



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP

**AWGIE AWARDS PRESENTATION DINNER
MELBOURNE, 10 JULY**

Ladies and gentlemen

I am very grateful for the opportunity to address you tonight at Australia's most prestigious awards for playwrights and scriptwriters - meaning the people who work at the creative edge of the arts and entertainment industry.

Value-adders to the nation's life.

I think you will understand me when I say that in view of the economic setbacks of the last couple of days and the human cost which those unemployment figures spell, this occasion might not seem on the face of it a place to address national issues.

And I can tell you without reservation that for the next couple of months or for as long as it takes, every government effort has to be directed at turning the tide of unemployment.

Fundamentally that means turning the economic tide and getting investment and growth back and with it, new jobs.

It also means making new jobs and making the best possible provision for those without jobs.

This is not to say that the arts and entertainment industry does not have a role to play in creating jobs and generating wealth.

On the contrary, the arts and entertainment industry is one of the industries that Australia always has been good at and which has an excellent future.

But your role is broader than simply generating income and employment.

You are engaged with the fundamentals of Australian life - the way we see ourselves, the way we are seen, the things we value, the things hope for.

Just as these things are at the centre of our lives, they will be at the centre of recovery because, as much as anything else, recovery depends on our confidence, our faith in ourselves. It depends on our spirit.

In no small measure the future of Australia is a cultural issue.

So I'm pleased to be here among those who work in one of Australia's great industries and one of the industries of the future.

I like to believe, some occasional evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, that those who work in the realms of Australia's culture and identity continue to recognise that the Australian Labor Party is their political ally.

My faith in this was reinforced by the letter which came from your President.

In it he talked about the way in which the writers gathered here express in their work some of the qualities we badly need - which any nation needs from time to time - namely a heightened sense of identity and a revival of spirit.

He also said that these writers had achieved significant levels of excellence, and that excellence was important to Australia.

I have a feeling he thought that I would be moved by these sentiments and beguiled into coming - and I suppose my presence here, after a flight from the Solomon Islands, is evidence that his instincts were right.

Although I am always a little bit cautious about discussing such things.

Over the years I have come to accept a bit of sensationalism and distortion.

Although even I was surprised at the media's recent response to my remarks about Australia's image abroad and my supposed slight on Paul Hogan.

All I wanted to say on that occasion was that we should be increasingly building our image overseas on the subtleties and diversity of Australia, on the wide band of our achievements - as well as that easy-going, droll and likeable side of our character and lifestyle.

My point, of course, was never the ludicrous one that the Paul Hogan campaign was somehow damaging: it was that we need to broaden the canvas - which really means nothing more than doing justice to the reality.

In truth, as Treasurer in the 1980s, there can be few people who know better than I the value of the Paul Hogan tourism campaign, and I doubt if anyone is more appreciative of Paul Hogan's role in it.

If Abraham Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address in 1992 the chances are the journalists wouldn't report the speech but the so-called "doorstop" interview that followed it.

And the first question they'd ask is, "how come you're talking about democracy and freedom when there's a war on?"

And there'd be learned articles at the weekend about whether it had been a lapse of political judgement for Mr Lincoln to deliver the Gettysburg address in Gettysburg instead of Philadelphia.

It is not easy to assert principles or ideas in the Australian political culture.

It's certainly very difficult to express more than one idea at a time.

It is not easy for politicians to have views on history, even if it is their own history.

One historian said recently - politicians shouldn't meddle in history - giving those of us in politics the impression was that he was content for us to make history but not to discuss it.

That is why your President's letter of invitation was welcome.

It is good to see that Australia's writers want an enlivened and enlarged public intellectual life.

I hope so - because those of us in politics who want to see Australia fulfill its very old hopes of being a great society and a great democracy, and who are determined to have a go, need the support of all good hearts and minds.

And good hearts and minds I think will recognise that to solve our social and economic problems we'll need a renewed sense of national purpose and new levels of national cohesion.

To go successfully into the Asia-Pacific and the rest of the world we'll need new levels of confidence and mature self-esteem.

But despite the enticement in David's invitation, that is not what I want to talk about tonight. Not specifically.

I want to talk about the arts - or, perhaps more accurately, the arts and our cultural development.

I'm starting from the proposition that if we are to make those economic, political and social advances I have just spoken of, we have to make a parallel cultural advance.

I think the time has come to recognise that however we define it - narrowly or broadly - our cultural development cannot be left to merely follow in the wake of the nation's economic progress.

I think it might be the best way to develop a better understanding of ourselves and the rest of the world. It might help give us the direction we need.

The truth is that ideally we should not need to have these debates about identity and nationhood.

They are understandable historically, but they are regrettable.

It's regrettable that we lack to some extent a knowledge of our history and our political and social system - an unselfconscious cultural dimension.

Those who still reach for their gun when they hear the word culture, might be more easily persuaded if they think of it as an extension of the argument for value-added industries.

Value adding to bauxite creates aluminium and adds dollar value to it. But the process also adds cultural value. You've made something - something useful - which adds more depth and a self-esteem.

The economic imperative and the cultural one are not capable of separation - they have the same conclusion.

We need to make things. And we need to export them - whether it's a ballet troupe, or an Olympic Team or a brand of tennis shoe.

We need to send these things of excellence out into the world with our imprint on them.

That's why in the 1990s I think we should be seeing our cultural development as an integral part of national development.

Resourcefulness, prizes in achievement and identity woven into a strand of national endeavour.

What I say tonight, however, remains a general view.

I'm in no position to say just now what specifically the government should do to best help the development of our culture.

Nor is it up to me or the Government for that matter to prescribe how Australia should develop culturally.

That is something that has to grow naturally from within our society.

The role of the Government is to ensure that that process happens and is not left to wither in isolation.

As you probably know, the Department has published a discussion paper on "The Role of the Commonwealth in Australia's Cultural Development".

There are already in motion a number of review processes.

Submissions have been received. Wide consultations are about to commence.

I don't intend to pre-empt the expert opinions these discussions will produce.

But we know that somewhere between the receipt of this advice and the creation of policy a great deal of sifting and judging will have to be done.

And the best way to do it is not, I believe, by the Government.

Bureaucratic assistance will be essential, but to do the work of assessment, to gather the necessary additional information which will inevitably be required, to help the Minister shape and finally formulate policy, Wendy Fatin and I have decided to establish an Advisory Panel drawn from the arts and the wider cultural environment - including film, television and broadcasting.

Wendy Fatin will be announcing the composition and terms of reference of this Advisory Panel shortly.

We want to treat all these submissions in the context of a Commonwealth strategy.

As far as simple principles are concerned all I want to establish tonight is that the Commonwealth government has a clear and very important responsibility to maintain and develop Australian culture.

This means, among many other things, that on a national level, innovation and ideas are perpetually encouraged; that self-expression and creativity are encouraged; that our heritage is preserved as more develops, and, just as importantly, that all Australians have a chance to participate and receive - that we invigorate the national life and return its product to the people.

I think these sorts of questions should engage us now.

I think good policy in this area needs to both set goals and re-assure us of our achievements.

The last is as important as the first - in a prolonged period of radical change I think people need to be reminded of achievements as often as they are reminded of those things which have still to be achieved.

That seems to me a function of culture - it provides both the stimulation that comes from the new and the reassurance that comes from the familiar.

Now, however we decide to go about doing it, what we need is a Commonwealth strategy for cultural development.

Put one way that means establishing the best way for the Commonwealth to deliver funding and other forms of assistance to all those activities which presently come under the aegis of the Australia Council, and the film and television bodies, and all those which are placed under the heading of "Cultural Heritage" - including the National Library, the National Gallery and the National Museum.

In that way we can throw in such cultural organisations as the ABC and its offshoots, the orchestras; and the Australian War Memorial.

We need to know what is the best way to fund these organisations, and what is the proper relationship between the Commonwealth, the States and Local Government.

That will be the kernel of the task for the Review Team over the next year.

Put another way, it is to find the best way to gather in our heritage and our ideas and deliver them to the people of Australia.

Until now, of course, we have adopted a European model - meaning our ideas about delivery have come from relatively geographically small and much more populous nations.

If we are serious about a national cultural policy, we need an Australian model - one which takes account of our geographic and demographic peculiarities.

Obviously, establishing those relationships between the tiers of government is an essential component in this, but there are others as well.

I mean it might lead us to place a very strong emphasis on touring. A principal component of a national cultural policy could be touring.

We might decide that we have to be very good at taking excellence to the provinces - delivering the nation's arts and heritage to people remote from the big cities.

Visiting the nation's life upon them, if you like.

It should be, after all, as much a right as a railway line or a road.

There is nothing unnatural about drama or orchestras performing in Mount Isa, Broken Hill, Kalgoorlie or Alice Springs.

On the contrary there should be more of it.

The much mooted National Museum is also a case in point.

I cannot conceive of a way to justify building another expensive mausoleum filled with inanimate things under glass.

But a museum housed imaginatively if unpretentiously, a uniquely Australian museum, has a certain appeal.

I mean uniquely Australian in that it would tell the Australian story by taking the ideas and heritage it houses out to the people.

A strategy which obeys these imperatives - geography and demography, access, education, stimulating public discussion, developing national networks, encouraging ideas and intellectual life.

This is something I would expect the Advisory Panel to address.

Perhaps something like the American Endowment for the Humanities, or a second Australia Council for the Humanities, or as Donald Horne has suggested, a Foundation for Australian Cultural Development might also have its place.

The name we call it by, like the eventual shape it might take, is not as important now as our thinking about a national cultural policy and what role such a body might play.

It might, for instance, be the principle vehicle of Australian cultural diplomacy: for promoting Australian culture - including Australian science and education - overseas.

There is no doubt that we need to do this. How do we measure the importance to this country of a Booker Award, or a tour of the Australian Ballet, except, perhaps, to say that it is immeasurable?

We can say the same about film and television - including those soaps which we now so successfully export or indeed the popular music industry of which we are the third largest producers.

I'm not talking simply about image, but about income.

I'm talking particularly about the services we can provide in Asia - and the potential that exists for such industries as publishing, arts and entertainment.

In all this we are talking about a role for the Commonwealth, and by implication for State and local governments.

Yet I believe that one of the keys to our cultural development will be a new culture of non-government funding.

I would expect that in the formulation of a new strategy we would want private individuals and companies to invest more in the creative life of the nation that generally has been no case to date.

In summary, I think the overall object should be to create a role for the Commonwealth government which at once stimulates our national creativity and returns it to the people.

I imagine a cultural policy which raises both the level of participation and the level of excellence.

I see this policy as an integral part of building a better and more secure Australia.

Indeed I believe the essence of our cultural policy should essentially be interwoven with the philosophy and spirit of the nation.

This country is poised on the edge of extraordinary opportunity. We have unparalleled advantages.

We must not let the recession cloud our awareness of that, or of the great strides we took in the eighties.

There is no doubt that we can get back to economic growth and general prosperity - that must be the overriding aim.

But the prosperity will be more secure and the effort to secure it more worthwhile if we also realise our culture is tied in with it and becomes part of it.

I mean that creating things, all manner of things - including of course the things that people here create - should be the nation's common purpose.

Creativity should be a word we value above all.

It is because I know that you value it so highly that I am grateful for the chance to speak tonight, and honoured to pay tribute to your work through the presentation of these awards.

Thank you.