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PRIME MINISTER

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

**SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE HONOURS, SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE
FRIDAY, 1 OCTOBER 1993**

It is a very great pleasure for me to be here this evening to honour such a distinguished group of Australian artists, who have given so much to their fellow Australians and the world at large.

But I know you will excuse me if I don't speak at length tonight about the recipients of the awards.

Their records are a much more eloquent testament than I could hope to provide.

Having said that, however, there is one performer here tonight that I do wish to pay special tribute to.

Walter Burley Griffin, perhaps the greatest architect in Australia's history, once very truly said that "buildings are the most subtle, accurate and enduring records of life."

Tonight I want to pay tribute to such a building - to the Sydney Opera House itself, one of the best architectural decisions that we ever made in Australia.

It was said somewhere that:

"... Whenever anybody begins to look at things in a way that is slightly novel, 999 people out of a 1000 are totally incapable of seeing what is put before them. It takes at least 40 years before they can manage to make it out."

There's truth in the observation, but in the case of the Opera House it is only a half truth.

It's certainly true that when the Opera House was under consideration and in the process of being built, many Australians just didn't know what to make of it. There

were no other buildings like it in Australia, and you never saw anything like it on your overseas tour to Covent Garden, or Paris or Milan or wherever.

So we got the snide comments about the Danish Blue - Danish Bluc, of course, was then a peak of cultural sophistication.

The doubters and the slaves to cultural conformity were out in force, and it took a major effort to ensure that what now seems the only possible design for the site, should prevail.

It did not take 40 years for the people of Sydney and Australia to call the Opera House their own. In a very short time they were delighting in it, and world wide, with Ayers Rock it was recognised as one of the two great symbols of Australia.

The extraordinary symbolic importance of this building was brought home to me in Ireland a few days ago, when a man told me how he had gone to Australia recently and when he stood in front of the Opera House, he said, he couldn't believe he was actually there.

What he described was the way Australians used to feel standing in front of Big Ben or the Tower of London.

In Monte Carlo it was quite apparent that everyone related their concept of Australia to these two images, the Opera House and Uluru, and I do not think it is drawing too long a bow to suggest that they deserve some of the credit for getting us the Games.

John Douglas Pringle, I think, captured the essence of what we feel about the Opera House when he wrote that:

"There it stands ... a perfect symbol linking the city to the sea, welcoming incoming ships with its wide open arches, shining brilliantly in the summer sun or gleaming palely by moonlight, contemporary in feeling yet reminding us of other ages when great buildings were built to the glory of God or the splendour of princes and not simply for utilitarian purposes ... it is a building of which all Australians may rightly be proud ...".

It is also significant, I think, that one of the recipients of an award here tonight, Dame Joan Sutherland, was an important member of our winning team in Monte Carlo.

Dame Joan, like other award winners, has been a trail-blazer for Australia for many years.

She, and Richard Bonyngc, Don Burrows, Ruth Cracknell, Sir Charles Mackerras, Graeme Murphy and Janet Vernon and Garth Welch and Marilyn Jones have done it hard for Australia.

I know that they would all protest that they loved what they were doing, and wouldn't have swapped it for quids. And I'm sure that's true.

But that doesn't mean that the rest of us should fail to recognise and acknowledge just what a debt we owe them.

Not just our young performers who have had opened for them doors which these people had to prise open for themselves.

But everyone who has found life a bit easier because of what they have done to establish Australia in the eyes of the world as a rich and creative culture.

These people deserve our profound thanks.

They have given us enormous pleasure.

They enrich our lives.

Their art inspires us to try a little bit harder and to live a little bit better, and I feel privileged to be among those honouring them tonight.