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PRIME MINISTER

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ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP TO THE 1992 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS PRESENTATION LUNCHEON, 26 JANUARY 1993 - ADMIRALTY HOUSE

Ladies and gentlemen

On this, like any other Australia Day, there is a great deal to celebrate.

We might start with the most obvious, but perhaps the most often ignored: I mean the continued good health of one of the world's oldest democracies.

Or a standard of living which remains among the highest in the world.

We might celebrate the enviable freedom and comforts of life in Australia. And the degree of security with which only a handful of other countries compare.

We could begin by celebrating these things, and giving thanks to those generations of Australians whose monumental labour and faith and love for this land bequeathed them to us.

On this Australia Day we might draw strength from their example and pledge ourselves to match their inspiration.

And it is useful to look back for a moment. It will remind us that we are not the first generation to be confronted by a great challenge, or the first to feel that the going was tough, or the first to need a sustaining faith in their country and their fellow Australians.

This post war generation might be guilty of bearing a myth about Australia. Perhaps because we inherited the post-war growth and stability I suspect it was we who allowed the idea to grow that Australia's history was an uninterrupted progression to better and better things. And perhaps we conveyed that idea to our children.

Possibly we lost some of the essential truth when, in our scepticism, we ceased to instruct our kids in the pioneering legends.

Perhaps that is something we should remedy.

The idea that good fortune has nearly always smiled upon Australia tends to obscure the fact that what has been built here the people have built.

Australians of any age would always tell you that it was their great good luck to live here: but those who farmed in the Mallee, or dug coal out of the Lithgow pits, or worked in the nation's factories in the earlier years of industrial capitalism were, more often than not, creating a fortunate life for the next generation, not their own.

Essentially this country was conceived in the imagination of its people, and delivered to us by their labour.

One hundred years ago Australia lay deep in drought and Depression. Out of that decade emerged the Federation.

Thirty years later there was another Depression, and out of that came people with the strength to fight a war.

Between the two depressions there was another war which took the lives of 60,000 young Australians from a population of just four and a half million.

These were the legendary Australians: the pioneers, those who struggled through the hardest of hard times, those who defended this country in 1942.

They have been enshrined in literature, art and monuments and we should never forget them.

In the past year two of the people who helped put those generations forever in the realm of Australian legend, Sydney Nolan and Paul Hasluck, died. The year before we lost Manning Clark.

Suddenly it seems the old generation is passing. It leaves a gap which we feel can never quite be filled.

Yet it is also an unmistakeable sign that responsibility has passed into our hands. Our lucky post-war generation now has to find the right direction. We have to make our own history.

That is the challenge – that is the message, I think, for this Australia Day 1993: to make sense of *our* history, make sense of who *we* are, make the most of *our* time.

No generation of Australians has faced a *greater* challenge than the one we face – certainly not in peace-time.

And I would say, as well, that none has shown a greater willingness to squarely face reality and do what has to be done.

These are difficult times. Not so hard on people as those in the past I have mentioned, partly because those events made us both wiser and more compassionate.

Today we do not have a third of the workforce unemployed, but a tenth. And we have a social net in place which was not there sixty years ago.

This is not the challenge of war or depression.

It is the no less difficult challenge of maintaining the momentum of an economic revolution while restoring employment.

It is the challenge of finding our place in that region which until now has been most foreign to us – Asia. And by finding our place there, securing the freedom, comforts and security our generation has enjoyed.

It is about managing a post industrial revolution and navigating a passage to the places where our future lies.

These are not options, but imperatives.

And responding to them will require the same qualities of courage and perseverance, and imagination and faith as those other moments in our history have demanded.

The tragedy of the recession has been the good work undone.

We created one and three quarter million and a half jobs in the eighties and we have lost three hundred thousand of them.

We have to get them back.

With our trading partners either in recession or growing more slowly than we are, it will not be easy.

It is now apparent that the wild lending of the late eighties and the subsequent collapse in asset prices has left the banking system poorly placed to fund the production and investment necessary to get the economy moving.

To compound the problem, Australian companies – like those in other countries – are now seeking greater productivity through substituting new efficiencies for jobs.

In these circumstances there might be a temptation to think that the unemployed are the casualties of progress – as the environment was in the conquest of the land, as people were in the industrial age, as cities have been in the rush to development.

But the sacrifice of people to the winds of change, or to ideological fashion is precisely what Australians resisted in the 1980s, when other countries – now manifestly to their great cost – allowed it to happen.

In my reading of the history of Australia this century it is precisely what Australians have *always* resisted.

It seems to me it has always been the judgment of most Australians that a true democracy has a social dimension. That governments have social responsibilities.

So the fight against unemployment will go on. The challenge to get those jobs back is an imperative.

The recession struck a blow at our confidence: all of us have felt it.

It did not strike us all equally, but it seems to me that it is our equal *responsibility* to strike back: to re-group and re-build.

And the best way of doing that is to seize the opportunity which the past decade of change has already delivered to us.

We have to continue the transformation of Australia from a country dependent entirely on the export of commodities, to a country which also manufactures goods and services which the world wants to buy.

And we have to continue to go where the greatest growth by far is, where the window of opportunity is open, where we cannot afford *not* to go – to Asia.

This is a fight we cannot afford to lose.

And I can say after ten years of fighting it, and watching Australians fight it, I cannot believe that we *will* lose it.

As I've said more than once this year, I know we can make the change because of the change we have already made.

Yesterday I spoke at another Australia Day gathering – one associated with Sydney's Olympic bid.

It was appropriate to point out there that Australia had done marvellously well on the international sporting scene in the past twelve months.

Nowhere did we do better than at the Barcelona Olympics, of course.

And we can perhaps learn from our athletes that the world should hold no fear for us. If we wed talent with resourcefulness and dedication we can compete with the world and win.

In the same speech I also pointed out that we had competed just as successfully on other fronts where those qualities matter.

In the arts, for instance. Young Australian ballet dancers won gold medals at the Genee Awards in London. They won *all* the medals – gold, silver and bronze. They won all of them in the previous year as well.

A young Australian achieved the rare distinction of being appointed to the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

An Australian film, *Strictly Ballroom*, picked up a swag of prizes around the world and topped the box office both here and in Great Britain.

An Australian actress, Judy Davis, won three of the most prestigious American acting awards and is widely predicted to win at least another two, including an Oscar.

The list of these artistic achievements is as long as those in sport and the lesson is the same. We can win in the world.

What is true of these successes is true of business. And it has proven to be.

For among the prizes won this year we might also list BHP's successful tender to develop the oil and gas reserves of Vietnam.

We might include all those companies which made things in Australia and sold them overseas.

That would be a longer list than anyone here would have the patience for. But the figures constitute one very important reason why I believe that Australia will succeed.

Our total exports have increased in the past five years by more than 40 per cent.

Our exports of elaborately transformed goods have increased by more than 100 per cent.

We have increased our exports to Asia by 70 per cent.

These reflect the dramatic recasting of Australia's economy.

They reflect something else just as fundamental. They reflect a sea change in the way we do things, the way we think about our future, the way we think about the rest of the world.

The change has occurred in boardrooms and on the shop floor. It can be seen in the growth among Australian companies of a commitment to international best practice. It can also be seen in the enterprise agreements which trade unions and management across Australia are signing every day.

There is a new cooperative culture in Australia. There is a new recognition that our success depends on a common effort. We have learned what the successful economies of the world learned long ago, and we have learned it very quickly - that cooperation is more productive and more competitive.

There is another lesson that should be learned from those successful countries:

- . There is a role for government.
- . Care for people remains paramount even in times of transition - *especially* in times of transition.
- . The change we want comes most easily when it comes with the least damage to the social fabric.

Yet while we can learn from these examples, they will not provide us with our solutions. The way forward for Australia is not the Japanese way, or the way of Singapore, any more than it is the British way, or the German, or the American.

What we do will be appropriate to *our* circumstances, *our* needs, *our* culture, *our* character.

It will call on our strengths - and they are many: we are strong in education; in democracy; in cultural diversity and social harmony.

We remain immensely strong in natural resources, including an environment which is both unique and, by world standards, relatively undamaged.

The great spaces of Australia are a strength. So is the efficiency of our primary producers, and the clean air, water and soil in which they grow their products.

We're strong in so far as we include in the dynamic of our country a very large proportion of our people. We include a considerably greater proportion of our people in the workforce than does, for instance, the United States.

We have taken in the past decade more women into the workforce, and we lead the world in implementing the United Nations Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

We are strong because we are a liberal democracy. We are strong because we are progressive.

And, as we make this great transition, the more we invest in the lives of our people the stronger we will be.

For if there is one thing I have learned in the past few years it is that the people of Australia are our greatest resource.

It is they who have adapted to the change, it is they who have risen to the challenge of the future, it is they who have both borne the burden and not infrequently pointed the way.

I said yesterday that these difficult times are not yet over. We cannot realistically expect to achieve all our goals before the end of the decade. We will have to continue to adjust: by "we", I mean all of us – governments, business, trade unions, communities.

But change breeds change; and ingenuity fosters ingenuity – and faith is infectious.

Ladies and Gentlemen

In this past year it has been my privilege to speak at a number of events commemorating the deeds of Australians during the second World War: legendary deeds at Kokoda, Milne Bay and the Coral Sea.

It was also the 50th anniversary of El Alamein, Singapore and Darwin.

In this same year I was privileged to be present on the long overdue occasion of our recognising the courage and sacrifice of those who served in Vietnam.

I spoke at events organised by the various and collective ethnic communities of Australia, and there it was possible to get a picture of the extraordinary progress that we have made towards an open, tolerant, pluralist society. A far richer society than the one in which I grew up.

I spoke at events organised by groups representing women in Australia, and could not help but reflect on the advances we have made towards genuine equity and, therefore, more genuine democracy.

Last year I had the opportunity to speak at several events about our great need to achieve in this decade social justice for Australian Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders.

We are committed to a process of reconciliation. We are determined to end two centuries of discrimination and injustice. The response since spelling out these ambitions in Redfern Park two months ago convinces me that the great majority of Australians are committed to them too.

Last year I visited Indonesia, Singapore and Japan. It was plain not only that an historic opportunity exists for us in the region but that the region expects us to seize it. We are expected to succeed.

Last year it was my duty to find the words to say when men and women of the Australian armed forces were sent to pursue the interests of democracy and peace in Cambodia, and a few months later it was my great privilege to visit them in Phnom Penh.

Last month I went to Townsville to farewell our troops as they left for Somalia on a similar mission.

What became apparent in the course of last year is that this generation of Australians is carving out a place in the world. It is growing its own legends.

This generation of Australians is making its own history.

We Australians need look no further than what we have done and what we are now doing to find our inspiration. We need look no further than ourselves.

There is no better message for Australia Day 1993.

Thank You.