



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON P J KEATING MP
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The growth in Australian exports constitutes one of the more remarkable chapters in our history.

Laconic, sceptical self-effacing nation that we are, we tend to play it all down - as if it is something that is happening to us, rather than something we are making happen.

In due course, no doubt Australians will recognise that this was a remarkable generation - a generation of exporters who might reasonably be numbered among the pioneers of modern Australia.

But I'm inclined not to wait that long.

I think that our efforts will be helped by building a contemporary understanding of the importance of what we are doing - the need for it, and the success we are having.

That is why these awards are so important, and why the organisers deserve great credit for staging them.

These awards acknowledge some of the outstanding achievers in Australia's export drive - and this is only proper because their efforts are a major contribution to the nation.

It's particularly significant to me that the cultural industry features prominently at these awards tonight.

I've always strongly held the view that our commercial development has to go hand in hand with our cultural development - that a society which values creativity and innovation, a society which is confident in its cultural identity is a society which produces better quality products for its markets.

In this sense having an interest in art and design is not an elitist abstraction - it is fundamental to our broader trade push.

The 30 finalists here tonight have contributed no less than \$1.6 billion to the nation's economy, and in doing that they have contributed jobs - opportunities for other industries, improved living standards, a more prominent and creative role for Australia in the world, a more active place in the Asia Pacific region, a more secure future for generations of Australians to come.

This is not to overclaim.

These are basic facts about contemporary Australia - as basic as the figures which describe Australia's export achievements in the past few years.

In the last decade, exports have doubled.

They have grown from 13 per cent of GDP to 20 per cent.

Exports of manufactures have trebled and now exceed those for rural products and minerals and fuels.

In the past six years exports of ETMs have grown at an average rate of 19 per cent per annum and nearly trebled in value.

Exports of services have grown at 7 per cent a year and now account for 20 per cent of total exports.

And the proportion of exports going to North and South-East Asia continues to rise and now accounts for 60 per cent of all Australian exports.

You see why I say this is a generation pioneering the new Australia.

It is not something that is being done to us - it is something we are doing for ourselves.

As a government we began a decade ago to create the conditions in which Australia could become a modern manufacturing nation able to compete with the best in the world.

We did it because we felt that to fail would cost nothing less than Australia's future - to fail would mean Australia joining the ranks of those benighted commodity-dependent countries.

I won't take you through the steps, but what we did and what we continue to do has helped create the environment in which businesses of all sizes are now manufacturing and exporting, and in which each year more companies are born only to manufacture and export or provide services for export.

This is not to claim all the credit for the government.

I must say that it gives me some satisfaction to see how the challenge has been taken up, and how now we are seeing the rewards for these decisions in the changing shape of the Australian economy.

And I also must say that absolute necessity for the changes we have made has never been so clear - we need only look at the trade figures and ask ourselves, with commodity prices as they are, where would we now be without the shift to manufactured and service exports?

Where would we have had we not recognised the chance in Asia, that that was where our future lay?

Where would we have had we not decided that Australia could reinvent itself - that Australians had enough genius and enough faith in themselves to change?

In the end that is where the credit properly goes - to the people of Australia who were prepared to take on the change and wear the hardships which change often involves.

It goes to the business people and trade unionists who found cooperative ways of working.

It goes to the farmers and manufacturers and scientists who found new products and new ways of producing them.

In the end the credit goes to those who saw in the imperative to export a great challenge and a great opportunity.

The Australian Export Awards honour all these people who did not wait for something to happen to them but went out and made something happen for them.

That is why we can talk of a generation of exporters - they have it as their ambition and they are translating that ambition into success, not only for themselves but for their country.

Of course, we all hope that these awards also encourage others to enter the new world of exporting.

During the 1980s, 30 new companies a year joined the ranks of emerging exporters.

It doesn't take much imagination to get an idea of the benefits that would flow if this number were doubled.

Now I have no need to tell this audience what it takes to be a successful exporter.

Let me instead quote one example to illustrate that once we know what is required and have no fear of the global market place, there is really no limit to the potential.

We have always been considered uncompetitive in the area of textiles, clothing and footwear, yet last year exports in this area rose by \$534 million, a 21 per cent increase on the previous year - and tonight we have among the finalists a representative of the TCF industry.

This is not an occasion for me to tell you all the reasons why the climate is right for building on these successes.

Let me say only that we have never been so internationally competitive as we are now and we will be more competitive in the future.

I think you know that the Government remains determined to do all it can to make the local environment favourable and open to suggestions about how to make it more so.

What I want to say in the remainder of the time at my disposal concerns the international environment.

I imagine there is nobody here who fails to recognise the absolute importance of a successful conclusion to the Uruguay Round of the GATT.

But sometimes it helps to repeat yourself.

And sometimes it helps to spell it out in figures: a successful outcome in a fortnight's time is likely to boost Australian exports by \$2.5 billion per annum by the year 2002.

A successful conclusion will enable Australia to maximise its commercial advantage and secure new trading opportunities for Australian exporters.

Australia has done all it can to see that such a conclusion is reached.

It now remains to hope that common sense and fairness and vision prevail, and that the interests of a few are not put before the interests of the world.

But there is no guarantee, and that is why the continued development of APEC and the recent remarkable meeting of APEC leaders in Seattle are so important for Australia.

In Seattle, I visited Boeing which is, of course, the world's largest Aerospace company.

But I went to demonstrate my support for an Australian company - Aerospace Technologies of Australia - which had just been awarded Boeing's "Major Outside Production Supplier of the Year" award.

You will also be aware that before going to Seattle I set up an APEC Business Consultative Panel to inform me of what business thinks APEC can do for business.

In Seattle, I am pleased to say, we agreed to set up an APEC Business Forum to identify issues APEC should address to facilitate regional trade and investment and encourage the further development of business networks throughout the region.

Australia will be represented in that forum.

APEC is not an abstraction.

Real outcomes from the Seattle meeting include work by APEC on deepening and broadening the outcome of the Uruguay Round, strengthening trade and investment liberalisation in the region, and facilitating regional cooperation in areas such as standards.

We also agreed to draw up a common non-binding set of investment principles that might lead to a formal regional investment agreement.

All these steps will deliver, in time, real benefits to Australian businesses.

All of them will make it that much easier for them to tap into the potential of the Asia-Pacific and find their niche in what is set to be the "Pacific Century".

Ladies and gentlemen

Someone said this morning - as if we did not know it - that we are not Asian.

Of course, we are not Asian.

But we share a future with the countries of our region.

And APEC is, to my way of thinking, the best - the most creative - expression of that future.

As I said earlier, 60 per cent of our exports now go to the Asian region.

And as I said at that very impressive National Trade and Investment conference in Melbourne last week, over the next two years exports to APEC countries will account for about one third of the total increase in our production.

In two years' time Australian exports to APEC countries will account for around 15 per cent of all we do, all we make and all we sell.

And over the next two years, increased exports to APEC members will create more than 70,000 new jobs for Australians - good jobs, well paid jobs, jobs with a future.

Perhaps this is the most important thing to say about the new export culture in Australia.

I said Australia's exporters were pioneers - they are, they are pioneering not just a new more dynamic shape to the Australian economy, and not just a new prosperity for Australia.

They are guaranteeing that Australians of this, but more particularly of future generations, will have a place in the front rank of societies - that they will have access to the jobs and opportunities on the leading edge of economic development.

That is the most rewarding place to be.

It is the only place to be if Australia is to remain one of the really great places to live in the world, and one of the great social democracies.

It remains for me to congratulate all the finalists here tonight and the people who have put on these awards.

It is always a great occasion because it honours great Australian imagination and enterprise.

And finally let me congratulate Austrade for its achievements last year. I noticed a newspaper report today which indicated that Austrade contributed to new exports last financial year valued at \$4.25 billion.

This is a fitting tribute to Bill Ferris, the outgoing Chair of Austrade, and it sets a high standard for Bob Johnston to emulate when he comes on board to replace him.

As the Financial Review said today, however, Bob brings a lifetime's experience of trading in Japanese and Asian markets to his new job, and so he will be well placed to build on Austrade's already formidable record.

I look forward to presenting the winner's prize later in the evening.