



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE GRADUATE SCHOOL, INAUGURAL DEAN'S LECTURE, 5 AUGUST 1994

I am very pleased to have been asked to give this, the first of the Dean's lectures, at the new University of Melbourne Graduate School.

This new school is a very good idea. It is bound to raise both the quality and the quantity of research at a great University.

Because it is multi-disciplinary, it should be the scene of creative dialogues: who knows what social and scientific benefits might flow when research into art or history or literature crosses currents with engineers, mathematicians and architects?

The new school will create a much more pronounced research focus at the University of Melbourne. It will of course make life easier and more rewarding for the University's 7,500 post-graduate students. It will boost the general profile of what is already a renowned institution both at home and abroad.

I would not like to be seen encouraging vulgar competition, but I should imagine it will help Melbourne claw back some ground from Monash.

The School is an idea for the times we are in - our future depends so much upon knowledge and the use we make of it; our ability to secure a rewarding place in the world depends upon it; our standard of living and quality of life depends upon it; the sort of material, intellectual and aesthetic environment we leave to our children depends upon it.

In fact this new Graduate School is so obviously a good idea we might wonder why it took so long.

Not that I would pass judgement. When you have been in politics for as long as I have you are no stranger to the phenomenon of good ideas passing by ungrasped.

Politics is a contest of ideas - and for ideas. It is a contest between the ideas of the rival parties - between the greatest of all Australian political ideas, the Labor Movement, and its opponents. And there is no greater contest of ideas than the one which occurs within the Labor Movement itself.

But politics is more than a contest of views. It is at times a contest between those with ideas and those without them.

And in turn between those with the wit and persistence necessary to see ideas made into reality, and those who are content to merely spout them and argue about them. It is a contest between the pragmatists and posturers - the doers and the talkers.

It is between those who want to go to the heart of things and those who forever tinker at the margins.

Ultimately it is between those who are excited by the challenge of change and those who recoil from it.

We should never underestimate the do-nothings and the think-nothings. They are a formidable foe. For substantial periods of our history they have held sway. Against obscurantists victory is never assured.

For myself, I find it difficult to comprehend any purpose for a political life other than reform. I remain genuinely puzzled by those familiar parliamentary figures who seem dedicated to no better cause than improving their smiles or perfecting their rendition of the two-fingered sloth.

It pains me a little to say it, but I have been in Federal politics for a quarter of a century. That is half my life - and it doesn't take a mathematician to tell me that the longer I stay the worse the ratio will get.

But a mathematician will not be able to explain why it is that the longer I stay the greater grows my conviction - why the experience of 25 years in the Federal Parliament has turned a belief in reform into a thirst for it.

For instance, after twenty five years, I ask myself if I could not be forgiven sidestepping the Hilmer Report on competition policy. Those States can be so perverse. It would be so much easier to roll over to them.

How many Australians would notice if we did not insist that the State authorities accept the same competitive disciplines as those borne by Australian business and Australian unions.

The Commonwealth will get no credit for success, and all the blame for failure. In political terms the States have nothing to lose either way.

So why take it on? For the same reason that we take APEC on. Or vocational education and training. Or Mabo. Or Regional Development. Or the Republic.

Because the times demand it, the next century demands it - and you can't do justice to one without the others.

~~..... In any event, fudge the job now and posterity will catch up with you.~~ After twenty five years in the Federal Parliament I cannot think of a single item of reforming legislation - not even the most flawed - which has damaged the fabric and the future of Australia in a dimension comparable to that caused by inaction or regression.

And what is true of this last quarter century is even more true of the one before it - it was not what they did, it was what they failed to do.

In a perverse way I thank them for it - whenever I feel a bit run down I think of all those years through the fifties, sixties and seventies when good ideas passed Australia by. When the world passed us by. And it stirs me into action again.

In a healthy democracy you can defend to the death the right of governments to do things you disagree with. But you can never defend their inaction - they have no right to slough off that responsibility.

You cannot defend a government which continually fails to see what's coming or what's begging to be done.

If I have one hope for posterity it is that the Government in which I have played a part since 1983 will be judged to have recognised and confronted the huge challenges Australia has faced, and continues to face, in the last decades of the 20th century.

The politics of reform is a gruelling business and I confess to wondering sometimes why we do it.

I also confess, entirely without apology, that power has a fair bit to do with it. I never met a good politician who didn't like using it - wrestling with it.

On the other hand I have met a lot of bad ones who shrank from it. And never trust the ones who say they are not politicians - would you trust a dentist who told you he was really a boilermaker?

The best politicians make no bones about it. The best politicians want power because they know that, for all its imperfections, as a vehicle for turning ideas into reality a political career has no equal.

How you could get hold of power and just sit on it is beyond me.

In the end it is probably a matter of instinct. I mean in the end good politicians and good governments are obliged to obey the human instinct to provide security for succeeding generations.

In a very real sense politics boils down to a contest between ideas about how that is best done.

In an ideal world, this would be too obvious a point to make. In the real world the truth of it is pretty thoroughly obscured.

In the real world, all sorts of media and other imperatives combine with a perfectly natural scepticism to create a climate in which the political system is generally deemed at best a deeply qualified success, and politicians sometimes struggle to maintain their status as normal members of the species.

It is not a particularly bad thing - it manifestly can't be. For the truth is that even through the mists of cynicism you can see the contrary indications: by and large, our political system serves us very well; by and large, our traditions serve us well; by and large, as a nation and a people we have succeeded.

And, in my view, we have never succeeded so well as we are succeeding now.

It is true - we have the best conjunction of economic circumstances in memory.

It is true that we are now a competitive and outwardly-oriented economy.

It is true that we think differently about the world and our place in it.

It is also true that we have sophisticated and effective social policies and programs with few equals in the world.

These are all measures of success. But there seems to me an even more profound measure - I mean the cultural shift, the shift in attitudes.

We are proving that as a nation we can live with change. We can adapt. We can initiate change.

Who would have thought a decade ago that we would number universities among our leading export earners?

Just as I am painfully aware of how rapidly my twenty five years in Parliament have passed, I am conscious that many of you - those of you who are still in your twenties - will have no memory of the things which used to plague Australia.

I mean things like one of the world's worst strike rates. Notoriously inefficient work practices in key industries. Inflation dragging us down. Financial regulations gumming up the works. A weak and uncompetitive manufacturing sector.

You need only go back another decade to find the White Australia Policy still in existence.

The great task of the eighties was to make Australia an international player in its own right. To make it competitive, outward-looking, phobia free.

It is very useful to be reminded that within half a generation such things fade from the public memory.

It comes as a bit of shock, for instance, to think that the great majority of this year's first year university students were not born when John Kerr dismissed the Whitlam Government.

It is a reminder of how quickly generations pass, and of why one generation cannot waste time in getting the ground prepared for the one to follow.

And why governments must not sit on their hands. Why governments must provide for this generation and the next. Why they must, therefore, be prepared to embrace change and encourage the people to embrace it.

The pace of change quickened in the eighties. It is moving even faster now.

But we can keep up. A decade ago we couldn't.

A decade ago you wouldn't see, up the back of The Economist where they keep the economic indicators, Australia leading the world - not just in growth at present, but in the international forecasts for growth and for inflation.

In December 1983, Australia's growth was the lowest in the industrial world. Australia's inflation was among the highest. Today it is among the lowest.

Quite unthinkable a decade ago. And no less unthinkable was a manufacturing sector with exports to rival those in agriculture and mining - let me tell those of you who were not present at the time, in the 1970s the orthodoxy was that Australia could never succeed as an exporter of manufactures.

We could never be sufficiently competitive, it was said, at least not without adopting the wage rates of the developing world.

No one then imagined that a decade later Australia's fastest growing exports would be elaborately transformed manufactures. Or that overall exports would represent 20 per cent of GDP.

Or that, whereas in the early eighties about 3% of our GDP was invested abroad, today it is 20%. Or universities and colleges would become principal players - and principal earners - in the new export culture, the new era of internationally traded services.

I could go on for a long time about these remarkable changes, including those in education and training. I could point out that whereas 4 in 10 young Australians completed secondary school in the early eighties, 8 in 10 do now. And I could point out that we are about to expand vocational education on the same scale.

But the most important lesson to be drawn from these changes is not their individual dimensions but the general revolution they imply. It is not just what they have won for us so far - it is what they assure us of winning in the future.

For they have meant that we are competitive. They have meant that we are players. That we now have a presence where we didn't before. That, as markets became global, we have adjusted quickly enough and dramatically enough to get into them.

As Asia became the most dynamic economic region in the world we have directed our national focus there, and our companies have moved to take advantage of the extraordinary opportunities. It is no accident that as I visited Jakarta to talk to President Soeharto about the forthcoming meeting of APEC leaders in Indonesia, a huge Australian trade exhibition was being held there.

The fact is that we are on the threshold of an unprecedented era of opportunity, one in which by our own efforts and according to our own lights we can deliver the great promise of Australia. We are in with a huge chance.

... We have only got to this stage by overcoming our inertia. In an article in the Australian on June 1 this year, Xavier Pons wrote the following:

Is there a common point between, say, Mabo, the Industrial Relations Reform Act, multiculturalism, the push for an Australian republic and the upgrading of Australia's military cooperation with Indonesia? Could there be some logic to it all?

Beyond the diversity and specificity of these recent developments, one can detect the premises of an unprecedented cultural shift as Australia, somewhat reluctantly, leaves behind the comforts of illusion and braces itself to face reality on its own terms.

Xavier Pons is right. There has been a cultural shift. There is a common point between those legislative landmarks. There is a thread of logic binding them. And it is most definitely about facing reality.

And I would say there is another thread: one which links the Government's willingness to legislate on these big issues with the willingness of Australians to make changes of comparable dimensions in their own lives - in their workplaces, in their schools, in the way they go about their enterprises, in accommodating multiculturalism, in recognising the new realities.

If I might regress for a moment to the matter of the contest between inertia and reform: we got this cultural shift by exposing ourselves to necessity. That is the essence of it.

There remain a few people on both sides of politics who disagree, but the fact is undeniable - only by establishing an environment of necessity did we get these changes. Nothing else would do.

The recognition of necessity has driven change in the past decade and it will drive it in this one. There is no greater weapon against the tendency to inertia. No better way to expose and defeat those without ideas and policies or the will to realise them.

In doing so, it has been essential to maintain the social equation. In fact we are in the vanguard of progressive social policy.

Compare our health system with other countries; our welfare system; our legislation protecting women and programs to expand their opportunities; our system of family payments; our recently introduced "jobs compact" and other measures to assist the long term unemployed announced in the White Paper - compare our social legislation with the advanced countries of the world and you will see that we have recognised change will not work, and is not worth attempting, if the social and cultural fabric of the nation cannot be kept intact.

And we have kept it intact. Most importantly we have to make sure the measures announced in the White Paper are effectively delivered, and the long-term unemployed are brought back in touch with the labour market.

~~There is a great deal more we can do to make our social system deliver more opportunity and more security. And there is a great deal we are doing - reforms like the Home Child Care Allowance I launched yesterday.~~

The important thing is to keep the equation in balance - we must maintain the social safety net and extend equality and opportunity through progressive social legislation, but the same purposes are also served by measures to make the economy more dynamic and competitive.

Without them, there would be infinitely less opportunity, infinitely less chance for the next generation of Australians.

Deregulation taught us not just what was needed, but what we were capable of. It brought out the creativity in us. Non-restrictive immigration policies and multiculturalism brought out the tolerance, and the capacity to build a much richer society.

The new openness of the 1980s exposed us to the world - and in so doing, as never before, exposed us to ourselves. We see ourselves more clearly now, I think. We have a better understanding of our capabilities.

I think we need to bring the same principles and the confidence we have developed from exercising them to every significant realm of our national life.

I believe Australians have every right to see their era as one of unparalleled achievement. Our history is often said to be built on a succession of noble failures, and our national character is said to reflect this.

Romantic and agreeable as this interpretation is, I think we can now aim to launch Australia into the next century on a tradition of success.

As a politician I believe in stirring Australia's economic and social broth. I think we should engage the whole of it. I think it puts more strength in the brew, and brings out our best, most generous and creative qualities.

I have always thought that there are more of these in the Australian community than the polls and the media would generally have us believe.

I profoundly believe in Australians belief in themselves - their seriousness of purpose, their capacity to rationalise their way through problems.

That is why I was confident we could pursue the just cause of Mabo and win - and why I remain confident that the legislation we introduced will survive every petty and mean attempt to undo it.

The Native Title Act will deliver to the Australians of the twenty first century what we have not enjoyed - the foundations of justice in the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. It will be a foundation for greater confidence and national self-esteem.

The same of course can be said for the Republic.

... There are any number of reasons why Australia should become a Republic. The simplest one - and I think a perfectly sufficient one - is that an independent nation with an independent destiny, and with traditions and a way of life which are uniquely its own, ought not to have a foreign Head of State.

And those who believe this is not the case should tell us why. I have not yet heard so much as a shred of a good reason - other than the weak refrain that the Queen is irrelevant.

I hear them say - "if it ain't broke don't fix it". This of course is a doctrine of inertia. It is an argument for the perfectly preserved horse and cart.

Or I hear them say - there are more important issues. This is true, just as there were more important issues a century ago when the Federation was designed and passed by the people.

Or I hear them say - as John Hewson said the other day - having an Australian as Australia's Head of State is not important. Yet as recently as the 1950's having the Queen of England as our Head of State was considered to be terribly important - "the crown as an abstract notion" united us, Bob Menzies said.

And it is true in the 1950's that British monarchy constituted a significant element of Australia's national sentiment and national cohesion. Our Head of State then commanded great respect, affection and loyalty.

But there is no denying that the British monarchy no longer commands that respect, affection and loyalty. It is equally true that our interests have grown increasingly away from those of Great Britain, and that the proportion of our population who have come from non-English speaking backgrounds has dramatically increased.

And it is just as true that these trends will continue.

So what do we say to the next generation of Australians? What do we say to the Australians of the 21st century?

That, even though the British monarchy has little or no relevance to your lives, values and aspirations, we will leave it with you?

Or will we say - we had the wit and the will to bequeath to you a Head of State who stands for the things we believe in? Who stands unambiguously for Australia? An appropriate Head of State, in other words.

So I say it is important that Australia's Head of State be an Australian. I say that it will be an appropriate mark of our achievements as a nation - not least of our achievements in recent years.

As you will have gathered today, if you have not gathered before, I hold an emphatic belief that politicians and governments should lead. That is what they are elected to do - and paid to do.

And recent experience leaves me in no doubt that when a lead is given Australians will respond - businesses, unions, communities, institutions like this one will respond..

But governments work within a system which has been determined by the people and which cannot be changed in any fundamental way without their approval. The Government has invited the people to change the system and the people are now responding.