



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
SPEECH TO THE IRISH-AUSTRALIAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE,
ST PATRICK'S DAY BREAKFAST, MELBOURNE
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Thank you very much Gerry, Padric Flynn, Your Grace
Archbishop Little, Joan Kirner, Martin Burke, the Irish
Ambassador, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure to be here this morning on
St Patrick's Day. I stayed last night in the Windsor Hotel
in Bob Menzies' old suite, contemplating St Patrick's Day,
and I thought I heard the chandelier moving, and I certainly
saw the wallpaper curl from the walls revealing a sort of
1950s look and beyond it. And I thought of that remark that
was passed so long ago when another famous person was lying
in his deathbed, another Irishman's deathbed in a Paris
hotel, and he said either something has got to give here,
either the wallpaper or me. And of course, it was him. And
the wallpaper reminded me of that particular occasion in the
Windsor Hotel. But the temptation on St Patrick's Day is, I
think, always to trivialise the Irish. I'm not having a
shot at you Brian, not having a shot at the comedians, but
it is nice to be here with the Irish Chamber of Commerce for
the breakfast because it does reflect upon what Ireland does
export. And what Ireland exports to the world is nothing
trivial. It is everything that counts, its Guinness, poetry,
passion, prose, and politics, and of course people, people
who have shaped nations. And as Padric said, and as Gerry
said, Australia without the Irish, a reflect on it would be
unimaginable. In fact Australia without the Irish would be
unthinkable, Australians without the Irish would be
unspeakable.

For the Irish in Australia have been the fount of Australian
nationalism.

It is a bit like Oscar Wilde himself in that hotel room,
that rare combination of folly and mobility, are the Irish.
The jokers in the pack, but also the adventurers, the
lifblood of the place, the people who know all about

independence and its importance. And it is one of the reasons why I'll value that history of Ireland by the Keatings, Padric, that you've given me this morning.

Indeed, my remarks a couple of weeks ago which Gerry refers to about independence from England, struck a cord with the Irish press and in Ireland, which I was very surprised at. I doubt if any two cultures were more fundamentally opposed than the Irish and the English, in religion, in tradition, and more particularly in history. Irish history, once you got passed the Celtic legends, was the history of never ending resistance to England. In Australia, as Robert Hughes put it in his recent work, 'The Fatal Shore', he said the Irish felt twice colonised, doubly aggrieved.

The remarkable thing is that an Australian identity emerged from these two broad streams, the English and the Irish, and of course I think we must say three, put the Scots in there as well. In other words, even before post-war European migration, before we regarded ourselves as having presided over a multicultural triumph. We in fact pulled off a multicultural triumph ourselves. An idea that Australia had been formed out of a traditional difference in hostility. And it is an amazing to think about that, that Australia as a nation before our post-war program was formed out of these peoples with traditional differences and hostilities. An idea that suggested that Australia was a country with a separate destiny, a separate future, and of course a separate past.

In 1992, I think two lessons present themselves to me. The first, that is to turn our multicultural society into an Australian strength which is becoming, which it will become. In second, to recognise that our destiny is separate. That ours is bound to be a destiny which is separate. Being clear to ourselves and the world that we mean to make our own way, a feeling which will be very important, the harnessing of national will, reviewing our confidence and pride in ourselves, including that sort of pride which lifts us beyond social hatred against the original Australians, the Aborigines. That manifestation of a feeling which will give us a much more powerful identity in the world as well.

I said a few things recently about the flag, but let me say this. We've got to be certain of who we are to take our place in the world, and we can't fly two symbols with our nation for much longer.

A nation is eternally uncertain about its representational image is of course a nation uncertain about itself. I spent a decade trying to transform the Australian economy, Brian remarked on it earlier, to make it a country with an international economic ambition. It became increasingly plain to me that another kind of transformation is necessary, a social transformation, a mental transformation, because we are not going to make it simply by getting the nuts and bolts together, by getting the macro-economy right, or Joan and me getting the railways right, or something else

right, we won't ever get it right until we get that mental transformation that Australia is a country of its own character. Australia is a country which will make its own way in the world. That's the transformation we need to really pull off our internationalisation, our true independence.

Recent events have made that quite clear to me. The uproar when I made those quite unexceptional remarks to Queen Elizabeth on her recent visit. The same sentiments which have left this country always hesitating, always drawing back, always missing the main chance, never seizing our own history. Well that's the one thing the Irish can teach us, their history and their destiny is forever their own and as always remains forever Ireland's.

But when it said in Australia that the contribution we made to Britain in World War I was not returned in full in World War II when an Australian view is expressed - scandal and outrage. Yet those who care to consult the histories, even those written by Englishmen, will find that it's not wrong or even indeed those who recently consult the Financial Times or the Guardian or the London Times, will find that it was not wrong. Yet my dissatisfaction and disaffection is not with Britain or the British, it is with those who cannot find it in themselves to speak with an unashamed and wholehearted Australian voice, who not only fail at the essential task to grasp the future but will not even grasp the past.

The Irish can teach them something about honouring their own history and their traditions. But nor am I much impressed with the new tack of those conservatives, those conservative Australians, the idea that if we are not tugging the forelock to Britain, we must be tugging it to Asia. It is possible, you know, not to tug the forelock to anyone.

Padric, we have got to be in this country like the Irish are, proud without being silly, parochial without being unworldly, culturally secure without being culturally arrogant. This is the great Irish legacy to Australia and we thank your country for it.

Thank you.