



PRIME MINISTER

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STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP

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This last year has been one of unprecedented global upheaval: of change so rapid we find ourselves having to confront international realities that were inconceivable twelve months ago. We have witnessed the disintegration of the second most powerful nation on earth, and the re-birth of nation states and national movements dormant for generations. We have seen the face of Europe change. We have seen the emergence of a dictator in the Middle East, and unprecedented international cooperation to defeat him.

Few eras have been so uncertain - or so promising. The world is being re-made, not just in Europe but in our own immediate region - in Asia where economic growth is faster than anywhere else in the world, where no one yet knows what the future political landscape will be, and where our future substantially lies.

We cannot hide from these realities. We must be ready and able to adapt. We must be strong enough and independent enough to be a constructive political and economic player in the new order. In one sense we have never been so alone: in another we have never been so much a part of the world.

In facing these challenges we ought to take both courage and pride in what we have already achieved. Because it is true to say that, if the changes here have not occurred with the same astonishing speed, they have been profound.

Only a generation ago we lived as an isolated outpost of Europe largely protected from the wider world by high tariff barriers and a cosy but increasingly unrealistic relationship with Great Britain. We have moved a long way from that: our course is now fixed towards a robust internationally competitive economy based on not just our great natural wealth but our human skills and energy - in manufacturing and services.

Only a decade ago our workplace relations and our wages system were governed by an inflexible code of hostility, a conventional wisdom that the interests of employers and employees were naturally opposed. That is emphatically no longer the case.

Less than a generation ago we still lived in fear of Asia - we regarded our near neighbours with a mixture of ignorance, hostility and condescension. We are now much more a part of the region, much more at home - economically, and as the Cambodian peace settlement so dramatically testifies, politically.

Without sacrificing social cohesion, we have become a much more complex society. Where for so long we were notorious for the White Australia Policy, we now enjoy a large measure of respect for the tolerance manifest in our immigration and multicultural policies.

Perhaps we should not be surprised if these and other profound cultural and economic changes have made many Australians wonder if the traditions of their country, the values for which they have worked and fought, are not under attack. I suspect there are many Australians who are wondering if their Australia will survive the changes - if there will be a place for the "old Australia" in the new.

I have no doubt that the best of Australia will survive - in fact it must. The hard-won traditions of democracy, of fairness and equity, individual opportunity and personal security, our way of life and those institutions which guarantee our freedom, will remain the guiding principles of Australia.

Indeed it is because we want these values to survive that we must re-make Australia. There is no question about it - if the good society we all want is to become reality we have to become a more dynamic, more efficient and cohesive society. We have to become a nation with a more truly national purpose.

With other ministers in recent weeks I have spoken to representatives of Australian business - all kinds of Australian business. I've spoken to state premiers and their senior ministers, and I've spoken to trade union leaders. The spirit of cooperation and endeavour, the good will, the unanimous commitment to economic recovery, and the ideas which emerged from these discussions re-affirmed my belief that we can successfully respond to the two great imperatives: the immediate one of stimulating economic growth and getting people back to work, and, in the longer term, completing the task of creating a revitalised and vigorous Australia.

One hundred years ago the colonies which were soon to form the Australian nation were deep in the worst depression and the worst drought Australia has ever experienced. Yet the 1890s was remarkable for the sense of nationhood which emerged. It was the first great flowering of the Australian spirit. Much of the old Australia was born in that decade. The new Australia, I firmly believe, can be born in this one. We can build on those great traditions and that spirit to meet the challenges which face us now.

I believe we need have no doubt about the future of our nation - no doubt that we can come out of this recession much stronger, with a much firmer basis for full employment and long term prosperity, and with a clearer vision of our common goal.

So in presenting these awards for the 1991 Australian and Young Australian of the Year we are honouring, I think, people who exemplify the spirit of Australia: that means, among many things, courage and enterprise, faith in ourselves, pride in our past - but with eyes firmly fixed on our future.

On behalf of the government and people of Australia I congratulate you all, and thank you for the example you have set us.