



PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Well, let me start by welcoming you to Australia.

And let me say how pleased I am that this major OECD conference is taking place here in Australia.

It's a welcome development not just because it provides us with an opportunity to showcase Melbourne and our many other great cities - cities that some have called the most livable in the world - but because it is one of the very few occasions that a major OECD conference has taken place in this part of the world.

And clearly, it's the sort of thing that should happen more often.

Over the years, the OECD has been criticised for being too Eurocentric in its focus, that it hasn't paid sufficient regard to the economic dynamism of the Asia Pacific region.

And I think there has been an element of truth to the criticism.

So the decision to hold this conference here in Australia, in the Asia Pacific region, is very much the right one because world attention is now well and truly focused on the Asia Pacific region.

And in a way that it has never been before.

Last week's historic APEC Leaders' Meeting in Bogor has made doubly sure of that.

And while the full ramifications of the Bogor Free Trade Declaration won't be felt until well into the next century, I think history will come to judge the Bogor Meeting a most significant event.

The fact that APEC has travelled so far in such a short period of time indicates the wish of this region to become the world's economic powerhouse.

That, and the fact that the region already accounts for half of the world's GDP and almost half of world trade, makes this the right area of the world to hold a major OECD conference.

Another reason why the location of this conference is right is because it's a conference on cities.

Governments in this part of the world, and the Australian Government in particular, have a strong sense that building livable and sustainable cities is one of the greatest challenges we face.

In fact, no region in the world has faster growing cities.

From 1970 to 1990, Asian cities accounted for half of the world's total urban population growth.

And they now total more than half of the world's 30 largest cities.

Beijing, Bombay, Calcutta, Jakarta, Seoul, Shanghai, Tianjin and Tokyo already have populations close to 10 million or more.

And they're set to grow even larger.

One estimate has it that 80 per cent of Asia's economic growth this decade will take place in its major cities.

This has staggering implications for urban population growth.

For example, between now and the year 2000, China is estimated to add more than the entire population of the United States to its cities.

Developments like these place an enormous responsibility on governments and urban designers throughout the region.

Making sure you have cities that are functional seems to me to be fundamental to participating in the region's growth.

But there's a bigger challenge and it is more than just making cities work.

It's about building cities that will endure through the next century.

And that, in many ways is a creative adventure, for, as the Australian artist Lloyd Rees once put it "Cities are the ultimate work of art".

We may well wonder as to what makes a great city, or for that matter a world city.

I think it's an almost indefinable thing.

But you certainly know a great city when you're in one.

Perhaps it's cities that are friendly, cities with generous public spaces and street faces that are welcoming.

Cities like Melbourne and Sydney.

Or perhaps it's cities that give their dwellers a sense of joy and involvement - cities that are engaging.

Whether it's the boulevards of Paris, New York's skyline, the buzz of Hong Kong, the raw energy of Shanghai or the splendour of Sydney Harbour, places of beauty and function really strike at the heart.

A great city gives off its own resonances.

A great city above all else has a soul.

A city without a soul is a barren landscape that draws its sustenance from its people - rather than the other way around.

A great city nourishes one's sense of self, gives one a peace and a communion with the built environment.

It creates a milieu which encourages endeavour and creativity, and achievement and peace.

A great city's power comes from the power of its people, the intellectual life, the business of its people, their attitudes to one another, their attitudes to others, their principles - their sense of mission.

These are indefinable things but they are as real as the cityscapes themselves.

The human relationship with cityscapes and the architecture is, I think, central to the chemistry of fulfilment and belonging.

Ugly cities affront one's eyes and dull one's faith in the enlightened progress of our civilisation.

Huge cities of cold monuments slashed by expressways depersonalise life and reduce one's self esteem.

Inefficient cities wear people down and diminish the community's capacity for growth and wealth.

By contrast cities of structure and beauty lift people up, engage them and encourage them.

Planning has such centralised connotations these days - yet without planning the developers often ignore the streetscape and sometimes leave their indifferent product and its problems to another generation.

The traffic flows, the reliance on automobiles, the short half lives of buildings, the altered balance, the alienation lies in the wake of private reward largely unencumbered by civic pride or commitment.

It seems to me that we have to consider our cities. Think about them, care for them, be proud of them, adapt them - plan for them.

Not sterile conformity to plan but enough structure to provide the form for the natural bacteria of the city to etch its pattern.

This sort of approach informs the way we think about our cities in Australia.

We want cities that are special places to live and great places to do business.

You can see it in projects such as Southbank which lies just across the Yarra River here in Melbourne.

As you will see, one of the best things about the Southbank development is that it provides a spectacular platform from which to view the city of Melbourne in much the same way that the Champs Elysee allows you to view Paris and the Statue of Liberty New York.

It wasn't so long ago that this was a dilapidated industrial and commercial area.

Those of you visiting our other cities will get a chance to see similar rejuvenation projects right around the country.

I think it's also important to understand that despite the postcard images of Australia as a vast continent, we are in fact one of the most urbanised nations in the region with our cities accounting for 85 per cent of our total population.

And not only is our population concentrated in the cities, it's also concentrated in a few major cities.

Sydney and Melbourne alone account for almost half our total population and provide the great bulk of the nation's employment.

These two cities which aspire to 'world city' status - however you might define it - are critical to the long term future of our nation.

Increasingly, we are coming to realise that it is the quality of our cities, and our city networks, that are key to our ability to generate wealth.

The growing recognition of just how important our cities are is borne out by some of the major Government programs now underway.

There is the Better Cities Program and the Australian Urban and Regional Development Review which the Deputy Prime Minister spoke to you about earlier today.

But there is another reason why we are now embracing our cities in a way that we never have before and that has something to do with a new and real sense of confidence.

It's a confidence in our long term future, a confidence that, if we put our minds to it in the century coming, Australia could be one of the best places in the world to live and do business.

And at this stage in our national history - in the run up to the centenary of our nationhood - I think it's also important that we step back a little and take a big picture perspective on how we can best tackle urban environment over the long term.

That's certainly something that I have an interest in and it's part of the reason why late last year I decided to establish an Urban Design Task Force involving some of the nation's most eminent architects, planners, landscape designers and academics.

My purpose in setting up the Task Force was a simple one: to find ways how we might improve the urban environment.

The Task Force has just completed its report and I'm very pleased to formally launch it today.

It's a good report which I know will be of great interest to the many people involved in urban design in Australia.

I think the main reason it's a good report is because of what it will do to really push the national debate on how we can best foster quality urban design in this country.

As I see it, the debate will be a very necessary and healthy exercise and one which I am looking forward to participating in.

So, thank you very much to each of the Task Force members - many of whom are here today - for all you've done, particularly because you have given your valuable time on a voluntary basis.

Let me also express my very deep personal appreciation to John Mant, the Convenor of the Task Force, who had the major task of bringing together the views of this diverse range of creative professionals.

I trust our international visitors will allow me the indulgence to take up three key points from the report.

First, to achieve excellence in urban design it's imperative that we draw together all those responsible for urban design, and I mean at every level of government.

As the report points out, the fragmentation of responsibilities for urban planning at the local level makes it very difficult to allocate clear responsibilities.

It's a case of everyone, and therefore no one, being ultimately responsible.

And that makes it virtually impossible for the community to demand accountability for the management of its urban spaces.

That, of course, is inimical to excellence in urban design and it, therefore, raises the big issue of whether we need a major restructuring of government agencies if we are serious about achieving high quality urban design outcomes that benefit all Australians.

This is, of course, an issue that extends beyond the sole responsibilities of the Commonwealth Government and I will be writing to Premiers and Chief Ministers to see how we might work together on this issue.

Second, at its heart, good urban design is a multi-disciplinary activity.

I think this is something that not everyone involved in urban design fully appreciates.

For too long, good urban design in this country has been frustrated by competing disciplines, professions, and government agencies which have approached the issue in a narrow way thereby leading to a less than optimum outcome.

That needs to change.

But I'm pleased to day some are getting it right.

An excellent example is the Design Studio that will run for a week at the end of this month in Sydney.

The Design Studio, which will develop urban design schemes for Homebush Bay for both the Olympics and up to the year 2020, is the largest design workshop of its kind to be held in Australia and the first ever for the Olympic Games.

The Studio will take an integrated multi-disciplinary approach incorporating leading national experts and specialists from around the world some of whom are attending this conference.

The third comment I wish to make is that we need to give appropriate recognition to the joint efforts that produce inspired and creative urban design.

For this reason the Government intends taking up the Task Force's recommendation to establish an Australia Prize in Urban Design.

This is a first in that it will reinforce the multi-disciplinary nature of quality urban design.

That's why the award will be not about individual projects but about places.

It will recognise excellence in the building and sustaining of urban communities.

It will recognise the achievement of the many individuals who create places that provide significant benefits to the environment and the community.

Further details of the award will be announced in due course.

So, those are some of my initial reactions to the Task Force report but, as I've said, you can rest assured I'll be having a few more words to say over the coming months.

So how do we pull all these threads together? What lies at the core of good urban design? How do we create livable cities in a global economy? How do we create great cities that people want to live and do business in?

I think the best way we can answer these questions is to start by thinking of our cities and imagining something better.

We want cities with both efficiency and beauty.

Quality of life is just as much bound up with the development of cities as is economic advancement.

Our cities must enable us to respond effectively to developments in the global economy.

But they must also offer us a quality of life that enhances our work and recreational well being.

They must be great places both to live and do business.

The two go hand in hand. They're self-reinforcing, a virtuous circle if you like.

Therefore, the way we manage and develop our cities is crucial to our economic future.

It's crucial to our social future.

And it's just as crucial to the quality of our environment.

Getting it right is primarily a question of striking the right balance.

We don't want cities that are monuments to Mammon but neither do we want cities that are museums of the past.

We will try to strike the right balance in Australia.

I am quietly confident that, with sufficient will and imagination on our part, not too far down the track people throughout the region will come to see Australian cities as ideal places both to live and do business.

To an extent, that's already happened with the many international firms which have already set up their regional operations and regional headquarters here in Australia.

Corporate executives in the Asia Pacific are coming to realise that if you live to work you'll work anywhere in the region, but if you work to live there's a good chance you'll choose to live in Australia.

There's already many that have come to Sydney and Melbourne and there are an increasing number finding their way to Perth and Brisbane.

This move is just starting to build up a head of steam and I'm sure that, come the next century, there will be many many more because our cities offer some things that our competitor cities never will and that's likely, I believe, to make our cities more sustainable over the long term.

We have some great cities, but we want to make them even better.

We want our cities to be more even hospitable, to be even more inviting.

We want cities that preserve the best of our past, that celebrate the best of the present and give a sense of the future.

Cities that people live in because they want to and not because they have to.

Organic cities, breathing, changing, living cities whose progress is infused with memory.

So let me wind up by saying what a pleasure it is for Australia to host this major OECD conference on cities.

I am sure the conference will promote a greater understanding of how we can all build better cities in our respective nations, cities linked to the global economy but cities which are great places to live in - cities by and for the people.

Thank you.