



# PRIME MINISTER

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

WELCOME TO PRESIDENT ROBINSON OF IRELAND  
CANBERRA, 27 OCTOBER 1992

President Robinson, on behalf of the Government and the people of Australia it is my great pleasure to welcome you.

It is truly a great pleasure for the reason that in certain significant and undeniable ways we Australians share your Irishness.

Even those who are not of Irish descent will say that when they go to Ireland it is uncanny how much they feel at home.

We would like to think that you feel something similar among us here.

And when we feel these bonds of recognition and affection we shouldn't be too surprised.

For at every major point in our history since 1788 the Irish have been there, in word and deed and spirit.

It is not easy to say just what that spirit comprises.

There has frequently been an element of rebellion about it of course, but it's much more than that.

The Irish contribution has been primarily to the language, literature, law, politics, religion and philosophy of Australia.

And football, and horse racing, and farming, and eating, and drinking, and story-telling, and what is these days called the hospitality industry, and music.

To name a few.

In other words, the Irish have been a great civilising force. A great creative force.

We share some basic attitudes.

Perhaps the most important of them, as you said in your speech to the Press Club yesterday, is a deep attachment to the lands we live in: the land itself lives in our minds, and informs the way we think about ourselves.

More than anything else, the shape of the continent somehow defines a disparate and far-flung population as one Australian people.

We have long been thoroughly urbanised and industrialised, but the land is still at the centre of our identity.

And I've no doubt that the Irish imagination played some part in keeping it there.

But as I am sure you know, the Aboriginal people, who were here for 40,000 years or more before us, understood this land in ways that we can never hope to emulate.

Yesterday you told the story of the Choctaw Indians who, on hearing of the Irish famine, raised seven hundred dollars and sent it to Ireland for the relief of the victims.

It was a case of people who were already displaced feeding those who were about to be.

In another nineteenth century example of the global village, in turn, those Irish were among the settlers who displaced the Aboriginal people of Australia.

It is one of our great hopes in this last decade of the twentieth century that we can put to rights the devastating impact that the European occupation of their country had on the Aboriginal people, and that we can reconcile at last the economic, social and cultural differences which still keep Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians apart.

This should not be beyond people who have succeeded in creating a very rich and harmonious society from an extraordinary variety of cultures.

Through these and many other avenues of social and economic policy designed to strengthen the ties which bind Australians, the Government I lead is seeking to create an Australia which is more truly one community and nation.

President I know that you also look to reconcile the differences which make for the continuing tragedy of Northern Ireland.

I know that you seek to bring opportunity and justice equally to women and men and close the divide between them.

I know that you seek to narrow the gap between rich and poor, and that your great hope is that everywhere the outcasts of the world can be brought in.

I know, that being Irish, you must be attracted to your country's past, to your ancient heritage and traditions - but I know that you look to your country's future.

We have this in common too.

In the last decade Ireland has grown out of the shadow of both Britain and its own past to become a more outward-looking nation, more confident of its identity, more alive to the world and its region.

A nation carving out for itself a very independent position in European affairs, and with it a stronger place for itself in the world.

It has done these things of necessity. Because they were the only way to give Ireland back its future. The only way to ensure that the Irish of the next generation will have no need to emigrate.

So these days when we Australians and Irish say that we see something deeply familiar in each other, it is not merely our common past but also our present preoccupations and our aspirations which we recognise.

For Australia has done the very same things - we are more open to the world, more confident and independent-minded, and alive to our region, the Asia Pacific, as you are to Europe.

Like you we have stepped out of the past.

Old countries we might be in different ways, but in a sense we're younger than we have ever been.

President, we share many of your hopes.

We share your country's determination to be a modern and dynamic nation.

Our affinity with your country and our roots in all of its political and religious traditions has always made the conflict in Northern Ireland a matter of deep concern to us, and we earnestly hope that the current talks being chaired by our former Governor General, Sir Ninian Stephen, will be successful.

We share your hope for sexual equality and social justice; and, at the end of a decade in which some countries have discounted these ambitions, we are proud to say that we have made substantial progress toward them.

That is something else we share - it may even be the strongest of the ties that bind us - we know that when we change we have to take our people with us.

President, the light which you keep burning in your window tells all your compatriots around the world that they will always be welcome home.

But, with the greatest respect, there's no need to keep it burning for the six million Australians of Irish ancestry.

It would never occur to us for a moment that we weren't welcome.

It would never occur to any of the other eleven million for that matter.

We presume we're as welcome as you are here. And that is very welcome.