



PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP
AUSTRALIAN BOOK PUBLISHERS AWARDS, SYDNEY 26 JUNE**

Ladies and gentlemen.

It's a pleasure to be here tonight on one of the big occasions in the Australian literary year.

And to be here with an Englishman of such courage and grace that he is prepared to share the stage with a notorious Pombasher.

I assure you, John, that I am not.

It is only my enemies who say that I am - my enemies, the British tabloids, and a certain type of intractable colonial which I'm sure you'd never come across in the Australian publishing industry.

I'm pleased to be here because I want to congratulate the industry for holding this first international book fair in Australia.

It's a very welcome development.

Similar events are held around the world; in fact the international reputation of some cities is to a significant degree built on book fairs.

There are book fairs in Frankfurt and Bologna. A US book fair, and Pacifica in Canada.

They are held in Asian countries.

Until now they not have been held here.

Yet, per capita, Australians read as many if not more books than any of these places. They buy at least as many. They depend on books as much.

We are an important market for English language publishing and, increasingly, for books in other languages and in translation - and it's a vigorous competitive market.

We should celebrate books - and their authors.

And their publishers.

And we should do what we can to focus the attention of Australians on an industry which is a vital supplier of their cultural needs.

If the word cultural is off-putting, let's say education, information, communication, entertainment, ideas, politics, history, stories - the skeleton, heart and mind of a community if you like.

And an essential underpinning and partner of film and television and many other industries.

And still probably the best measure of who we are, what we are about, and how well we are doing on the scale of civilisation.

There we have a few reasons why I am pleased to be associated with the Australian Book Fair and with these awards.

There is another one - books offer us a window on to the world.

Just as they do much to define us to ourselves, they can define us to the rest of the world.

And quite frankly, I think we could do with a bit of re-defining.

Visitors like John Mortimer could be forgiven for wondering why we are so pre-occupied with questions of identity.

Not only visitors - my political opponents describe it as a distraction, or an obsession, depending on their mood.

But it seems to me a fundamental concern.

In the 1990s we need to be confident in ways that we have never been, independent in ways that we've never been.

Why? Because all the old supports that gave us both confidence and a vicarious identity have been pulled away.

The old imperial supports contrived to make the matter of our independence a secondary concern: for long periods of our history political expediency made it an illegitimate concern.

The same reflex governs the conservative knee jerk today.

As my opponents are inclined to believe only certified historians, or RSL Presidents, on such matters, let me quote one - W.J. Hudson, the pre-eminent historian of Australian foreign policy.

In an article published this year he writes:

When independence from Britain came piecemeal in the twentieth century - diplomatic independence 1923, executive independence in 1926 and legislative independence in 1931 - it came unsought by Australia. The independence campaign was waged by Canada, South Africa and the Irish Free State, and Australia unsuccessfully opposed them. Australia became independent not by her choice, not when she wanted it, not as a result of her own efforts and not because Australians sought freedom to fulfil their own alternative visions. From the Australian point of view, Britain abdicated and Australia was thrust into an independence which she did not want and which, lest a potential aggressor might think he had only Australia to face and not the might of the British empire, she pretended had not happened.

Some Australians - some influential Australians - still pretend. Some symbolic vestiges and some attitudes suggest that the nation is still pretending.

I don't think that we can pretend anymore - in any form.

We will go into the world independent or we will not succeed, we will go by our own efforts because there is no one else to help us, we will fulfil our own visions because no one is going to lend us theirs.

We have always been ambivalent about who we are. Robert Menzies of course resolved the dilemma by saying we were like a child - that is we were not so much two people at once as one caught between childhood and adulthood.

He imagined us in our relationship with Britain as being like a youth returning to its mother, the old family - as if back from a spell at Timbertop, or jackerooing.

Hudson uses a similar metaphor but puts a different spin on it.

When Britain formalised her withdrawal into Europe, he says, Australians "felt bereft and betrayed".

Australia was like an adult son having affairs (economically with Japan and militarily with the United States) but still living at home and, worse than kicking him out of the old home, mother was moving house and not taking him with her.

In the 1990s , without the slightest disrespect to a country for which I have the greatest admiration, and to whose language and institutions I am a very grateful heir, I want to see us leave home.

Of course, we do not remain there in any substantial material way - but we are there emblematically and to a degree psychologically, and it would be much better for us in the real world that we now inhabit if we removed the emblems and excised the doubts.

We need very badly that spirit of independence and faith in ourselves which will enable us to shape a rôle for ourselves in the region and the world.

I mean a faith that is deeper than the mix of chauvinism and expediency which has tended to shape our political culture: and a degree of confidence which will allow an image of us to form that is both more helpful and much closer to the truth than the lingering stereo-types of gormless men, and shrimps and barbecues.

In this connection I might tell you that yesterday I presented Australia's Second Report to the Chair of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

The Chair, Mrs Mervat Tallaway, pointed out that, in legislation to protect and improve the status of women, Australia was a model for the rest of the world, surpassed by none, and equalled perhaps only by the Scandinavian countries.

Nowhere in the image we present to the rest of the world - nor, I suspect, in our self-image - is there a reflection of that fact.

It would do us good if Australians did know that, and if the rest of the world knew it.

It would do us good psychologically.

And - because we have learned things in getting there and so have skills and experience which other countries need - it would do us good materially.

I think our ignorance of these things comes from that same abdication of responsibility for our own destiny, and our own history.

Let me quote another historian, Professor Stuart MacIntyre of Melbourne University, who said recently:

Australian history lacks a civic dimension that would record how it established its forms of self-government and the values for which the polity stands. Just as a survey revealed that more Australian schoolchildren knew of the Constitution of the United States of America than the constitution of their own country, so Washington and Martin Luther King are more celebrated figures than Wentworth and Catherine Helen Spence. Our interest in the past is an interest in family history but not civic history.

How else could we consider removing Caroline Chisholm from our currency - the most significant woman of our colonial history, and one engaged in the most significant phenomenon of all our history - immigration.

The fact is that for a very long while the focus of our historical interest was not our own history.

In the age of multicultural Australia we have not by any means entirely replaced the old sentiments with unequivocally Australian ones.

Indeed, in a sense, multiculturalism combined with the lingering Britishness of the place to circumvent the emergence of a singularly Australian identity to replace the old imperial one.

As Professor MacIntyre says, "at the very moment when Australia asserted a more forward-looking and pluralist identity, the public culture lapsed into inarticulacy."

Again, it seems to me, the questions of identity, image and our place in the world are linked.

We have very rapidly transformed ourselves from a notoriously xenophobic and insular society to one which has the beginnings of a reputation for its remarkably successful multicultural experiment.

But that success does not form a significant part of our image abroad, and we do not take much pride in it here.

Nor do we take sufficient advantage of the skills, experience and cultural insight which our multicultural population offers us in international business.

The Japanese will tell us that their success is built on their uniquely monocultural society.

The fact that we can't do that should not concern us - the United States achieved phenomenal success from a multitude of cultures.

I believe we can too.

But I think we have to make clear that our belief in liberty, tolerance, equity and the encouragement of ethnic diversity in no way compromises our expectation that the first loyalty of all who make their home here will be to Australia.

In the 1990s I think we should make it clear.

As a simple step in that direction, I believe the Oath of Allegiance sworn by new citizens at naturalisation ceremonies should proclaim unequivocally their loyalty to Australia and the things we believe Australia stands for - including liberty, tolerance, social justice - those very beliefs which underpin multiculturalism.

As Professor MacIntyre says, there is at present "no doctrine of citizenship. The new citizen swears an oath to abide by the laws of her or his new state, but these laws are not spelt out, nor is there any elaboration of their guiding principles or the ethos they encompass."

My own feeling is that the truth about us is more profound than we are accustomed to admit.

We are still very often described as a place which is "new" or "young". But Australia is not young.

The truth about the continent is that it is the oldest in the world - and the continent shapes our culture.

The truth about the Australians who were here before 1788 is that they lived in the oldest continuous civilisation in the world - and they have shaped our culture.

The truth about the people who have come here since is that they brought cultures as old as Europe's, Asia's, the Middle East's.

The truth about Australian democracy is that there are few older.

The truth about the first few years of our nationhood is that we were in the vanguard of social and democratic progress.

Just as it is true that we are once more.

We are a mature social democracy - in need of more direction and cohesion than we have so far had, and more confidence than we have presently - but mature and robust nonetheless.

A mature social democracy, ladies and gentlemen, with a remarkably active publishing industry and literary culture.

A mature social democracy in which the people read books. And involve themselves in the arts to an extent at least equivalent to other cultures. And seek to make civilised lives. And think and invent.

And they write books - they win Nobel, Booker, Pulitzer and other international prizes.

They win Australian prizes. Many Australian prizes.

I wonder if any other country has more literary prizes.

Increasingly they have an international profile in the UK and the USA.

I hope that increasingly they will be read in Asia - that this book fair will mark a turning point in the internationalisation of our cultural industries, and that the book world will do all it can to develop export markets in our region.

I cannot stress too much how important that task is.

That answer to our biggest contemporary problem - unemployment - the answers about our economic future, are bound to our success in Asia.

And our success there, like our success at home, is bound I believe to many of the issues I have talked about tonight.

Books already play a vital role in carrying the message of who we are: the message that this is a culture of imagination and sophistication.

It is also a culture - like the nation itself - of vast unrealised potential.

No industry will play a more significant role in realising it than the publishing industry.

None will do more to shape and project our identity.

I hope that tonight I have made reasonably clear why I think this task is so very important.

So I congratulate the industry for this week's great convention.

I also congratulate all those who have been short-listed for these awards - and, of course, all those who have won.

And I thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak.