



## PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
OPENING SESSION OF THE  
76TH NATIONAL CONGRESS OF THE RSL  
CANBERRA, 2 SEPTEMBER 1991**

---

Your Excellency the Governor-General,  
Brigadier Alf Garland, RSL President,  
Dr Hewson,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The extraordinary pace of change in the international arena in recent years - reaching a remarkable climax over the past two weeks - will I know make many people wonder whether we need to rethink our defence policy.

I want to address that issue today, because defence is one of the fundamentals of our national life, and in periods of rapid change it is more than ever important to make sure we have got the fundamentals right. Perhaps the best way to refresh our sense of those fundamentals is to look back a bit.

In the midst of all this great unfolding of history, literally before our eyes, it would be easy to lose sight of the past. But in a very real sense, the extraordinary events since 1989 are the culmination of events which began more than half a century ago - events in which this nation of ours, and your members in particular, played a direct and memorable part.

We have had some important anniversaries recently, and we will soon see many more. Next month sees the fiftieth anniversary of the decision of the Australian Parliament to hand over responsibility for wartime administration and the defence of Australia to the Australian Labor Party under the leadership of John Curtin - a responsibility which was magnificently discharged.

This year the RSL has participated in the very successful commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the battles of Greece and Crete. Over the next few months we will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the Pacific War, and remember the terrible events of late 1941 and 1942. I know commemorative events have been planned for Darwin, Singapore and the Coral Sea, and I am sure there will be others. I wish them well.

These commemorations will recall, not just for you, but for younger generations of Australians, the most dangerous days of Australia's history, when we faced imminent threat of an invasion which we seemed powerless to resist.

Remembering the Pacific War brings us back to the bedrock of our national life - to the survival of that national life itself, and to the fundamental purpose of that struggle and that sacrifice - the survival of Australian democracy. It reminds us what defence policy should be all about - that we should never again find ourselves in the position we were in between December 1941 and May 1942.

For that reason, my Government's defence policy is based on a principle of great simplicity; that the first priority of the Australian Defence Force must be the defence of Australia. Our aim is to build a defence force which can defend Australia without assistance from the combat forces of other nations. We call that policy self-reliance.

But focusing our defence policy on the defence of Australia is not only the logical reflection of our historical experience and national priorities. It also provides the basis for a practical, workable, efficient defence structure, and it defines an enduring goal that gives stability to defence planning. Those points are worth explaining in a little detail.

First, the priority we give in developing the ADF to the defence of Australia provides a firm basis to the rest of our defence planning. Because we know exactly what we are trying to do, it is easier to work out how to do it.

Having determined that the priority task of the ADF is the defence of Australia, the Government has developed and articulated a military strategy of layered defence which sets out how that job is to be done.

Next, we have set down in detail the defence capabilities we need to make that military strategy work. By defining a concrete goal, our defence policy has gone beyond the usual strategic platitudes. It has defined exactly the capabilities we need to do the job.

And then we have set about the long job of building those capabilities. The contracts have been signed and the work is now being done on the largest defence investment program in Australia's peacetime history. New ships and submarines; new airbases and radars; new helicopters and armoured vehicles.

The key to all these decisions is setting priorities. There will never be enough money to acquire every capability that might be useful. We need to focus our efforts on the capabilities which are really critical. And to do that we need to know exactly what we are trying to achieve; we need a clear goal. That goal is the defence of Australia.

Third, our defence policy focus on the defence of Australia is an enduring principle which gives that policy its stability and durability. The decision to give priority to the defence of Australia is not the product of a passing trend. It reflects the fundamental reality that whatever is happening elsewhere in the world, and however rapidly that change might take place, the one job the Australian Defence Force must be able to do is to defend Australia.

This durability is very important. Building a defence force is a slow business. Our major equipment programs often take ten years to complete. The equipment itself may last for thirty years. So the defence structure decisions we make today will determine the shape of Australia's defence forces forty years from now. We have a great responsibility to make sure that our decisions today will suit not just the world of next year, or even of the year 2000, but of 2030 and beyond.

But having now, I hope, made clear how the principle of the defence of Australia permeates our defence planning, I want also to explain the limits of that principle. Because those limits are also important.

As I have explained, our policy is to build a defence force to defend Australia, because that is the ADF's principal role. But that does not mean that we believe the ADF has no other role. There still lingers in our defence debate the echos of the old debate between forward defence and fortress Australia. But that dichotomy has been left far behind by the development of defence technology, and of the ADF itself.

It might once have been the case that Australian defence policy had to make a stark choice between defending Australia and playing a role in Australia's wider region. That is no longer the case. The capabilities which the Australian Defence Force has developed and is acquiring for the defence of Australia also provide powerful capabilities to play a role in our region of broad strategic interest and beyond.

This ability to use the capabilities we develop for the defence of Australia to perform other tasks further afield has always been part of our defence policy, and was set out explicitly in the White Paper of 1987. And it is an aspect of our policy which we have vigorously put into practice.

With the exception of the United States, no country makes more regular or more substantial military deployments to South East Asia and the South West Pacific than Australia. And beyond our own region, no country has been more willing and more able to respond quickly and appropriately to events further afield when we believed that Australia's interests have required it.

I do not need to remind you that this year we accepted the awesome responsibility of committing Australian forces to combat for the first time since Vietnam. The RSL knows better than any group in Australia just what that can mean. We were proud that the Australian Defence Force had the capability to make such a rapid, sustained and effective contribution to the international effort in the Gulf.

We deployed ADF units again to northern Iraq for humanitarian relief of Kurdish refugees in the aftermath of the war, and we expect soon to send our men and women to the Western Sahara in support of the UN settlement of a long-standing dispute there.

And with last week's successful meeting of the Cambodian factions in Thailand, we hope that the UN-sponsored comprehensive settlement in Cambodia, which we have worked towards for so long, will soon be implemented. Australia stands ready to contribute a major ADF contingent to help make that settlement work.

So do not let anyone tell you that a defence force designed for the defence of Australia is useless for anything else; that it is just some kind of glorified coast guard. The facts of recent history simply do not sustain such nonsense.

Our defence policy of self-reliance within a framework of alliances and regional associations also provides a durable basis for maintaining and developing our alliance with the United States - formalised in the ANZUS Treaty which was signed forty years ago yesterday - in the new conditions of the post-Cold War world. I have explained in detail recently how we see our alliances and regional associations developing as we work to build regional security, and how we see the contribution which the ADF can make to that process.

For all these reasons, I believe that precisely because of the enormous uncertainty in the world today, Australia's defence policy must continue to focus rigourously on the defence of Australia as the principal task of the ADF.

But that does not mean that defence policy can stand still. While we must have a clear and steady goal for our defence planning, we must be as flexible as possible about how we approach it. We must relentlessly seek the most efficient way of achieving the results we need. We must not fall into the trap of assuming that the way things have been done in the past must always be the best way to do them in the future. Our aim must be to get the most defence we can for our dollar.

Earlier this year, my Defence Minister Robert Ray announced the most comprehensive reforms to the management of Australia's defence forces for many years. The ADF itself has played a central role in developing these reforms; I congratulate the CDF, General Gration, and his colleagues for their far-sighted work.

We said at the time that these reforms have not been undertaken to find ways to cut the defence budget. They have been undertaken to find ways of spending the defence budget better. And we have proved that in last month's budget, in which defence spending has been maintained in real terms.

Nor have our reform efforts been limited to the defence portfolio. Under my very able and genial Minister Ben Humphreys, we have been working hard to improve the services we provide to Australia's veterans. Our key initiative has been integration, which we believe will give veterans a better deal. I am pleased that your largest branch, the NSW branch, has indicated qualified support for integration, and is looking to the Commonwealth and NSW Governments to finalise arrangements. We will be delighted to continue to talk about the issue with other branches, and we hope that they too can come to see the undoubted advantages of the steps we are proposing.

Finally I want to close by saying specifically to the Vietnam Veterans, who have come in recent years to be remembered properly in this country, how glad we are to see Long Tan Day becoming increasingly accepted as a day of remembrance of the Vietnam War, and how much we welcome the commencement of the Vietnam Memorial when Ben Humphreys turns the first sod on Friday.

Mr Chairman, returning to my opening theme, we have the privilege and challenge of living in the time of the most momentous change in recent history. We must all be ready to accept that challenge. I look forward to the opportunity of working with you as we do precisely that. I wish your conference well.

\* \* \* \* \*