



PRIME MINISTER

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ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP
BATTLE OF AUSTRALIA COMMEMORATION SERVICE
BICENTENNIAL PARK, DARWIN, 19 FEBRUARY 1992

Today we pay tribute to those who died here in Darwin in 1942 - Australians and Americans who gave their lives in the defence of this country and freedom everywhere.

The raids on Darwin, the loss of life, the great destruction of this and other northern communities, the tragedies of so many Territorians forcibly expatriated from their homes - these things we Australians have not properly acknowledged.

Today we acknowledge them.

Today we pay tribute to their courage, and recognise the debt we owe to the people of Northern Australia.

No nation should fail to honour those who have given it devoted service. No nation should forget its past.

This and subsequent raids on Australia's northern ports were acts of unwarranted aggression, yet it has to be said that there were worse actions during the Asia-Pacific War.

The Japanese conquest and occupation of the region involved unspeakable suffering for large parts of the population, and for Allied prisoners of war, including many thousands of Australians.

These events cannot and should not be forgotten.

Indeed, among the countries of the region a common awareness of the history we share will strengthen the basis of trust and cooperation in our relations.

In Japan's case, more candid recognition of responsibility for past actions will enhance the wider acceptance and legitimacy of its emerging leadership role in the Asia-Pacific region.

Yet we would certainly be wrong to think that only Japan has lessons to learn from those events fifty years ago.

The attack on Darwin was a striking symbol of the uncertainty of our position in the region.

It was also unmistakable proof of the inadequacy of our responses. Fifty years later, of course, there are still lessons to be learned.

A lesson in strength and independence of mind, for instance. We might remember the folly of relying so totally, for both policy and defence, on Great Britain.

Increasingly we had been living in a fantasy land of an exhausted Empire. We treated Asia with a mixture of condescension and fear - or worse, we ignored it altogether.

Yet there is a positive lesson to be learned as well - we adapted. Australians, accustomed to regarding themselves as British, resolved to turn to the one country that could save the day - without prejudice to their British origins they forged a friendship with the United States which endures to this day.

It will do us no harm to reflect on the virtues of changing old preconceptions and being ready and willing to respond to new realities.

To the generation of 1942 it was quite unthinkable that we might voluntarily become a part of Asia. That we might ever be friends with Japan was entirely out of the question.

Yet we have made those changes. We have built friendships, trust and understanding. We are playing a creative role in the region, and the opportunity is there to expand that role.

The bombing of Darwin was a tragedy. But it was also an awakening. And there is no doubt that we have learned from the experience.

Yet there is much more to learn, and a good deal of it, I think, concerns our own society, our own attitudes.

It is significant, for instance, that it took 49 years for an Australian government to recognise the role that Aboriginal people played in the defence of Australia.

During the war, groups of Aboriginals, including special Army units, patrolled areas which spanned almost the entire Arnhem Land coast. They were involved in the rescue of Allied airmen and the capture of enemy airmen.

Yet they received very little recognition and until last year little or no remuneration for their services.

I am very glad that on this 50th anniversary we can at last pay tribute to all those Australians who served their country.

The bombing of Darwin brought home to us how isolated and vulnerable so much of Australia was - how difficult it was to make and defend a nation on such a vast continent.

Today we might remind ourselves that we will do that so much better if we include in all our national goals, and all our national pride - all our people.

Ladies and gentlemen, in the hour of peril in 1942 Australians responded as you would expect a free people to respond - they found in themselves and each other untapped resources of strength and purpose.

They learned the value of cooperation.

They made an all-in, national effort.

Today there is, of course, much to learn from that as well. We must find in ourselves that same resolve and spirit which helped to turn the tide.

If we do this we will be able to speak to the world about those things which Australia cherishes - about freedom and fairness, about tolerance, and independence - we will be able to have some influence, we will be able to pay our own way ... and we will be able to say that the memory of those people who died here in Darwin has been truly honoured.