



PRIME MINISTER

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP
SIR SIDNEY NOLAN MEMORIAL

(PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)

Ladies and gentlemen

My last conversation with Sir Sidney was midway through last year. We talked a lot about architecture, a subject on which I can generally hold my own. But this is not to threaten you with a discourse on art today.

I will leave the expert judgments to Elwyn Lynn and others.

This gallery - like a couple of others around the country - is one of my favourite haunts.

But just as you can enter a temple without knowing the rites, I know I can come here and pay tribute to Sidney Nolan without pretending to be expert on his life and work.

And that is really the point: the power of his work was such that it has influenced even the inexpert among us.

All of us have had our image of Australia in some way shaped by Sidney Nolan. All of us, I suspect have had our self-image shaped by him.

He was one of the great interpreters of our national life.

He painted the physical landscape and altered our mental landscape. Radically different as his painting was, when we looked at it we recognised ourselves.

This will prompt some journalists to say - Keating admits resemblance to Ned Kelly - but I am willing to wear that.

Go and look at the Kelly paintings here or at Lanyon any day and there will always be someone gazing at them - and the paintings, like a mirror, will be gazing back.

I've always thought it said something remarkable about Australians that in the 1950s they so quickly moved aside their Heysen gum trees for Nolans, Boyds and Drysdales.

As I have often said in other contexts, Australians have a remarkable capacity for change. And I reckon it is because they recognise the truth when they see it.

You'll forgive me for expressing the passing thought - if only they had moved aside Bob Menzies when they moved aside Hans Heysen.

What Sidney Nolan and his colleagues did was just about as subversive I suppose: they took our landscape and our legends and somehow made them both more radical and even more our own.

Just when a generation of Australians had grown used to the Heidelberg school and its successors, and complacent in the thought that that was who were, along came Nolan and said - actually, we're more like this.

As an Australian who has been concerned with change, I have to say that the paintings of Sidney Nolan - and the success of Sidney Nolan - has always given me heart.

His paintings expressed our essential difference - to me they say something about our potential.

It is true of course that Sidney Nolan became Australia's most internationally celebrated painter. He did us a service in that.

Yet his greatest service, I think, was to place before us in a period of pretty dull conformity - some might even say regression - images of this country which reminded us that our experience was at once unique and universal.

He startled us: in much the same way earlier generations had been startled by the landscape, or by Ned Kelly, or as a bushman might be on seeing his reflection in a Wimmera waterhole for the first time.

I think Nolan was among the poets of Australia.

He was certainly among that generation who I'm sure will in time become legendary themselves.

Those Australians who lived through depression and war and did not lose faith.

Twenty eight years separate Sidney Nolan's birth from the end of World War II - in which, incidentally, his brother was killed. In least twelve of those years Australia was either fighting a war or a depression.

Whatever political path they took, or whatever their doubts about life here, they did not lose their love of this place and their essential Australianess.

I don't say this out of any form of jingoism. I mean only that Sidney Nolan was of that generation which kept the place going - and of a genius which revived us, renewed us, kept alive the spark.

He was essential to the continuation of the national story.

The sad thing about today is that that generation is now passing. Just a week ago I attended the funeral of Paul Hasluck. This week it was Tom Fitzgerald. It is just eighteen months since Manning Clark died. A year or so before that, Patrick White.

The mantle has unmistakably passed to us - the lucky post war generation.

The life and death of Sidney Nolan is a reminder of how great the responsibility is.

It is also a reminder of how tragic it is when we lose our young artists: in the past twelve months Brett Whiteley, the dancer Kelvin Coe, and the conductor Stuart Challender have all died.

It is a reminder, especially for those who continue to peddle the idea that the right cultural policy is built substantially around starvation, that support for art and artists is an essential investment in the nation's life.

We are currently developing a new cultural policy for Australia. One of the essential elements will be a strategy for developing creative habitats for artists.

Habitats like the one the Reeds provided for Sidney Nolan.

That is another essential element in the cultural life of this country - we need more private support for the arts. More private patronage. More John and Sunday Reeds.

We are trying to find the best way to create that support.

Sidney Nolan certainly understood that, and in his later life he put a great deal back into Australia.

In honour of his brother, in 1974 he donated his Gallipoli paintings and drawings to the Australian War Memorial.

In 1982 he donated the Paradise Gardens series to the Victorian Arts Centre.

And the Kelly paintings have been donated to the ANG.

Today I am delighted to announce perhaps the most generous gift of all.

It is my pleasure to announce that a great project, dear to the heart of Sidney Nolan, has reached fruition.

For many years it was the shared vision of Arthur and Yvonne Boyd and Sidney and Mary Nolan and their families that the Bundanon Estate on the banks of the Shoalhaven River near Nowra be made a gift to the nation.

Indeed it was to talk about this, and not architecture, that Sidney Nolan came to see me last year.

The Government has reached an agreement with Arthur and Yvonne Boyd under which the beautiful properties of "Bundanon" and "Riversdale", and an extensive art collection owned by them, are to be given to the Australian people.

A public art gallery and performing arts centre will be established, as well as facilities for walking and camping in the 1200 hectares of superb natural environment - the environment which was the subject and inspiration for a great many Boyd and Nolan paintings.

I understand that there are some 2000 works of art in the Boyd collection, including works by John Brack, Leonard French, Charles Blackman and John Perceval.

Artists, musicians, film makers, performers and craftsmen and women will in future be able to live and work in Bundanon, and exhibit or perform the works created there in a new purpose-designed gallery and performing arts area.

The gift includes the original sandstone residence dating from 1866 and its antique furniture, paintings and pottery.

In addition there is an important collection of art works, letters and photographs chronicling four generations of the Boyd family.

The Commonwealth has agreed to provide \$5.43 million to the Bundanon Trust.

Contributions will shortly be sought from major education and government institutions, as well as the public.

This is a gift of profound significance, not to say great generosity.

It will ensure that the contributions Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd have made to our national heritage will live on: it also means that new generations of Australians will have their opportunity to contribute.

It means that a superb piece of our natural environment will be secure from the ravages of developers - I know that is dear to Arthur and Yvonne's hearts.

I take this opportunity today to express our gratitude for this gift, which has required more than generosity - it has needed vision and patience.

This is a rare gift to the nation.

The announcement today is a fitting tribute to the late Sir Sidney Nolan.

It is also, of course Sir Sidney's tribute to Australia.

And Arthur Boyd's tribute, and I can only say to Arthur and Yvonne, on behalf of everyone here and the Government and the people of Australia - thank you.

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