"Open your newspaper any day of the week and you will find a report from somewhere in the world of someone being imprisoned, tortured or executed because his opinions or religion are unacceptable to the government."

He continued

"The newspaper reader feels a sickening sense of impotence. Yet if these feelings of disgust all over the world could be united into common action, something effective could be done."

Just a few weeks after the appearance of that newspaper article, Benenson spoke on Australian radio. Over fifty listeners immediately wrote asking what they could do to help. This response was repeated worldwide, and from the idea of a single individual grew a movement which today has over one million members, subscribers and regular donors in over 150 countries, together with over 4,200 local volunteer groups.

In Australia, Amnesty International has over 30,000 members and supporters and 180 local groups.

Peter Benenson's message stemmed from a simple belief in the dignity and rights of all human beings to express their own beliefs free of the threat of physical abuse or intimidation.

This belief still forms the basis of Amnesty International's charter today:

- the immediate and unconditional release of all 'prisoners of conscience';
- fair and prompt trial for all political prisoners; and
- an end to all torture and executions.

Since its inception Amnesty International has been one of the most consistent and compassionate voices in defence of human rights across the globe. Over the last three decades it has taken up more than 42,000 cases.

It was in just recognition of this organisation's achievement that in 1977 it was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

And only last December, Amnesty helped draw the attention of the world to the human rights violations by Iraq during its brutal and illegal occupation of Kuwait and it has continued to report on the human rights situation in Kuwait.

It is a telling tribute to Amnesty International's independence and impartiality that it has achieved support and recognition across the entire political spectrum. Amnesty International Australia is the first section of the movement to have a Federal Parliamentary Group, listing almost two-thirds of MP's as members and having as its patrons representatives from all parties represented in the Parliament.

My friends

The success of Amnesty in gaining support in Australia and throughout the world should not lead us to underestimate the challenges which still beset those committed to the human rights cause.

It is estimated that prisoners of conscience are still being held in nearly half the countries of the world, and in 50 countries political prisoners can still be held without charge or trial.

In 1989 torture and ill-treatment of prisoners were reported in 96 countries. Extrajudicial executions, and death from torture or ill-treatment in custody, were reported in more than 40 countries, and 'disappearances' in more than 20. Political prisoners were detained in at least 92 countries, and unfair trials in political cases were known to have taken place in 31 countries.

These statistics point to a litany of injustice and human rights abuses which continue to occur throughout the world.

But more than that, the figures are evidence that the principles of human rights enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of 1948 and elaborated on in the many declarations, covenants and conventions of the United Nations are still far from being fully accepted throughout the global community.

And for this reason it is imperative that government and non-government organisations alike continue to pursue the cause of human rights.

I think Australia can be proud of its record in this area.

Generations of Australians, and their parliamentary representatives, have worked to give practical effect to the principles and spirit of the Universal Declaration both in our own society and in broader international forums.

It gives me particular pleasure to welcome the many young people here today who will carry on this great task.

The current positive climate of international realignment presents, I believe, an historic opportunity to carry this work forward.

Of course we are unlikely to see a complete end to human rights abuses. Tensions in many parts of the world require us to work hard if we are to ensure that the rights to freedom of expression, economic organisation and self-determination are met in the most humane and peaceable way.

Australia has never accepted the view, still occasionally espoused, that action aimed at the improvement of human rights in some way constitutes interference in the domestic affairs of individual countries.

Our position on this is now increasingly shared by the international community.

We continue to be one of the most active countries in the world pursuing human rights issues on a bilateral basis.

In 1989/90, for example, we made direct representations at ministerial or official level in relation to 443 different groups or individuals in 87 different countries.

We have also taken a particular interest in regional issues:

- We have expressed our concern about the situation in Myanmar and, in particular, the failure of the military to hand over power to a civilian government.
- We have made clear our concern about the continuation of human rights abuses in China and our continuing concern about the tragic cycle of violence in Sri Lanka.

- We have reached an agreement with the Chinese Government to send a delegation to that country to examine and discuss human rights and related matters - an agreement which we hope will be a first step in developing a serious and constructive bilateral dialogue on human rights issues
- And, while we have acknowledged the overall improvement in the human rights situation in East Timor in recent years, we continue to urge that existing problems be dealt with fairly and humanely and that domestic and international concerns be allayed.

Australia's active pursuit of human rights issues is a cornerstone of our foreign policy, and demonstrates our intention to be a good international citizen in the full sense of the term.

It is equally true that we have worked to remedy domestic human rights concerns.

One area in which Amnesty International has taken an interest in Australia has been in the treatment and status of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

The final report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was tabled in May by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. This comprehensive report gave considerable information to the Government - indeed to all Australians - on the present position of Aborigines in Australian society today.

Putting it simply, the main finding of the Royal Commission was that too many Aboriginal people are in custody too often. In fact they are in custody at a rate, calculated nationally, 29 times that of the general community.

The Royal Commission report indicts the legal and corrective services systems in Australia and points to a society-wide range of Aboriginal disadvantage.

The Government has committed itself to ensuring that there is a co-ordinated and comprehensive national response to the Royal Commission's final report.

I have written to all the Premiers and Chief Ministers seeking their co-operation in a joint strategy of response and I am confident that the necessary co-operation will be forthcoming.

We are conscious that there will continue to be considerable international interest in how all Governments in Australia - and the Australian community as a whole - reacts to what the Royal Commission has to say and how we set about implementing the recommendations.

Foremost among these, I am sure, will be Amnesty International.

For it is a measure of Amnesty International's credibility and the breadth of their concern that they will leave no area of the world untouched and demand nothing less than universal adherence to their principles.

And it is a measure of the high regard in which Amnesty International is held by so many people in this country, that any subject in which Amnesty involves itself immediately becomes a centre of attention and a very good reason for governments to take a hard look at their policies.

For that we have good cause for gratitude - and I appreciate the opportunity you have given me today to congratulate Amnesty International on its thirtieth birthday.

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