



PRIME MINISTER

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

OPENING OF THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY AND INAUGURAL EXHIBITION "ABOUT FACE: ASPECTS OF AUSTRALIAN PORTRAITURE", OLD PARLIAMENT HOUSE
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I am very pleased to be here in this hall of memories -- this place where I used to sit and try to read the mind's construction in the face. The Tory's mind in the Liberal's face. Or was it vice versa?

This whole place is still full of faces for me.

It is where on every sitting day I saw a national portrait gallery right in front of me. A gallery of Australian life - or about half of it.

From our side the view was principally Protestant, pastoral and legal, mixed elements of rich and rustic; blokes - they were nearly all blokes -- whose faces betrayed a life of relative ease, and blokes whose life on the land had furrowed their brows, narrowed their gaze and reddened their cheeks.

There were men like John Gorton who wore the scars of battle; there were slightly tormented looking characters; people whose faces showed the strain and those who hid it, even under pressure.

There was the odd dandy, occasional obsessives, people trying to hide the encroachment of age or baldness.

There were conservatives of a kind you rarely see these days. They came from another Australia. The kind who, just by looking at them, you knew would speak with an accent more English than Australian.

Most of them were decent. If by our lights they were all wrong-headed, in the end there were not many who were wrong-hearted.

It was a galaxy of Australians, a sort of human zoo and down the years we watched them look upon us in triumph and disaster. We saw them change.

And they saw us. You will have to ask one of them what they saw.

This is the place where Mick Young once called to Andrew Peacock -- give us your angry face, Andrew.

It's the perfect place for a Portrait Gallery.

It can always be said, and often with irresistible logic and passion, that we need one more gallery or museum. One more place to put our heritage on show.

It may have reached the ears of some of you that I have sometimes resisted this logic and this passion.

It is true. I have not always been persuaded that another huge and hugely expensive building on the banks of Burley Griffin ranked high among the things we need for a better national life.

I am well aware that the National Portrait Gallery in London is world renowned and much loved by the British. I know that the Americans have their National Portrait Gallery in Washington.

I know that there are people who say that in portraits we can see the nation's mind -- and I believe that is substantially true.

I have long known the reasons why a National Portrait Gallery is desirable, but many things are desirable and some things are essential and there is only so much money to go around.

And generally I have felt it was better to spread it among those who are presently creating.

So I remained a less than passionate advocate.

I have nothing against portraits. I'm all for them.

It's almost unAustralian not to be for portraits.

What other country has an annual nationwide barney about a portrait contest?

Perhaps it has something to do with the perennial question of identity in Australia -- the old "who are we?" question. The question that should have been settled a long while ago.

And I suppose that is how -- at least in part -- I came to the conclusion that a portrait gallery was one more gallery worth having.

I thought, maybe in the last decade of the century this National Portrait Gallery can help give us a bit of direction on the question which really should have been settled a long while ago - the identity question. The "who are we?" question.

I have to say that it's not a question which has ever caused me much concern.

But I know some people remain ambivalent about it.

Perhaps it helps to have Irish ancestors.

The answer of course is dead simple - and there were plenty in this country who knew it a century and more ago -- "we are Australian".

And that means among other things, that we are all the nuances of attitude, feature and expression; all the hopeful, despairing, brave, anxious, lofty and lowly, males and females of any and every ethnic origin whose portraits were ever rendered by any means on this continent.

If the Portrait Gallery makes these the boundaries of its ambition, then it will be well on the way to being truly national and truly worthwhile.

It will be better if it is not dominated by governors and other eminent Victorians in heavy gilt frames. Or a gallery with an exclusive emphasis on the great achievers.

It will be better, I think, if it is a much broader gallery of our national life -- including contemporary life. And I think Australians will like it much more.

And that is why this first exhibition is such a good one.

It's good to see Meryl Tankard in there with Nellie Melba -- and Dorothy Hewett and Germaine Greer and all those colonial women we have never seen before.

Bill and Dallas with Zelman Cowen, Bob Menzies and Henry Parkes and George Reid. And me with Bob and Bob with Hazel.

Bungaree with Albert Namatjira and Lois O'Donoghue and Gulpilil and Eddie Mabo - along with the Lieutenant Colonel Nunn who was responsible for the Waterloo Creek massacre.

Not to say Stella Bowen's airmen in their fur collars who were dying in the war before she could finish painting them, and Percy Grainger in the same period, and also in fur.

If the exhibition gives us a sense of continuity, it also offers up a measure of the extraordinary mosaic of Australia now and in the past.

Not just in the variety of the subjects but in the way they have been portrayed - so that we get an idea of the way the modern media paints its pictures, as well as modern artists, or portrait artists of other times, or amateur photographers.

There are all sorts of Australians here in all sorts of contexts, and captured in all sorts of mediums.

The effect, it seems to me, is democratic in a totally uncontrived way. Intrinsicly and inescapably democratic, like the country itself.

I think Anne Loxley has succeeded brilliantly in making this an exhibition which is unimpeachably representative and democratic - and it has to be said, in places, painfully nostalgic.

But she has also provided us with some great Australian works of art.

To see this exhibition, then, is to begin to understand what a National Portrait Gallery might do.

It might excite a wider interest in our history and society. It might encourage us to learn the story of Australia, and to better understand the stories of our fellow Australians.

It might help us understand what it is to be Australian, and what it was to be Australian. What it is to be an Aboriginal Australian. An Australian woman. An Australian with your life hanging on a thread during the Second World War. A child living in Australia in 1814.

Last, but not least by any means - it might induce us to recognise the enormous contribution to Australia made by our artists.

It might help us to remember that in the end the quality of our national life depends upon and is measured by the quality of our creative life.

It might lead us to the conclusion that life is what we make of it - nationally speaking, that was never so true as it is now.

As ever much will depend upon the support and initiative of government.

But not just government - the arts and heritage of Australia does need more private patronage than it has been customary for them to receive.

They should receive more - and I'm sure they will when their crucial role is understood.

Perhaps the National Portrait Gallery can help that understanding. Perhaps some wandering sponsors will come here and see their own lives reflected in these faces and decide to put something back into the country through the arts.

I might say that the Arts Angels, launched so successfully in Melbourne recently, seem to be a good example of what can be done.

It is in this context that I should take the opportunity to thank on behalf of everyone here, Gordon and Marilyn Darling for their resolute support of this Gallery.

You see I have become a convert to the National Portrait Gallery.

The more so because it is not going to be left sitting in Canberra locked up in yet another massive mausoleum.

The works on display here are all on loan from both public and private collections.

Their quality, and variety and the degree to which they represent the many faces of Australia, is a fair indication of just how much of our heritage is kept out of the sight of the people.

And a fair indication of the role the National Portrait Gallery can play in levering this heritage off walls all over the country, so that the country can see it.

Even better, these exhibitions will not be confined to Canberra.

Under the *Visions of Australia* program which we announced during the last election campaign, the National Portrait Gallery will be able to offer this and future exhibitions to other venues in metropolitan centres and through the network of regional galleries and museums.

The same program of course is open to other cultural bodies across the country.

It seems to me that in a country of our size and demography, all our collecting institutions - all our cultural institutions - should be exploiting modern transport and technology to take our heritage out to the people.

So I hope that the National Portrait Gallery prospers and prospers along the lines we see here tonight.

There are many people to congratulate. Warren Horton and John Thompson and others from the National Library. Anne Loxley, the curator, of course.

Marilyn and Gordon Darling I have already mentioned. Those private collectors who donated their works so willingly. The public collections who showed immense good will towards the project and made their works available at short notice.

My friend and former colleague, Doug McLelland, Chair of the Old Parliament House Committee.

I am sure there are others. But they will forgive me for passing them by, because it is now my duty and great pleasure to officially open this exhibition -- and in doing so wish every success to the Australian National Portrait Gallery.

Thank you