



PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR AWARDS, 7 SEPTEMBER 1992**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here for the presentation of the Prime Minister's Employer of the Year Awards. Thank you all for coming.

You will often hear from our side of politics the term "social net" - by which we mean the protection of those who for any reason need protection or assistance, who live and work at a disadvantage.

We think the "social net" is a measure of how civilised we are.

I think the term is sometimes misunderstood.

It is not merely a social backstop. It is not socially inactive or passive.

Increasingly in the last decade, Australians have developed creative programs, which are valuable both to the individual and society at large.

And I think we have come to recognise in Australia that such programs are more than a measure of our progress towards a good society - they actively propel us along that path.

They give us all a bit more strength.

We are here today to congratulate employers who have given new job opportunities to people with disabilities.

People who have been given these opportunities speak of the enormous boost to their confidence and self-esteem, the sense of independence and self-reliance they gain - things which are basic to all of us.

We're here to congratulate employers who have made this possible but we also owe them our thanks.

Because in doing these things, it seems to me, we all grow in self-esteem, and confidence, and self-reliance.

We make Australia a better place to live when we do them.

Ladies and gentlemen -

1992 marks the end of the United Nations International Decade of disabled persons, so it is appropriate, I think, to briefly outline how the Commonwealth Government has been living up to its responsibilities.

In 1987 we took an historic first step towards overcoming the barriers faced by Australians with disabilities, with the introduction of the Disability Services Act.

The Act has provided both a significant catalyst for change and a set of principles and objectives to strive for.

It took the needs of people with disabilities out of the realms of protective charity and into those of social policy.

It made segregation in accomodation and employment a thing of the past.

The Disability Services Act established two new employment models:

- competitive employment and training agencies which enable people with disabilities to earn a full wage
- and
- supported employment services for those people who require additional training and support.

I'm pleased to say that many of the employers who have been nominated for these awards have received assistance from services funded under the Act.

The introduction late last year of the Disability Reform Package extends our initiative to provide adequate assistance for those who are unable to compete in the labour market, while also providing opportunities and encouragement for those who have potential for employment.

Ladies and gentlemen -

Today I am proud to advise you that the Disability Discrimination Bill has passed through the House of Representatives.

Under the legislation, people with disabilities who experience discrimination in employment will be able to make a complaint to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

The Disability Discrimination Bill will complement existing State laws in the area of physical, intellectual and psychiatric disability, and extend to people with disabilities similar rights and opportunities as are enjoyed by Australians generally.

I am also pleased to say that, despite the tight fiscal environment, in this year's Budget we announced a package of assistance to address the additional costs of disability.

We have come a long way in this Decade of Disabled Persons.

But new challenges emerge.

- . We need to provide support for people commensurate with their needs.
- . We need to address more comprehensively people with psychiatric disabilities - people who in the past have suffered from very considerable neglect.
- . We need to generate employment and activity opportunities for people currently in sheltered workshops.
- . We need to facilitate the successful transition of young people with disabilities from school into the workforce or further training.

The Government is committed to ensuring that young people with disabilities obtain their share of access to the employment and training places announced in the Government's Youth Statement, Young Australians.

There are of course no easy or quick solutions but, in view of what has been achieved so far, I am confident that imagination and sustained cooperative effort can take us a long way.

Our success has proved the value of cooperation - between the Commonwealth Government and its departments, State governments, organisations representing people with disabilities, service providers, employers and unions.

I am pleased that many of these bodies are represented here and I welcome them all.

In particular, I want to thank Ian Spicer and Martin Ferguson.

Their presence acknowledges the work which employers and unions have been doing jointly and individually to raise the awareness of their members about the capacities and the largely untapped potential of people with disabilities.

Ladies and Gentlemen -

Today we can celebrate the achievements of many hundreds of Australians who are turning our ideal into a reality.

Australia's achievements in the area of disability legislation, programs and financial assistance have placed us in the forefront of international development in this area.

Australia received recognition and praise at the Independence '92 Congress in Vancouver last year.

As I have said on more than one occasion in recent months, these difficult economic times we have been through, and the economic challenges we face, do not constitute a reason for discounting our social achievements or our social goals.

Ladies and Gentlemen -

Let me thank on your behalf the selection panel who face the difficult task of choosing the finalists from short-lists from each State and Territory and the Commonwealth and who also insisted on examining all the entrants, not only those who were short-listed.

Finally, let me say something about the employers who have been nominated for these awards.

Among the significant features of the nominations were

- . the full award wages and conditions under which people are employed.
- . the willingness of employers to modify the workplace
- . the level of integration into the workplace of employees with a disability, and
- . the expanding of job profiles of workers to allow them the training and supervision necessary to perform more complex tasks in the organisations.

A wide variety of occupations and industries are represented.

The success stories include - a customer service operator, an apprentice upholsterer, a fast food kitchen-hand, a horticultural employee, and office work in architectural and engineering firms - to name just a few.

Ladies and Gentlemen -

On behalf of everyone here I want to congratulate all the employers nominated for these awards.

It might well be said, beyond the recognition we afford them today, the most satisfying return on their efforts lies in the words of some of those people they have helped.

For instance, one man with a severe physical disability has said:

"I feel proud of myself. Since becoming financially independent, I have been able to help other people."

Another said: "before, when I wasn't working I was more frightened to go out ... but now I am more secure and self-confident."

And a young man with an intellectual disability has remarked on how much better the experience of working is compared to social security:

"People still have the right to have a job, he said, to do things like other people. With a job you can plan things you want to do with your life instead of relying on other people."

Ladies and Gentlemen -

I now ask my colleague the Minister for Health, Housing and Community Services, Mr Brian Howe, to call upon the State and Commonwealth winners to come forward and receive their awards.