



PRIME MINISTER

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP TO
THE FEDERATION OF ETHNIC COMMUNITY COUNCILS
SYDNEY, 12 AUGUST 1992

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very grateful for the opportunity to address so many distinguished members of the Australian community tonight.

It is something that I have looked forward to since I became Prime Minister.

I want to particularly thank the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia and the New South Wales Ethnic Community Council for organising this occasion, and Carl Harbaum and Edna McGill for their involvement.

Ladies and gentlemen

Like most Australians I have spent a small part of the last three weeks watching, listening to, or reading about the Olympic Games in Barcelona.

Amid all the drama, the thought occurred to me more than once that what the world achieves every four years Australia achieves every day - which is a quite extraordinary measure of cultural diversity and tolerance.

If we were inspired by the scenes in Barcelona, perhaps we can also draw a little inspiration from our achievement here.

The economic troubles we are going through along with the rest of the world are cause for grave concern.

But we have made social advances in Australia superior to virtually anywhere else in the rest of the world, and we should take pride in them, value them, preserve them.

The rich, diverse and tolerant society Australia's multicultural policies have produced is among the greatest of these advances - advances which many other countries envy and admire.

And you can be sure the Government will preserve and improve upon that society.

Perhaps the most moving and symbolic moment in Barcelona occurred at the end of the women's 10,000 metres: when we saw the embrace between the Ethiopian winner and the South African who finished second.

This seemed to me more than an advertisement for the transcending capacity of sport to bring people together.

It was a reminder, in a technocratic era when the icons of success are predominantly economic, that the greatest aspiration of humanity and of any society is to live together in peace.

It is also, then, a reminder of how well we have done this in Australia.

A reminder that we should, in no small way, measure our success in these terms.

And, perhaps, count the fact that we live in a society relatively free of ethnic strife as one of the great blessings of being an Australian.

Peter Robinson made the point very well a couple of weeks ago in an article in the Financial Review.

It was an article against the nihilism which many Australians, including young Australians, these days frequently express.

Comparing Australia to other countries around the world, he pointed out the rare privileges of living here.

And he stressed the degree to which these privileges depend on the spirit of the people.

"Nations are not created, evolved or fully represented by governments", he wrote. They spring from, and grow because of, their people's sense of community".

On the other side of the world, in an article appearing in the New York Review of Books, the President of Czechoslovakia, recently made a remarkably similar point.

In re-building his nation, he said, it will be essential to develop among the people a sense of confidence and pride, a feeling of "co-responsibility for public affairs".

He stressed how much his hopes depended on "what we understand as the human spirit".

I might say that increasingly I feel that Australia's future as a nation depends in large part on these same things. I have been stressing them not just in talking about the organisation of government, but in cultural policy, where we are attempting to put questions of Australia's cultural development in the mainstream of national development:

- in Aboriginal affairs, where we are attempting to make this the decade of breakthrough so that we might all feel more pride and confidence as Australians:
- in various aspects of social policy, in industrial relations, in policies for Australian women, and in education where we have increased participation rates and set up a National Training Authority to provide for all our young people
- and not least in economic policy where our efforts are aimed at a truly national effort involving all Australians in recovery and growth.

This is the idea of One Nation.

It applies also, of course, to our multicultural policies.

For ethnic communities give much and have much to give, to our economic, social and cultural goals.

They have always given much of course.

Immigration is the central fact of this country's history - it's how we all got here. All those who arrived in the last two hundred years at least.

It has been the source of our energy - in the frontier eras of pastoralism and mining, in industrial and post-industrial Australia. I need not reel off the names of Australia's most successful entrepreneurs - past and present - to make the point to this audience.

Nor need I mention the outstanding professional people, the writers, artists and performers, the sportsmen and women, and no less those vast numbers who invested not only their labour but their life in Australia - and gave it life in doing so.

The waves of post-war immigrants have helped Australia define itself - helped us see ourselves, raised our self-awareness, made it easier for us to judge what to build on and what to change.

In this way they have made Australia much more dynamic.

And of course, each wave of immigrants has invested Australia with new ambitions, new skills, new energy.

And, of course, new cultures, new ways of living, new ideas.

So Australia has been made stronger, richer in every sense, more worldly and outward-looking - and, because Australians have trusted to their faith in the principles of fairness and democracy, they have also been made more tolerant.

A better country without doubt.

There are some who say that Australia cannot be strong because of our cultural diversity.

The Leader of the Opposition is one of them.

Dr Hewson says that our multicultural policies are "the politics of division."

The innovative and compassionate policies which have produced a society remarkable among the nations of the world for both diversity and peace he sees as "absolutely a fundamental mistake."

All we do", he says, "is elevate a few professional ethnics."

I say he is wrong.

Australia is no less one nation for the diversity of its heritage, than is a house less stable and strong for the diversity of the crafts and materials which go into building it.

The trick is to work from a few sound principles, while allowing enough flexibility to solve problems and encourage innovation.

Those principles have been given expression in the multicultural policies of the last decade - the ones which Dr Hewson describes as "absolutely a fundamental mistake".

I said that one of those principles is tolerance. In the last forty years or so Australians have much to be satisfied with in this regard.

The country has been transformed - from an insular and xenophobic society, to one widely admired in the world for its openness.

With that openness has come perhaps an unexpected benefit - that is, more confidence and, I think, greater levels of mature self-esteem.

We need those things now. We will need them in the coming years. They are essential components of success.

We will not need some of the more negative perceptions which can emerge.

I mean the belief that our identity is derivative; or a poorly knit patchwork of other identities, or one to be hidden behind an imperial cloak for fear that we might be exposed as second rate.

In other words we will want to obliterate the cultural cringe - and with it both the servility and the jingoism which have sometimes characterised our behaviour.

What we want to preserve and enhance is the sense that Australia represents an opportunity to build something new, something better.

It is from this that the lasting contributions to our national life have come: from those who have said - this Australia is my home. This is where my loyalties lie.

So long as those basic principles are there, so long as the common ambition is there, there will always be strength in our diversity.

It seems to me that just now Australia is rather like the great port cities of old Europe and Asia which got their material wealth from trade, but their greatness from being at the cross-roads of cultures - from the people and ideas which flowed about them.

In the challenging and competitive world that we now live in - that we now face - Australia, I believe, can draw strength from the same human sources.

As I said before, tolerance will continue to be one of the essential principles in this.

I think I should also say that tolerance is a two way street.

It is essential to a multicultural society to welcome newcomers, accept and learn to enjoy difference.

It is equally essential to respect the traditions of the Australian nation.

Australia is not a new place or a shallow one. It is one of the oldest democracies in the world. Its political institutions are a unique blend of the British, American, European and home-grown Australian.

Its traditions derive from hard and unique experience on this continent and from battles in defence of it, as much as they do from the varied cultures of the British Isles - or any of the other countries from which Australian settlers have come.

These traditions deserve and must receive respect. No country taking itself seriously would demand less.

I think it is also true that just as the newer cultures of Australia should enjoy tolerance and support, so should those who see a threat to the old Australia in the emergence of the new.

You will know that I believe in change when change is necessary. You will know that I don't believe any group of Australians can claim a monopoly on our past or on our future.

But I also believe in maintaining the best traditions of the culture from which I came.

The same principles which lead the Government to hold the enhancement and preservation of social harmony as an imperative, leads us to build on the old traditions as well as the new.

Ladies and gentlemen

A little earlier I mentioned Australia's cosmopolitan potential.

I said that there is more than trade to any great city or state.

But there is nothing like trade to attract people. Nothing like trade to give them energy and ideas. And there is nothing like it to encourage liberty and to transcend cultural differences.

Trade - or let us say a healthy vibrant economy - is the surest guarantee of general prosperity, of healthy social democracy, and of our multicultural society continuing to flourish.

Just as it creates common ground between nations, it creates common ground within them.

So when I say that our attention to the social and cultural concerns of Australia are central ones, I do not for a moment cease to regard the economy as the framework on which all our hopes ultimately hang.

My point has been that it is pointless and self-defeating to separate our social ambitions from our economic ones.

And nowhere is this more clear, surely, than here in this audience.

Because, as I have said, it is people like yourselves and those you represent who have done much to drive the economy.

And I believe it is becoming increasingly apparent that our diverse and open society may well yield us economic benefits we really did not expect.

The language skills of multicultural Australia, the personal knowledge of other countries and their markets, the international networks which so many Australians maintain, all offer unique trading advantages.

There is quite clear evidence, for example, that the small businesses of Asian Australians have been succeeding to an unparalleled degree during the last few years, including the recession.

One reason is their ability to operate effectively in Asian markets.

Given that we have the same facilities of language and local knowledge, there seems to be no reason why we cannot enjoy more success in Middle Eastern and European - especially Central European - markets.

The Government will be seeking to encourage these advantages.

They will be the focus of a special conference the Office of Multicultural Affairs in my department will be co-sponsoring in October this year.

In talking about the real and potential commercial advantages which the ethnic communities have conferred on Australia, you can be sure that the Government has not forgotten its particular responsibilities to those communities.

I mean we must work to see that there are genuinely equal opportunities for new and better jobs when they are displaced by restructuring; that there is adequate English language training as well as vocational training.

There is more than fairness involved in the discharge of these responsibilities: there is the recognition of the need to encourage talent and ambition and energy in the process of restructuring.

Migrant groups have been at the forefront of every major industrial step we have taken in Australia.

Just as they were in the vanguard of the industrial re-adjustment after the war and the sustained surge which followed, so they will play a leading role in the re-structured economy of the nineties and beyond.

Ladies and gentlemen

Perhaps some of the things I have said tonight could be interpreted as overly optimistic or complacent.

I do not mean to be. I do believe that there is much to be proud of.

But there is also much to do.

The government is aware that the need to manage our diverse society is not one which appreciably fades with time.

We need to go on taking those steps necessary to keep the barriers down - the difference flourishing but the barriers between Australians down.

There are times when this is acutely necessary - when, for instance, overseas wars impact directly on Australian ethnic groups.

I take this opportunity to congratulate those communities who have so ably done this over the years; most notably in recent times during the Gulf War, and the tragedy now occurring in Yugoslavia.

The Government acknowledges with gratitude and admiration the restraint that has been shown.

There will always be times when specific communities are under particular stress. The government will listen and do what it can.

The more usual but no less necessary task is to listen on a regular basis through formal consultations, like those conducted by the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Gerry Hand, and through channels like the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

I say "listening" - I mean "including".

I say "ethnic communities" - I mean all Australians.

I mean what we do is part of this Labor Government's commitment - it's historic commitment - to social improvement, to social justice.

Access and equity policies are an essential part of this.

They ensure equitable access to government programs and services for all Australians regardless of their background.

Those who argue that multiculturalism divides the community should consider the alternatives.

Providing programs which some Australians could not use at all because of language or cultural barriers; or of providing one set of programs for the majority community and another for those whose backgrounds are not English speaking - these are divisive, these would create two classes of Australians.

The multicultural policies of the Government are intent upon not creating ghettos - strife, or special treatment, or "professional ethnics".

They are intent on managing diversity for the good of every individual and for the good of the country.

It is for these reasons that we have, for example, sought to remove the barriers to participation in the media and the arts - through that uniquely Australian institution, the SBS - and more recently through traineeships designed to ensure that young Australians of non-English speaking backgrounds have a chance in the media.

We don't do these things to support particular cultures for their own sake.

We do it to keep the barriers down.

As I said, we take the view that these policies are an extension of our democratic traditions.

They require good faith on all sides.

For our part we stick to the principle that all Australians have the right to express and enjoy their cultural identity as they choose, provided they do not infringe the rights of any other Australians.

It's as true for a recent arrival from Vietnam as it is for an Austral-Celt from Bankstown with half a dozen generations born here.

We expect all Australians to observe these rights and liberties.

Australian governments have also included in their responsibilities, the provision of the basics for survival.

Since the days of Arthur Calwell the Australian immigration policy has taken a share of the responsibility for settlement after immigration.

Today's government continues that tradition - and, indeed, through access and equity policies, extends it.

Our continuing success depends on that unspoken partnership between Government and the community.

In this context I pay tribute to the work done by FECCA and its many affiliates.

It has been an immensely useful task - a crucial task - to bring together Australians from so many backgrounds, and to foster among them a sense of belonging to this country. So it is with pride, not complacency, that I address you tonight.

Australia's immigration policy and its multicultural policies have been one of the great undertakings of our history, one of the great achievements.

Also, one of the great risks.

It involved trust in our people and our traditions to manage the sort of diversity which in so many other countries has led to tragedy.

Just in recent times - look at Los Angeles, Bradford, Sarajevo, Boipatong.

We have managed it. We are determined that we will continue to manage it.

The pride comes not merely from the sense that we, the Australian Government, has done well, or we the old Anglo and Celtic Australians.

It comes in large part from seeing how well the peoples of the world have done in Australia.

In that, as an Australian, I take great pleasure and pride.

The achievement of Australian governments, and ministers like Gerry Hand, has been to match in imagination, ambition and courage, the imagination, ambition and courage of the people who have left their homes to come here.

They are the qualities we need now. Indeed they are the qualities a nation always needs.

Tonight I am grateful for the opportunity to meet you, to express my thoughts and feelings, and to pay tribute.

It is a very appropriate time. All those great moments at the Olympics could not disguise the fact of world events.

Events which make clear that working and living with cultural difference is one of the great global challenges of our time.

I do not believe it is overstating the case to say, then, that in Australia we have some lessons for the world.

Thank you.