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## PRIME MINISTER

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP  
TO THE WALKLEY AWARDS PRESENTATION DINNER - ANA HOTEL,  
SYDNEY, 27 NOVEMBER 1992

Ladies and gentlemen

It is a great pleasure to be here tonight.

It is *always* a pleasure to be among the nation's press.

I have only a hazy idea of why this is so.

But that is better than the Leader of the Opposition who has no idea at all.

Let me get the politics over with early. I don't share this Nixonian - you won't have me to kick around any more - attitude.

I like engagement.

The Garboesque has no attraction for me. I don't want to be alone.

I ask myself these days - does this make me peculiar?

That I like to talk to the press?

That, wrong-headed or inconvenient as they sometimes are, I like journalists?

That I like politics?

Am I wrong to believe that for all the inevitable imperfections this is one of the world's better democracies and Australian journalists are a powerful reason why this is so?

I don't think I am wrong.

I think it must be a kind of cultural attraction that you have for me.

I see the press down the back of the plane on overseas trips - fierce and hungry, like grizzly bears on a package tour of the Orient.

There are members of my staff who are too frightened to walk down the aisle between them to go to the toilet.

They wait till nightfall and tiptoe down when they're all asleep – little knowing that journalists are at their most dangerous after dark.

Yet I can't resist going down for a yarn.

I think the reason I enjoy the company of journalists, even when I can see by the look in their eyes that they would like to tear me limb from limb, is that I actually like democracy.

It has its problems, democracy. It doesn't always turn up the results we want. It can be as frustrating to those of us who want change as it is to conservatives who want the world to stand still.

But it's far and away the best form of government anybody has ever come up with, and I must say I think it is my natural habitat.

In fact it seems to me that in Australia we probably don't sufficiently appreciate the facts of our democratic achievement – that this is one of the great democracies of the world and, we shouldn't forget, one of the oldest.

Those who complain about politics and politicians in Australia have a point. The number of our governments creates a demand for good politicians in excess of the supply.

And the good ones have to learn to live in a maelstrom which is often made more by media forces than by political or policy ones.

Televising parliament has dramatically increased that tendency and set all sorts of new imperatives for political success.

For every politician who thrives in this environment there are others who drown, or who merely cling to the sides, or stay forever unnoticed, tucked up in the vortex.

There is a lot of room for improvement. It does get a bit rugged, and, no doubt, dispiriting for electors.

But so long as Question Time is the televised spectacle of questions without notice being fired at ministers in the hope of getting them to publicly slip up, there will be severe pressures on nicety and decorum.

And so long as it is also the forum in which the great questions of the day are fought out, it will be more than a game of croquet. It will be very often verbal *war* – and no one prepared to go to war should fight it with less than total commitment.

And really, while it is more public now than perhaps it used to be, the House of Representatives has always been a rugged place.

Since Federation – since parliaments *began* – there has been sniping and pantomime in styles as various as the human personality.

There has been absolute savagery sometimes.

And we Australians are not alone in it.

Few Australian politicians have declared their loathing of their opponents in the terms that Winston Churchill did.

"I hate the Tory party" – he said – "their men, their words, and their methods."

I've always had a soft spot for Churchill.

That was the same Winston Churchill who, in the House of Commons, called Ramsay MacDonald "the boneless wonder".

Yet in Australia, which is said to be such a rough-house, it would be considered a bit beyond the bounds of decency in Australia to say you actually *hated* the Opposition.

At the very least you would have to be funny about it.

And I know if I called someone "the boneless wonder" on a day when there was not much other news around, you could be sure that night there would be a fair bit of pious clicking of tongues in the vicinity of television screens.

Particularly because the grab, almost certainly, would be taken out of its context.

Context is everything.

What Churchill described to the House was how he had been taken to the circus as a child, where the advertised exhibit which most interested him had been the one described as *The Boneless Wonder*.

He went on to say "My parents judged that the spectacle would be too revolting for my youthful eyes and I have waited fifty years to see The Boneless Wonder sitting on the Treasury Bench".

You would never get all that on the TV news.

It would just be a grab of me shouting over the din of the Opposition – "I've waited fifty years to see The Boneless Wonder". And a cut-away to Peter Reith feigning hurt and outrage.

Lloyd George once described the House of Commons as being to a politician what a pub is to a drunkard – meaning that it is their natural environment and source of happiness, however perverse.

I would say much the same about the House of Representatives – or any great democratic chamber.

And I'd also say to those who believe that the standard of the place will be raised by replacing the politicians with some species of non-politician – that it would no more do that, than a pub would be improved by having a clientele of wowsers.

Or a newspaper would be a better newspaper for being written by people without a taste for politics and people.

Better to have better politicians. Ones who have enough faith in the strength of this democracy to be prepared to push changes. Tough ones. Passionate ones. Ones who understand politics and power.

And better to have journalists who understand these things too.

And proprietors who understand them.

There is a cast to Australian democracy which is unique, and which has given us, I believe, unique advantages.

The principal thing to understand is that it comes from the bottom up – it is not imposed from the top.

And I believe that its a source of strength.

If the democracies have been the successful societies of the past century, the most successful democracies have been the social democracies.

The ones that have not feared the inclusion of the less well off in the social system, or discarded the social net: but who have seen their strength in it, the source of their self-esteem, the measure of their worth and national achievement.

If you measure the achievements of Australia, this is where they principally lie. They are democratic achievements, or, at least, they are cast in a democratic mould.

The fundamentals were laid down at the time of federation or before.

And since then, from the principles of arbitration and the basic wage to the development of social services with few rivals in the world, the cast of politics in Australia has been democratic.

It underpins the success of multiculturalism, no less than it underpinned the ethos of the first AIF and the legend it created.

These are out of the egalitarian stamp of Australia.

The same thing underpins the Accord. It underpins our recently revived reputation for advanced social legislation.

It underpins, I would say, the decision to abolish the discrimination against homosexuals in the armed forces.

It is decisions like this which keep us in the front rank of democracies.

When people say they want to break the mould of Australian politics I would say – watch out!

Because you can't break it without threatening the mould of society too – you can't break it without threatening the democracy.

And that I think is why it is the case that those who are talking about breaking the mould of *politics* carry with them policies to break the mould of Australian *society*.

Perhaps they fail to understand that the two can't be separated.

Perhaps they understand it very well.

Perhaps they don't understand that, of all the values and traditions which bind Australia, those of the people are the strongest and the most important.

Perhaps they confuse tradition with class and caste and official ritual.

It would not be surprising if it was simple confusion: because the conservatives in this country have very often been confused about the fact that our institutions and traditions belong to the people – they *made* the best of them and if they need changing they will change them.

I will forgive them their ignorance, of course.

But I doubt if Australians will when they get their chance to judge.

And that, I'm inclined to think, is what politicians and political journalists have always to remember.

That politics doesn't start in Canberra. It ends there.

And, just as it does politicians good to escape the unreal world of Canberra, it would do the political culture no harm if the gallery sometimes extended the peripheries of their vision.

There is a culture in Canberra which encourages politicians and press alike to see only the links and not the chain.

They are very *small* links in a very long chain.

They are no more than each day in the political life of the country.

It seems to me that this is one of the reasons why journalists often feel obliged to editorialise in news stories: it is the only way to make sense of what is more often than not an *uncompleted* story.

Too often I think.

I do believe Australians have to pick their way through too much opinion to get to the news.

In fact the opinion becomes part of the news – the news today is that Michelle appears to have changed her mind. Or Geoff has not changed his. Or the jury's still out on what conclusion Peter will come to.

I do think the Australian news is over interpreted.

I know Gerard Henderson has been saying lately that journalists should improve their knowledge of history – and I agree with him.

He also reckons I should improve *mine* – and I *don't* agree with him.

But the point is well taken.

It's not to say I don't thoroughly enjoy the daily meal the gallery makes of our activities, to acknowledge that the democratic culture would be better served by more of the broader style of political journalism, *and* more matter of fact reporting of political events.

I think the bears *could* hunt in a bigger circle – the bigger circle of Australian democracy, the provenance of our institutions and traditions and ideas.

But I think with equal certainty that what is done now is essential and is done remarkably well.

It is literally true that democracy is impossible without a free press.

And it is literally true, and *patently* true every day of the political year, that the democracy which is practised in Canberra would be impossible without the free press which operates there.

Thank you for having me here.