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PRIME MINISTER

EMBARGO: 8.30PM, 3 NOVEMBER 1994

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
AUSTRALIAN QUALITY AWARDS
SYDNEY, 3 NOVEMBER 1994**

Well, it's a great pleasure to be speaking to you all right across Australia.

The involvement of so many people in these National Quality Awards is as good an indicator as any of just how far Australian business has come since the Awards were first initiated in 1988.

Australian business has well and truly made the leap to international best practice and quality is now a central plank of Australian business culture.

Of course, the Australian Quality Council has played a critical role in all this. And I congratulate the Council for all it has done to build a quality culture, to create a culture of excellence throughout Australia.

I think Australian business should also take great comfort in knowing that it has the wherewithal to match it with the best in the world and, in many cases, to be the best in the world.

Of course, Government too has played its part.

The many reforms we have introduced, and with which you are no doubt familiar, have opened Australia to the world and provided an environment in which business could flourish.

As indeed it has.

We've seen manufacturing exports grow by an average 15 per cent a year over the last decade.

We've seen our exports of services, which place a premium on quality, grow by more than 10 per cent a year to now account for one fifth of our total exports.

And, over the same period, we've seen our exports increase their total share of GDP from 14 to 22 per cent.

These are all big achievements for which both business and government can take credit.

Ten years ago, most would have seen achievements like these well beyond our grasp.

And events like this one tonight would have been equally unthinkable.

Back then, you would have been more likely to assemble these sorts of numbers for a national debate on how high the tariff wall should be.

And the overwhelming majority would have argued the higher the better.

Thankfully, that debate is now well behind us but it does have important lessons.

I think one of the most important lessons it has taught us, and it's borne out in our export performance, is that we are right to have faith in ourselves - in one sense, that's what tonight's awards are about.

When we have faith in ourselves, we feel more optimistic about the future.

And feeling optimistic, having a sense of the possibility of a better world, leads you to build that world.

Whereas if you don't share the optimism, you won't see any point in making an effort.

That's why when people are confronted by big changes, like the opening up of the Australian economy, they quickly fall into two camps.

There are those who don't have faith in our ability to meet the new challenges.

They fall back to supporting the status quo, or worse still, they advocate a retrograde return to a supposedly glorious past.

These are the ones who once we start to grow strongly ask not "How can we sustain the growth?" but "When will it end?"

These are the ones who when we have low inflation ask not "How can we keep it low?" but "How high will it go?"

And then there are the people, like those associated with the Australian quality movement, who believe in our capacity to ride the waves of change and to ride them well - with excellence.

These people realise that in an increasingly competitive world you are more likely to provide for those who come after you if you embrace the future not with fear and loathing but with confidence.

And it's into this second camp that the majority of Australians are flooding - there's a real sense of confidence about the place.

It's a sense of confidence that we haven't had for a while.

And, in terms of our place in the world, it's a sense of confidence that we've never had before.

You can certainly feel it among the business community, and particularly on nights like this.

And it's not a sense of confidence that is boastful or short-sighted.

Nor is it of the sort paraded by the buffoons of the 1980s.

Rather it is a quiet confidence, a quiet confidence in business's ability to produce world class products and services and the government's ability to run a low inflation economy.

It's the sort of quiet confidence that leaves me feeling very optimistic about the country's future.

And you can see it in the new class of business leaders that have emerged in recent times.

You can see it in the leaders of small to medium sized firms identified in the McKinsey *Emerging Exporters* report and the LEK *Intelligent Exports* report - leaders who had a vision of their companies as global exporters, who searched out new markets and who then set their companies on the path to winning those markets.

You can also see it in the leaders in the big firms like Tubmemakers, Toyota and BHP Steel, firms that have picked up Australian Quality Awards in recent years.

Tonight we honour all these leaders.

But by "leaders" I don't mean just the chief executives, just those who come up to accept the awards, I mean those people that are committed to quality and excellence right throughout an organisation.

It doesn't matter whether you are a CEO, a line manager or a stores assistant - or for that matter a Prime Minister - it's what you bring to the position rather than the position itself that really counts.

Great organisations have great people throughout the organisation - from the bottom to the top.

And that's one reason why these Awards are so important - they acknowledge excellence right across an organisation.

Great organisations, be they firms or governments, will always welcome new challenges.

And this is where APEC comes in - we have to ensure that our world class products and services aren't denied access, particularly in the booming Asian markets.

There's no point in having a quality product if you've got nowhere to sell it.

What we are seeking to do with APEC will deliver significant long term benefits to many generations of Australians.

We are looking to the forthcoming APEC Leaders' meeting in Bogor to make a commitment to free trade in the region by a particular date.

Once the political will is expressed, business will factor it into their calculations and the export success of businesses like the ones we honour tonight will depend not on the extent of their access to the world's fastest growing markets but rather on the quality of their products - and that's as it should be.

Harmonised standards are a smaller part of the picture and, through APEC, we are already working to harmonise product standards and to secure mutual recognition of standards and conformance arrangements throughout the region.

And as we seek to improve our external environment, we continue to do the same at home because we know that economic reform is a process of continuous improvement.

That's why, in partnership with the States, we are putting in place a national competition policy that will create a single market for Australian goods and services.

It's something that will be of major benefit to business and I hope those of you in business keep up the pressure on your State political leaders to embrace national competition.

Together with the reforms in electricity and gas, already well underway, the new national competition policy will give a huge boost to our international competitiveness.

Let me finish up.

Two weeks ago, when I launched our cultural policy statement, *Creative Nation*, I referred to the raw energy, skills and ambition of Australians as sources of great riches.

From them flow the creativity, innovation and dedication needed to bring the value and quality of our products and services up to standards competitive with the best the world has to offer.

Underlying *Creative Nation* and all the other government initiatives I have referred to tonight is one thing - confidence in our ability to excel at what we do.

It's as simple as that.

There are few other developed countries that can match present day Australia.

But we shouldn't be content with that, there's no excellence in parity.

As I see it, the goal of this Labor Government is to ensure that in the 21st Century there is no better place in the world to live and do business than Australia.

This is a highly ambitious goal but it is achievable.

What's reassuring about the Australian Quality Awards is that they show we are a nation rich in excellence, that Australians have the ability to deliver on quality.

Tonight's awards should give us every reason for approaching the new century with a quiet but deep-seated confidence.

Thank you.