



PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP WOMEN IN SPORT AWARDS

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It is my great pleasure to be with you again tonight.

Last year, I enjoyed the occasion very much.

But it was in the middle of an election campaign. Elections are the political equivalent of the Olympics but, the pity is, they occur more frequently.

Elections have a way of making every living, breathing thing, including sport, political - and I know that is not to everybody's taste.

It is not to my taste, for a start.

Tonight I can speak to you unsullied by politics, and at the end of a year in which the winds of change really did blow very strong in Australia.

There is a new optimism around: in the economy and in the nation at large, I think. And in sport.

Some people say that if the Australian cricket team is winning, or Greg Norman, or we pick up a gold medal or two somewhere in the world - the whole nation lifts, even when the other news, the economic news, is not so good.

But just now we've got them cycling together - the Australian economy is flourishing again and so is Australian sport.

So, if the theory is true, in the nineties we should be able to lift enormously.

In the last twelve months there has been no bigger boost to this very welcome phenomenon than the Olympics 2000 decision.

It was a great boost to national confidence.

We are honoured to have with us tonight, Shirley de la Hunty, one of the few Australians who knows what it was like to compete and win at the Olympics in front of her own crowd.

We are six years away now from having the opportunity to see that again.

The night we won the Games in Monte Carlo will remain a highlight of my time as Prime Minister and a great memory always.

But when all the work has been done, when the events are over and the crowds have left Homebush and all the competitors have gone home, the success of Sydney 2000 will depend not on politicians or organisers or officials.

The glory will belong to the competitors.

What we remember about Melbourne 1956 is not the method by which the city won the right to stage the Olympics, or the extraordinary efforts of the organising committee to actually get the show on the road.

We remember names such as Cuthbert, Fraser, Rose and, of course, Strickland.

If you watched the National Athletics Championships on ABC television last weekend, you would have seen among the familiar Anglo-Celtic names, new ones like Costian and Poetschka and Capobianco and Van der Kuyp.

On the same weekend, if you watched the one-day cricket, you would have seen a young man named Chee Quee scoring a century.

If you had watched the netball, you would have seen a young woman named Avellino shooting goals.

Look at an Australian sporting team these days and increasingly you see a microcosm of the contemporary society - and in the energy and success they represent, I believe a view of Australia's future.

The presence of people from vastly different backgrounds at the higher levels of competition embodies the principle that all of you try to promote - that sport is for everybody.

They should inspire Australian youngsters to realise that our Olympics 2000 competitors can come from any cultural background, any gender, or any school.

Their example, like that of the Cuthberts and Kilborns and Flemings and Frasers and de la Huntys, teaches this generation - the television generation, the multicultural generation - that sport is indeed for every Australian.

These elite sportsmen and women are a permanent reminder that this is a society open to talent: open, in fact, to anyone who wants to participate.

They serve as an inspiration to people who want to compete at any level.

I said at the beginning that some things are best left divorced from politics. The truth is that athletes can do things which politicians can only hope to do.

Politicians can talk until they are blue in the face about the need for the community to accept people of different backgrounds, and they might - if they are lucky - in a lifetime do as much for the cause of tolerance and reconciliation as Cathy Freeman does in 22 seconds.

A politician can talk about the need for women to enjoy the same opportunities as men - and achieve less in a year than Betty Cuthbert achieved in less than two minutes as an Olympian.

Or what she achieves every time she appears in public today, every time we remember her.

It is not only because we bathe in her reflected glory: it is because she embodied then, and still does now, the enormous effort that goes into such success in sport, and to see it triumphant gives us inspiration and hope for our efforts in life.

All of us need this example.

As they make their way deeper into positions of opportunity and influence, and into spheres of our national life from which they have been too long held out, women need it.

But men probably need it more.

Men need it to remember what other elements in our culture incline them to forget.

It will help men to remember the absolutely equal entitlements of women in the wider society if they remember their absolutely equal - perhaps even greater - contribution to sport.

They have, after all, won 11 of the 14 track and field Olympic gold medals in the post-war era.

They do, after all, participate in broadly equal numbers.

We can hardly define ourselves by our feats in sport and ignore at least half the people who have achieved them - Australian women.

This gathering is a celebration of women in Australian sport. It is a celebration of the great contribution that women make; of their central and equal role in sport at every level; of the equal part they have played as models and inspirations for the nation at large.

As Prime Minister of a country for which the "fair go" is a by-word and tolerance a basic part of what it means to be Australian, I not only congratulate all of you, I thank you for the contribution you are making to Australia in ways that go beyond the boundaries of sport.