



PRIME MINISTER

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

NATIONAL IMMIGRATION OUTLOOK CONFERENCE
SYDNEY, 13 NOVEMBER 1992

Ladies and gentlemen

I am delighted to have the opportunity to address this very distinguished gathering, and I think I should begin by saying on behalf of the Government, thank you for giving your time and expertise to a conference of very great importance to Australia.

The names of those taking part attest to the continuing centrality of immigration in Australia's life - and, I think, to the great public spirit at large these days.

And I think it is true to say that these days we can sense in Australian public life beyond the party political sphere a new sense of purpose and engagement in national issues, a new level of interest in the future.

It is something I think all of us would encourage.

Ladies and gentlemen, a few months ago I attended a preview screening of the Australian film, *Strictly Ballroom* which has since set box office records and won a raft of prizes here and elsewhere in the world. It is an extraordinary popular phenomenon.

Strictly Ballroom has a few lessons for us I think. For a start it is a reminder that creativity and productivity, the cultural and the economic, are complementary.

Strictly Ballroom is popular culture, including multicultural, and it is art. It is also a terrific return on a public and private sector investment - and it exports. It is both economics and culture, including multicultural.

The story of the film would have been impossible without the post-war immigration policy. It could not have been conceived without it. Nor could the personnel - the cast and crew - have been conceived for that matter.

Strictly Ballroom concerns faith and hope and opportunity and care. The making of it concerned the same things.

Strictly Ballroom is about excellence but it is also, quintessentially, about ordinary people.

The film tells us that, hard as it often is to do it, old ways need to change. It tells us that we need to be open to new ideas.

But it is also about the best of Australian values - their immutability and their adaptability. It is a decidedly unyuppie film. It's about continuity as well as change.

It might be read as a metaphor for Australia in the last half of the century. It is about all of us. There is a bit of all of us in it, and it suggests to all of us, I think, that there is a lot to learn from the experience of multicultural Australia.

Ladies and gentlemen, in the latter half of the 1970s, when I found that I was increasingly in a position to have some influence in the Labor Party, and therefore potentially some influence on Australian public life, the nature of my ambitions became clearer to me.

Since then they have become clearer still.

I hope you will bear with me for a moment while I try to explain them. I think it is worth doing because I don't think my experience is at all atypical.

The community I grew up in was distinctly Anglo and Celtic Australian. I grew up with old fashioned Australian working class traditions, one of which was a pretty happy partnership with social mobility.

Success was encouraged and applauded, but it was assumed that you wouldn't forget your roots. You would take them with you wherever you went in life, whatever you did.

Now I don't need to explain to you the relatively simple cultural parameters of such a society. The faiths, on the outside at least, were work, family, church, league, racehorses and rock and roll.

Under the surface lurked a love of Australia and its way of life, a broad egalitarianism, a belief in social justice, the idea - I know it's a cliché but it's true - of a fair go for everyone.

These values were simple enough once you understood them, and to grow up in them was to understand them.

But what perhaps does need to be explained is the paradox they contained for people of my generation.

For, you see, I had the greatest respect for the values and traditions of the Bankstown community. I still do. Fundamentally, they are what I am.

Bankstown is nothing more or less than home.

And, as people do with homes, I want to protect what it is and what it stands for.

But the paradox was this: much as I loved it, I wanted to change it. I wanted to open the place up.

The Australia I knew as a young man was narrow, insular, uncertain of itself.

The Australia of the 1970s was still too narrow.

It seemed to me that, for all its great virtues, Australia was missing out on what the world had to offer, and it was offering the world less than it could.

Australians in those days tended to believe that you could only keep traditions up by keeping others out.

By the 1970s I had begun to see my cause among those who wanted to open Australia up to the outside world - I wanted a Labor Party and a Labor government which was open to the world and phobia-free.

Like Australia itself, Bankstown is now a very different place, and perhaps the most obvious change can be seen in the shopping malls where these days Lebanese and Vietnamese businesses predominate.

This causes some concern among the older residents - just as it caused concern among my parents' generation when migrants from Italy and Greece began to move in.

These and other migrant groups have added to the life of Bankstown - they've given it more strength and interest.

In due course I have no doubt the migrants of recent years will too.

But the old values are still strong - there is still that faith in the idea of social justice, expanded opportunity and broad egalitarian democracy, faith in Australia, concern about Australia - all these are still the dominant values, and they transcend ethnic origins.

One of those values is tolerance.

We should not lose sight of the fact that along with the willingness of migrants to come and join in the life of Australia, and the willingness of governments to facilitate that, the essential preconditions for the success of the immigration program were the values of democracy, tolerance and goodwill in which earlier generations of Australians believed.

This is not self-congratulation so much as giving credit where it's due. I say we should give credit to democracy - Australian democracy.

For under that laconic exterior a serious democracy is lurking. And under the conservative attachment to the Australian way of life, there is a capacity to accommodate change, and welcome difference.

We can draw a parallel between multicultural policy and economic policy in the 1980s.

As Treasurer I saw my role as the necessary one of opening Australia up to the world, making us a player: in the longer run, I have no doubt, not just a player, but a winner.

There have been setbacks - the recession has been an awful setback: but essentially that is what it is - a setback on the long road to an Australia which successfully competes in the world and thus successfully sustains a high standard of living, increased opportunities and a healthy democracy for its people.

Just as we are an infinitely more interesting, rich and rewarding society because we are now multicultural, so the rewards will be greater - infinitely greater - because our economy has joined up with the world.

Imperfect as they might be, the deeper democratic values of ordinary Australians were absolutely necessary in the transformation of Australia from a narrow and inward looking society to a more cosmopolitan and outward looking one.

I have said several times this year at various functions, here and overseas - if you want the proof of our capacity to change in the next decade look at the change we have made in the last one.

It has been the willingness of Australians to make the change and the capacity of their institutions to make it which has brought about the revolution in our workplaces, and which more than anything else gives us reason for confidence about the future.

We are succeeding in making this a competitive, export-oriented, productive culture because the people of Australia have come with us.

We will only make it wealthier society, and therefore a place where more opportunity exists, by the same means - not by creating an underclass, or by employing some form of trickle down economics, but taking all the people with us.

I won't belabour you with figures now. Nor am I shrinking from realities which still need to be addressed.

But the shape of the Australian economy has changed dramatically in the last few years and the most telling evidence of this is in the fact that our exported manufactures have doubled and total exports now make up 23 per cent of Gross Domestic Product compared with 14 per cent a decade ago.

The message is the same as the message of multiculturalism. *The basic values of Australia support change.*

Our broad egalitarianism does not drag us down, it underpins our capacity to adapt.

It is our strength. And for me that is the resolution of the paradox - between those things which we value and those things we want, what we have and what we need, between inertia and progress.

The basic mould of Australian society has served us well through generations, through great trials and extraordinary change.

We need to make it stronger, bigger, more adaptable and interesting.

But it must not be broken.

The Accord provides another example - another example of building from the mould - from the cooperative, equitable nation-building instincts of Australian society.

The Accord is primarily responsible for giving us rates of industrial disputation sixty per cent below the 1970s, the creation of 1.5 million jobs since 1983, a ten per cent reduction in labor costs, a substantial shift from wages to profits, the lowest rate of inflation in the OECD, a doubling of manufactured exports since 1983 and an increase of 63 per cent since 1988-89.

There has been no greater contribution to our competitiveness than this partnership - and there is no better guarantee of it increasing.

The recession has given us totally unacceptable levels of unemployment, but we will not find jobs for those people by disposing of our strengths - and the Accord is perhaps the greatest of these.

I firmly believe that our economic success rests ultimately on the same bases as our social success - our success as a nation involves both.

The key is this - if we include Australians and their best traditions we'll succeed. If we leave their fate to chance, I believe we'll fail.

More than that, we will lose one of the great egalitarian societies in the world. We'll lose both our heritage and our future.

I want to make the point very plainly: the chances for truly radical change depend on social acceptance of change. Change which tramples on social values, which breaks the mould, will simply not succeed.

What I want to say tonight concerns change. Not change of the strictly economic type with which I know I am generally associated. It concerns some of the things I believe we can do in this decade leading to the centenary of federation to extend the domain of our common heritage and our common hopes.

If it is true that it was caring for cultural traditions which made multiculturalism a success, it follows that fostering and maintaining the nation's cultural life is a matter of priority.

It's why, among reasons like pure pleasure, I set a lot of store in the arts.

I think much more than is often appreciated in politics, they serve to bind society together.

The arts define and re-define us and in that they give us confidence. They encourage tolerance as well as excellence, they shape and reinforce the mould of our society, and by all this they can help carry us through.

Again, we can learn something from that famous decade a century ago.

The legacy of the 1890s was not just federation and the Labour movement - it was an image of ourselves and this land indelibly engraved by Australian writers and artists.

They defined Australia, and in so doing they gave Australians faith in themselves for generations to come.

I live in hope - and it's a confident hope - that the 1990s will renew our faith and the faith of new generations.

That's substantially why this year we established a panel of leading Australians to develop a national cultural policy - to bring cultural questions into the mainstream of decision making in Australia, and to encourage excellence and broaden participation.

In this the Government is taking a leading role, but it also responding to public interest and concern.

As I said when I began there is, just now, an enlivened interest in the nation.

It can be seen in programs aimed at re-defining Australia both at home and abroad, particularly in Asia.

Some of these programs are coming from government departments, but what is most striking and most encouraging is the degree to which they are being generated by groups of independent individuals or by institutions which never contemplated such a role for themselves a few years ago.

I think it is true to say that they are in part a return on the issues of nationhood which the Government has raised this year.

Not that we invented them - there has been for a long time I believe a rising tide of national feeling and a great need to open the channels of expression.

You can be sure that we intend to keep them open.

Ladies and gentlemen, when we think about the issues of Australian nationhood in the 1990s, once again I think there is something to be learned from the multicultural experience.

It's worth remembering that long before the post-war immigration program one could have drawn a cultural map of Australia defining regional and other differences based on Australian experience.

The map essentially still exists. And, as with multiculturalism, the object is to find unity in the diversity, productivity in the diversity.

Long may Queenslanders be Queenslanders and Sandgroppers Sandgroppers, and the people of Wagga or Weipa, or the Mallee or the Barossa take pride in their distinctive communities, all they do and all they have done.

In fact it should please Australian nationalists to think that, culturally speaking, Australia will be characterised by stronger regional identities as time passes.

And by a stronger national identity.

We need a strong national identity at home to give us more strength of purpose and belief. We need it abroad to leave no one in any doubt about who we are and what we stand for.

I think we should and can encourage it.

We can encourage the idea of Australian citizenship in a number of ways, including by serious consideration of our national symbols and by a full non-partisan debate on constitutional change.

I think I have made my position on these pretty clear in the course of this year. I am one who thinks our flag would better reflect our contemporary identity and aspirations if it did not carry on it the flag of another country.

I also believe that the flag should not be changed without the support of a majority of the Australian people - and it will not be.

There would now appear to be no doubt that something very close to such a majority exists in support of an Australian republic, and that the number is growing.

It seems to me that the public is increasingly interested in this debate and expects of the Government that the appropriate constitutional changes be fully and expertly canvassed and considered.

I don't believe Governments in the nineties are going to be able to avoid this responsibility, and, I think and certainly hope, that the time is rapidly approaching when it will be possible for political leaders to discuss these matters without the inference being drawn that one is Irish, or creating a distraction, or hostile to Britain or Her Majesty the Queen.

This is not change so much as institutions *keeping up* with change - with national growth.

These things will have to be confronted because the people, particularly younger people, want them. And deserve them.

If it is true that those basic values of Australian democracy were an essential factor in the success of multiculturalism, then I think it is probably time that we acknowledged them more formally.

I saw recently that Asian participants in an Academy of Social Sciences project said that they were at once proud of their Australian citizenship and puzzled by how little pride native-born Australians seemed to take in it.

I think it is probably true that Australians who were born here tend to take their rights and responsibilities for granted, and lapse into believing that this democracy came to us by accident - in the same way that we not so long ago believed our prosperity was an historical accident.

In truth, just as we have learned that we must work at creating national wealth, that we must be cleverer and more cooperative and cohesive, so we have to work at social and political development - at national growth.

In this decade I think we might profitably aim at building in the whole community a more spirited sense of our democratic achievements and greater involvement in the questions now confronting us.

It would be absurd if migrants attending citizenship ceremonies felt more strongly and were more knowledgeable about Australian democracy than Australians of long standing.

If our education system is the best means of changing this, then we should use the education system to change it. If there are other means, we should employ those as well.

In the next few years we should be looking at all those elements of our political and constitutional heritage which have been lost to Australians or leached of meaning.

Just as we deliver our cultural heritage back to all Australians, I think we should be seeking ways to deliver the essential strands of our nationhood.

The patriation of our Constitution from London might be a start.

As my colleague, the Minister for Justice, said last night, another very useful initiative might be the adoption of an Oath of Citizenship sworn to Australia and the principles of democracy and tolerance, and explicitly recognising that Australian citizenship is a common bond involving reciprocal rights and obligations which unite us all.

At another level there can be no greater hope than that our efforts to achieve reconciliation with the Aboriginal people succeed, and that we can convert the unconscionable tragedy of 200 years into a common cause for social justice.

Ladies and gentlemen, last February we brought down an economic statement with the non economic name of "One Nation".

By this we meant to convey our message that social and political cohesion and purpose were as important as economics in the effort for recovery and securing the nation's long term future.

It was not just the name, but the programs we announced which told the story - the National Rail Highway and road programs, the National Training Authority, the National Electricity Grid were at once emblems and manifestations of our intent.

As a Labor Government whose primary goal is always full employment, we recognise just how severe the effects of recession have been - how severe they continue to be.

We have devoted by far the greatest part of our efforts this year to reducing levels of unemployment and doing our best to alleviate its effects. We have devoted a very large part of the Budget to this.

We have also taken the view that the solution is not merely economic.

And the experience of immigration and multiculturalism in Australia makes that plain.

One cannot speak of immigration without thinking of the hope and faith which migrants need. In themselves and in Australia.

If we are to succeed as this, the greatest of Australia's social undertakings has succeeded, we will need those elements of hope and faith in Australia.

And we will need the tolerance and good will on which the immigration program rested.

We will need to keep the best of our traditions alive and guiding us, and our hearts and minds open to the world.

I think that is the best lesson to be learned from the past fifty years of our history.

That lesson applied might see us with our democratic traditions essentially unchanged in the year 2000 but our people more aware of them, and more eloquent in their expression of them.

By this I mean something beyond a nation in which everyone knows the words of the National Anthem - but that would certainly be a good start.

Whatever decisions Australians make in the next few years - and I think it is likely that they will choose to have an Australian Head of State - the proper role for Government in these things is to open debate and the way for change.

The greatest hope is that by the year of the centenary of federation the social justice Australians have always believed in is more than ever before a thoroughgoing reality in Australia - and that, above all, full employment is entrenched again.

If these are my hopes for the year 2000, my hope today is that, for all the necessary detail of your deliberations here and elsewhere in your professional lives, you never lose sight of this bigger picture.

Thank you.