



PRIME MINISTER

EMBARGOED AGAINST DELIVERY
10.00AM EASTERN STANDARD TIME

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

NORTHERN TERRITORY FOOTBALL LEAGUE
ABORIGINAL ALL-STARS v COLLINGWOOD BALL

As the football experts are prone to say - there's a lot hanging on this game tomorrow.

But it's not so much on who wins or loses. Both sides, it seems to me, are already the winners - simply for playing the game.

It also seems to me that they are sides with something very basic in common: I mean they both know what it is to do it hard in the world.

Collingwood, the greatest sporting club in Australia, grew up in a poor working class area of Melbourne. They were social underdogs who became sporting top dogs.

Collingwood succeeded because it tapped the spirit of people whose circumstances might easily have drained the spirit from them.

The Collingwood Football Club gave them a collective strength. It gave them the means by which they could know success. The spirit was there - it just needed a vehicle for its expression.

The All Stars have much in common with this story. They have been drawn from the ranks of those Australians who have been denied a lot of the good things in Australian life - and subjected to a lot of the worst things.

They too might easily have given in to their circumstances.

But the All Stars - like the teams in the Territory from which many of their players are drawn - are proof of their willingness to overcome the odds. The team is an expression of the spirit and the potential of Aboriginal Australia.

Like Collingwood, the spirit is there - it only needs the vehicle for its expression.

I will come back to the football in a moment.

And before you murmur - what would this character from Bankstown and Canberra know about Australian Rules? - I have to remind you that in March last year, almost alone among the tipsters, I said that the winner of the 1993 Brownlow Medal would be Gavan Wanganeen.

And Nicky Winmar was my second tip.

Nicky Winmar's gesture of defiance at Collingwood is destined to be legendary. In my view it was a great gesture.

Yet there were other gestures in last year's football season which were, in a sense, just as significant because they spoke of success.

There was Gavan Wanganeen with the Brownlow Medal in his hand. There was Michael Long with the Norm Smith medal - and the Premiership Cup above his head.

And there was the gesture of Allan McAlister coming to the Territory to meet the Aboriginal community, to talk, to learn, to come to a new understanding.

Tomorrow's match builds on all those events.

And let me say now there will be other winners to come out of this weekend's events.

Pre-eminent among them will be the City of Darwin.

Hundreds of thousands of Australians will be watching this historic match. I am sure it will not fail to enter the minds of most of them that Darwin was the place which had the national vision and character to make it happen.

Darwin and its people.

Standing here in a dinner suit on a night like this I realise that among the many attractions of Darwin must be the climate.

It is a wonderful climate for politics. I mean the sort of climate in which no politician would dare to make a long speech.

Most of you will know, I hope, that I am a politician who is inclined to take a national view. I tend to think of Australia as one nation.

The details of what I mean by that would take too long to describe at a ball in tropical heat - but in short it means that whatever the difference in geography and experience, or colour or creed - whatever the degree of our attachment to the place in which we live - we are all

Australians, and think of ourselves as Australians, and do better in the world and by each other when we work with a common national purpose.

That means, among other things, that while the place I come from is very different to Darwin, Darwin's experience is part of mine. When Darwin succeeds we all share in that success. When Darwin's spirit rises so does the spirit of Australia.

And Darwin's spirit is most definitely rising.

This has always been a frontier town - but never more so than now. It is in the forefront of the great change which is taking place in Australia.

It is our gateway to Asia, a place with a vital role to play in our economic development, and in our cultural and social development. Darwin, after all, has always been multicultural, it has always had multiracial sport - it has set the example for the rest of Australia.

As I said, Australia is undergoing a profound change: in the way we do things, in the direction of our thinking, in the way we imagine ourselves and our role in the world.

They say you can't write history until you are far enough away to see the shape of events. Up close, in the midst of the fray, it's all a bit of a blur.

But in the last twelve months I reckon we've all felt it.

You could sense the change in the last year or so - as if the tide had imperceptibly turned - and was now running our way.

Just now we are starting to see evidence of it in the figures. You can see it on the score-board.

It actually is a bit like a football match. There is that moment when you feel the game change.

And I truly believe the game has changed between black and white Australia.

This game is evidence of it. In that sense the score is already on the board.

It's hard to say precisely what the turning point was.

I know that Kevin Sheedy and the Essendon Football Club played a role with their recruiting campaigns and their regular pre-season games in Darwin - and last year's Premiership was proof that there was wisdom as well as justice in the policy.

I think they deserve enormous credit for their initiative.

And of course there is one other person who deserves a lot of credit - Nicky Winmar.

Think of what one gesture of defiance triggered - a national debate on racism in sport and a new recognition of the role Aboriginals play in Australian sport.

Not to mention a horrible succession of mysterious Collingwood defeats.

Along the way, things also went wrong for Nicky and St Kilda; Allan McAlister came to the Northern Territory; Essendon, with a sizeable crew of Aboriginal players, won the premiership; Michael Long won the Norm Smith medal; and my March selection, Gavan Wanganeen, won the Brownlow.

It has all ended up here - with this historic match.

And it all happened in the International Year of the World's Indigenous People - and the year of Mabo.

So the game, as I said, has changed.

There is a change in mood and awareness.

And with the Mabo decision there is a change in law - and let me tell you that despite all the arguments, all the understandable anxiety, all the negotiation which is still to take place, the Mabo legislation puts right an historic wrong and there is no going back on that.

I am very much aware of how far there is to go.

I am also aware that very often the sentiments expressed by politicians seem out of touch with social and economic reality - out of touch with the complexities of life as it is really lived in Australia.

It is our duty to get in touch with those realities and fashion policies accordingly. Ultimately the trick is always to put the right people and the right money in the right places.

But it is also necessary to state the principles: not because one ever believes that they can be translated into a perfect reality, but because they are necessary values and ambitions for a nation to live by.

They are the nation's articles of faith, the code we live by. In some countries they are written into constitutions and bills of rights: here they are unwritten, but they are just as powerful.

I am talking about ideas like a fair go for all, support for the underdog, tolerance of difference, respect for those who by their own efforts have succeeded against the odds.

Every one of those principles on which we pride ourselves declares that racism is abhorrent - everywhere, including football fields - or tennis courts, or athletics tracks. It is abhorrent to our best traditions and the best traditions of sport.

I was at a function at the Australian War Memorial during the week - the opening of an exhibition of drawings done by children in a Jewish ghetto in Poland during the war. All but a handful of 17,000 children in the ghetto were killed in the Auschwitz extermination camp.

I mention this only as a background to words which a survivor of the ghetto used in a speech at the war memorial - to summarise, he said what an extraordinary gift the tolerance and freedom and democracy of Australia had been for refugees like himself.

He also said that democracy and tolerance were more deeply embedded in the fabric of Australian life than anywhere else in the world.

His words were very moving. They were a reminder that those intangible things like tolerance and fairness are real, especially to people who have been denied them.

It was a reminder of how vital to our national life and character these values are - how jealously we should defend them.

I would like to think that tomorrow's contest is part of that defence.

That's why I said at the beginning that, however close the contest on the field and whoever wins, the teams are both winners.

I hope - and I think we all hope - that in due course it will be seen that they were both playing on the same side.

In fact I think all Australians can be winners from this weekend's events. If we all want to be. If we all are prepared to enter into the spirit of it. If we all see it as a step along the way - a highly symbolic step - towards reconciliation between black and white Australians.

I congratulate Tony Shaw and the NTFL, and Allan McAlister and the Collingwood Football Club for all they have done.

I also want to pay tribute to Maurice Rioli, coach of the All-Stars, former great player and for years now in the Northern Territory and throughout Australia a hero and role model for Aboriginal people.

And finally, let me wish the players the very best of luck.

DARWIN
11 February 1994