



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
CHRISTIAN BROTHERS HIGH SCHOOL, LEWISHAM
CENTENARY YEAR ANNUAL PRIZE GIVING
AND CONCERT
SYDNEY - 25 SEPTEMBER 1991**

Brother Peter Hester
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen
Students of the School

In a country as young as ours there are not many institutions as old as Christian Brothers High School, Lewisham.

100 years young and still going strong - that bears great witness to the dedication and commitment of the Christian Brothers to the service of the young on the western side of Sydney, beginning at a time when it was not very fashionable to move west.

Why, in those days Lewisham was like Penrith!

Christian Brothers, Lewisham has seen some 14,000 students through its classrooms in those 100 years.

They have distinguished themselves in every walk of life in this great city and throughout our great country. There have been a remarkable number, perhaps some would say a disproportionate number, of politicians.

But tonight, I want to single out one as an example and I am sure that not one of the 14,000 would begrudge me doing so.

I refer to Victor Chang, who was a student here from 1953 to 1955.

Dr Chang was a great Australian not only because he had special skills which literally gave life to so many of his fellow Australians and to others beyond our shores, but because he was a fully participating citizen of this country of ours. I am sure he learned much of that here at this school.

In a few minutes I will be honoured to present the first Victor Chang memorial award for chemistry. This award will keep alive the memory of a remarkable Australian in future generations of students in a way he would have thought appropriate, and I congratulate the school for commemorating his tragically too short life in this way.

1891 - the year of the founding of your school also saw the first constitutional convention in Sydney. This was the beginning of a tortuous process of writing the Australian constitution. It took another ten years to make Federation a reality.

Australia has a decade to go before it achieves its centenary. But the events of the past few years have shown us that the ideas and impulse of country and nation often run older and deeper than the arbitrary timing of political leaders.

The idea of one nation in one island continent always had the appeal of commonsense. Never forgetting the fact that the Aborigines had created their own remarkable culture here over the preceding 40 or 50,000 years, each of the colonies had been founded and settled by people from Great Britain - though I don't suppose the Irish parents of the early pupils at Christian Brothers, Lewisham were too keen on the description.

But commonsense very nearly did not prevail in the referendums that eventually brought about the one Commonwealth of Australia. It took two rounds to convince a sufficient number of the people in the colony of New South Wales to join, and the colony of West Australia did not come aboard until the very last minute.

It was not pre-ordained that we should become one nation; it is one of our great strokes of good fortune that we became one. But, of course, it wasn't just good luck. It happened because we had men of vision and purpose like Parkes, Griffith, Deakin, Barton, Reid, Watson, Higgins and Kingston. And, in the final analysis, it happened because of the determination of the men and women of Australia themselves.

Between the idea and the reality - the idea of 1891, the reality of 1991, was to lie generations of hard work, dedication and sacrifice. And five generations of Christian Brothers pupils have been part of it all.

As we look forward to 2001, and the centenary of the Australian Federation, it is worth taking a quick look back at what else was happening in 1891.

In 1891 were laid the foundations of this school, the Australian Labor Party, and Australia itself. Not a bad trifecta.

Ahead of Australians then were two depressions, one just around the corner in the 1890s, and the Great Depression of the 1930s; two world wars, the rise and fall of fascism and communism, unprecedented technological change which has served as an instrument of both good and evil, and here in Australia the building of an independent, tolerant, educated and democratic society.

Let me take each of those words - independent, tolerant, educated, democratic - to measure the change we have experienced over these 100 years.

Independent: from six colonies relying on distance and the strength of the royal navy for its security, we have become a truly independent nation, self-reliant in defence, a nation whose voice is heard and respected in the world.

The protection we asked and expected from Britain 100 years ago was based upon our fear of living isolated in the Asia-Pacific region. Now we proudly identify ourselves as an integral part of this most dynamic region, co-operating with our neighbours and enmeshing our destiny with theirs.

Tolerant: that deep seated fear of our neighbours itself produced a singularly restrictive immigration policy.

We cannot disguise the fact that this policy carried deep undertones of racial superiority - directed not just against Asians, but, in fact, the majority of the European peoples.

Now we have become one of the most diverse peoples on Earth, and we are all the richer and the better for it. We need not run away from the facts of the past. Rather, we can take pride in the victory of tolerance and intelligence, over mindless prejudice.

However, we should not ignore the fact that we still, unfortunately, hear in our society some voices echoing that mindless racial intolerance of the past. The very name of Victor Chang - an immortal Australian - should still those voices forever.

And I will deal with an aspect of our progress towards an educated Australia in the context of intolerance.

Because, when this school was founded in 1891, Catholic schools were denied all rights to community assistance - 'state aid' as it used to be called.

It is one of the great transformations of the Australian society in my lifetime that the rampant sectarianism which divided and disfigured our community for well over a century has been consigned to where it has always belonged - to the dustbin of discredited history.

The real victims of that sectarianism were the children, the children of government schools as much as Catholic schools, because as long as it dominated the education debate, the

quality of all education and the standards of all schools suffered. When I became Prime Minister in 1983, we still suffered from the overhang of the State Aid debate. I committed myself to eradicating it as an issue once and for all. We have achieved that.

And here I pay tribute to the Christian Brothers, whose dedication, in the old days of denial, kept great schools like this going so splendidly.

And finally, I described the Australia of today as a great democracy.

We are all now living through some of the most momentous times in modern history.

And the powerhouse of this great revolution in human affairs is the yearning of men and women all over the world to be free, to have the democratic institutions which Australia has, all too easily, all too often, seemed to take for granted.

I am sure that none of your generation, if you think seriously about the tremendous events you see literally unfolding before you on television, will ever take for granted your inheritance of an independent, tolerant, educated and above all, democratic Australia.

I salute this great institution - Christian Brothers High School, Lewisham - for the signal role it has played in fashioning that inheritance for which we are, all, the richer.

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