



PRIME MINISTER

EMBARGOED AGAINST DELIVERY

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP
LAUNCH OF RODNEY HALL'S NOVEL - THE SECOND BRIDEGROOM
ADELAIDE FESTIVAL OF ARTS, 4.30PM 6 MARCH 1992

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm pleased to be here today at one of the world's great arts festivals.

My purpose is both to launch Rodney Hall's book and to celebrate it.

It's a pleasure to be here because I know Rodney Hall, I know some of his ideas, I know how much he cares about this country, and I know he is going to make a great contribution to our national life as Chairman of the Australia Council.

I also know that this book, which was published in hardback last year, was never officially launched.

And any book which has enjoyed such magnificent acclaim as this book has, deserves to be launched - deserves to be celebrated.

I doubt if any book by an Australian has received better reviews than this one.

Some of them are modestly repeated on the cover - the Financial Times calls it a modern classic -

Rodney will forgive me for mentioning that the Financial Times also gave me a good review recently, for a speech I made in the presence of Her Majesty, and another I made in the presence of Her Loyal Australian Opposition.

This does not mean the Financial Times is easy to please - it means they are discerning.

On the same cover you will see that Dinny O'Hearn says the book is even better than the one before it, and the one before it was a masterpiece.

This is the sort of language I have always liked.

In Frankfurt they said Rodney Hall ranks with Garcia Marquez. In New York they compared him with William Faulkner and Flannery O'Conner.

In the Sydney Morning Herald Stephen Knight ranked him with Patrick White.

And back to London where the Sunday Times said - "in Rodney Hall Australia has produced another great novelist".

For this extraordinary critical reception Rodney Hall deserves our congratulations - although I know he won't mind my saying that you haven't really been reviewed until you've been reviewed in the London tabloids.

"Hands orf our language, cobber!", they would have said.

Given the expert and international literary judgements that have been made on Rodney's recent work, it would be presumptuous of me to pass any judgement.

But I can say that I enjoyed The Second Bridegroom - and that it's a novel of great interest to anyone who has thought about European civilisation in this country.

Anyone who has ever wondered what it means to be an Australian.

The novel rang a Celtic bell in me. Like most Australians of Irish extraction, Celtic mythology and the Celtic temperament has always seemed to me a powerful force in our make-up, and in the creation of our legends and traditions.

This is a book with any number of political and cultural implications for Australia.

For instance it's a very powerful reminder that we have to come to terms with Aboriginal Australia - pre and post European.

Until we do this - until we start to make some real progress towards closing the gap in both attitudes and living standards - I think there will always be a feeling among us that maybe we don't quite belong, that we're not serious, that we're simply here for the view.

Or just here to make forgeries of the Old World.

These are old themes in Australia: the Celticry and Aboriginality, the business of being what Manning Clark called Austral-Britons.

Or as Rodney Hall puts it - Australians became a race with one foot in the 'air.

If I might be allowed to use that phrase for my own purposes, Rodney, allow me to say that I would like to see Australians put the foot down.

These cultural cross currents are no bad thing, of course. They have produced a lot of our intellectual energy. A lot of our difference in fact.

And, contrary to the Les Paterson stereotype with which someone recently branded me, I don't have any time at all for the view that it's no good if it's not authentically Australian.

You're looking at someone who has a great affection for Europe. Who counts among his greatest pleasures European architecture and European music.

But I am not British or French.

I'm Australian. It's the land I know, the people I know, the resonances I feel, and my commitment to it happens to be unequivocal, unambiguous and absolute.

If Australians are encouraged to think about it, I don't think any of them will want the cobwebs to remain. I don't think they want their identity compromised.

These things really should not have to be said in a nation which in truth is not so young any more.

But, as we've discovered in the last couple of weeks, when these simple, unexceptional things are said, they produce responses which are quite extraordinary.

They've been said, of course, by writers and artists, they've been said on the stage and on film for years - since the turn of the century and before.

That, of course, is one of the great virtues of the arts and why a country is healthier when they flourish. They can provide us with a truer vision of ourselves than politicians or anyone else can.

That is one of the principle reasons why my government will support the arts in this country.

It is also one of the reasons why we are in favour of appointing more artists to arts bodies, putting more of the focus of arts policy on artists, and doing all we can to improve the professional standing and income of our artists - and why I'm very happy to be able to announce today that two great Australian artists, Carl Vine and Nanette Hassall will shortly be recommended to the Governor General for appointment to the Australia Council.

There is no doubt that their knowledge and expertise will be an enormous benefit, and their presence, inevitably, a boost to the Council's standing.

The arts of course play a variety of roles in this country - but the most significant I think is making us believe in ourselves.

I don't mean that patriotism is a prerequisite - I mean that books like the one that we're celebrating today helps define us to ourselves and to the world, and that is very important.

I may as well tell you now, however, that I will not be leaving it up the artists to do this - you are going to hear a lot more in the way of uncompromising belief, including uncompromising reference to our history.

As I said there are some among us who intend to put the nation's foot down.

Let me once again congratulate you Rodney, thank you for the metaphor, and all of you for having me here.

ADELAIDE/CANBERRA