



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP,
PRIME MINISTER'S ADDRESS TO THE FECCA CONGRESS, CANBERRA
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Ladies and gentlemen

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to address this third Congress of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia.

Over the years, FECCA has made a substantial contribution to the process of nation-building, to strengthening the social fabric, and to defining an Australian identity which more accurately reflects today's national aspirations and realities.

I congratulate you for it and urge you to keep up the good work.

You have played a leading role in one of the unquestionable success stories of this country's history.

Multicultural Australia is one of the great social engineering achievements. In a world once more torn by ethnic hatred and bloodshed, what has been done here stands increasingly as a benchmark of democratic common sense.

It is something all Australians should be proud of - and I say "all" advisedly.

I say it because while governments have played a leading part in this success, and FECCA has played a notable part with various ethnic groups, and while the ethnic communities are themselves deserving of enormous credit, in the last resort success depended on Australian democratic values and principles of tolerance.

The policies of multiculturalism encouraged those ideals of course. Groups like your own have encouraged tolerance.

But, as I said to a recent immigration conference, the triumph of multiculturalism is a triumph of Australian democracy.

It is built - and could only be built - on a sturdy sense of social justice.

Australia was inclined to narrowness and xenophobia, there is no doubt. All nations in their own way are.

Not all nations, however, overcome these feelings.

In not all nations are the democratic values stronger than the undemocratic ones, the values of tolerance, the idea of fairness stronger than the feelings of fear and resentment towards those who are different.

In Australia - to an unsurpassed extent - they manifestly are. And must remain.

In the 1990s I would like to see Australians counting the democracy they have built here high among their many reasons for pride.

And the success of multiculturalism high among their democracy's achievements.

Multiculturalism should never be seen as a denial of Australia's heritage, but as an affirmation of our democratic values and traditions.

The notions of access and equity are not new ones - they were current at the birth of the Federation. They were there in the 1890s. They have been with us ever since.

Properly understood, multiculturalism is an extension of democracy - of pluralism.

The proper end of multicultural policies is cultural pluralism. The integrity of different cultures within an Australian democratic framework.

I say these things because I think it will be good for us in this last decade of the century, the decade leading to the centenary of federation, to re-awaken awareness of Australian social democracy.

Awareness of our social democratic values and achievements.

I think sometimes we could do more to raise our democratic consciousness.

I think it would at once help reinforce democratic institutions and traditions, and make the way easier for necessary change.

Multiculturalism is among the institutions a greater level of democratic consciousness would support.

Multiculturalism as I have described it - the opposite - and the antidote - to ethnocentrism and cultural fragmentation.

It is a source of cultural strength - and, as we are now discovering, a potential source of economic strength.

In this regard I was pleased to attend the Productive Diversity conference, and to announce there some steps we are taking to exploit our linguistic and cultural diversity in the interests of a stronger, internationally oriented economy.

As you probably know I also told the conference that we have taken steps to assist job seekers whose lack of formal English is impeding their employment prospects.

In another innovation we have established the Bilingual Consultants Network (BCN) to meet the need for governments to identify the views of individuals and groups within the community when planning their policies and services.

The network is designed to act as a channel for the views of those Australians who, through language, cultural or geographic barriers have not to date been adequately considered.

The Australia-wide BCN comprising 600 people and fifty languages, and extending to all States and the Northern Territory, is now available to government and community organisations.

It can, for example, let agencies and companies gather knowledge among client groups of their policies and programs.

It is an invaluable, cost effective tool for those who require soundly-based information on the needs and views of all Australians.

By such means as these the Government can do much to create an environment in which all Australians have a chance to play a part in society.

When I say all Australians let me specifically acknowledge immigrant women, of all ages and backgrounds, who have contributed so much to this country and whose needs, I recognise, have not always been met as they should.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Ethnic radio is a major element in the Government strategy for enabling those from non-English speaking backgrounds, particularly older residents and newly arrived migrants, to participate in the life of Australia.

Ethnic radio programming is an important vehicle for accommodating the information and communication needs of people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Unfortunately, there is at present insufficient air time available on the SBS's two radio stations to satisfy the programming demands of all ethnic communities in Sydney and Melbourne.

SBS currently provides programming in approximately 64 different languages between 6am and midnight, but the demand on available air time means some languages are limited to half an hour per fortnight.

And there is no SBS radio service outside Sydney and Melbourne.

To provide migrant communities with a fairer share of broadcasting services, I am pleased to announce that the Government is establishing a second SBS radio network in Melbourne and Sydney, and extending the service to Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane, Darwin, Canberra and Hobart.

For the first time, Australia will have a national ethnic broadcasting network.

A second SBS radio network will begin broadcasting to Melbourne in December 1993 and to Sydney in July 1994.

The first services to Adelaide, Perth, Brisbane and Darwin will commence in late 1993 with services to Canberra and Hobart to follow.

The new network will ensure that the many people in Sydney and Melbourne who are of non-English speaking background get a better deal.

Its programs will be directed to meeting the needs of ethnic communities in Sydney and Melbourne which cannot now be accommodated on Radio 2EA and 3EA.

The new service will complement the excellent EA radio services in each city, and also those of the volunteer-based public radio stations that offer multi-lingual programs.

Community broadcasters have nothing to fear from the decision to extend SBS radio services. The Government will continue to support the public broadcasting sector.

The new network will help meet the needs of ethnic communities for programs in their own languages, including communities affected by the recent re-scheduling of services on Radio 2EA and 3EA.

The programs will mostly originate from SBS's new studios at Artarmon in Sydney and be networked to other capital cities.

The SBS will be carrying out consultations with ethnic communities and stakeholder groups before taking final decisions on program content, format and scheduling.

I know you will forgive me for pointing out the sharp contrast between the Government's policy on ethnic broadcasting and the Federal Opposition's stated intention to cut \$6 million from the SBS.

Such a reduction must put in jeopardy plans for expansion, as well as existing programming, services and staffing.

Six million dollars is more than the SBS spends on program acquisition. It is more than their Australian production budget. It is more than the total operational costs of 2EA.

SBS is a remarkable - and in my view remarkably effective and valuable - institution of Australian democracy.

You may be absolutely sure that the Government will continue to support it, and where possible expand its services.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Australian citizenship with its attendant rights and obligations is part of the glue which binds this nation and its citizens.

The Government is keen to encourage all Australian residents to become Australian citizens and does not consider it should be restricted to a privileged few.

The recent decision of the High Court on the eligibility of several candidates in the Wills bi-election has implications which are a matter of concern for all Australians.

In particular, the decision which found that two individuals were ineligible to stand because they had failed to take "reasonable steps" to renounce their foreign citizenship may raise doubts about the value of Australian citizenship.

I recognise that immigrants from certain countries face almost insurmountable barriers to renounce their former citizenship, even when assuming Australian citizenship.

Technically, therefore, they can be constitutionally precluded from entering the Commonwealth Parliament for reasons quite beyond their own control.

The High Court decision effectively debars naturalised immigrants - Australian citizens - from certain countries from standing for Parliament, unless they have taken "reasonable steps" to divest themselves of their original citizenship.

Only a constitutional referendum can ensure that this does not happen again.

I recognise that the High Court decisions on this and other eligibility requirements for members of Parliament raise a number of complex issues, including the role of dual citizenship in our society.

I would welcome your views on these matters and will take these into account in the Government's consideration of the subject.

Practical considerations preclude a referendum at the next election. However I intend to pursue the issues with the Opposition in the next Parliament, with a view to changing the current constitutional requirements for eligibility for Parliament.

And in my view Australian citizenship should be sufficient qualification.

Ladies and gentlemen

Let me conclude as I began - by saying that multiculturalism is an extension of Australian social democracy. A dramatic extension.

It has radically changed the way Australians live and the way we think about ourselves and the rest of the world.

But it is built on a traditional democratic foundation.

We need to expand economic and social opportunity, of course - that is the basis of social democracy. It is one of the principles underlying multicultural policy.

But we also need to develop a greater awareness and appreciation of our democratic institutions and values - among the immigrant population and among Australians of long standing.

It is my passionate belief that in this decade we need to build a multicultural Australia which is richly pluralist, richly democratic - and richly and unmistakably Australian.

Finally I must say a word or two about your retiring Chairperson, Carl Harbaum.

I know of the hard work he has put into the Federation over many years, of the dignity and the deep love of Australia which he has brought to the job.