



**PRIME MINISTER**

**ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP  
AAP CONFERENCE OF ASIAN, AUSTRALIAN AND PACIFIC MEDIA  
EXECUTIVES, REGENT HOTEL, SYDNEY - TUESDAY, 22 NOVEMBER 1994**

**\*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY\***

I am very grateful for the invitation to speak to such a distinguished audience as we have here today - and I welcome all of you from overseas to Australia and to Sydney.

It is somehow gratifying that within a week of the Bogor Declaration we have a conference of media executives drawn from the Asia-Pacific.

Less than a decade ago, the Asia-Pacific was just a concept.

Increasingly today it is a defining reality.

With APEC all the more so, of course.

Mind you, had they read some of the Australian media at the weekend, the uninitiated could be forgiven for thinking that the Asia-Pacific and APEC were still unproven concepts, or realities of no great consequence.

Those of us with long experience know that this was the obligatory spray of scepticism to prevent any hubris sprouting.

The Australian media are conscientious in keeping us in our places and reminding us that good works are never an excuse to draw more than a breath of satisfaction.

But in fact, like everyone else, they know that change is upon us.

No one I suspect knows it better than the Australian media.

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And if it is a political leader's prime responsibility to anticipate and manage change, and confront the necessities change brings - then I am sure they also know that the political leaders at Bogor did this as it has rarely been done before.

That was where the sense of euphoria came from: from doing something with some genuine vision about it.

Not a mandatory genuflection or theatrical squint into the future, but an act which might actually mark this generation as one with sufficient wisdom, care and foresight to lay the basis of a better world for millions of people in the future.

And sufficient resolve.

That it should have happened - and that it should have been so rapidly taken for granted - perhaps testifies to the transforming times in which we live.

It seems to me that these are times when the most pessimistic among us find it difficult to escape the possibilities on offer.

We might even call it an age of possibility.

So much changed with the end of the Cold War.

We watched, millions of us around the world, as its most powerful symbol - the Berlin Wall - was broken down.

We all knew that we watching a long chapter in the history of the modern world come to an end.

How we read its fall depended, I suppose, on our natural disposition.

Pessimists will tend to see only the problems which flow from the collapse of an old order.

Optimists will fail to see them.

The near-sighted and the nostalgic will see a symbol of a century at its end; romantics and visionaries will see the start of a new one.

My vote is with the pragmatists.

Pragmatists will see the possibilities.

And seize them.

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It is a great era for those with an eye for possibilities – in trade and investment, the environment, cultural development, information technology.

Name your interest.

We all know an era has ended.

We all speak of a new "post Cold War world".

And in Bogor we took a practical step towards defining it.

It is a cliché to say that much remains to be done, and many hurdles will have to be jumped – but it is just as true to say that an extraordinary amount was done and an extraordinary number of hurdles were jumped.

We did not define the next century, but we gave ourselves a chance to shape it as it should be shaped, which is to say in all our interests.

In fact a clue to the shape of the new post Cold War world lay hidden in the drama of events leading up to the end of the Berlin Wall.

While we watched the collapse of the Soviet Union on television and perhaps secretly wished that CNN had been there in 1917, teenage students in California were communicating by another means with teenage students in Moscow and St Petersburg.

As the Soviet Union disintegrated, and the legacy of older generations fell apart before our eyes on television, a new generation was talking to Americans on Internet – unfiltered and unedited.

It gives us a glimpse of what awaits us in the 21st Century.

And I think it gives us a hint of why we are more inclined to think in terms of the possible – why agreements like the APEC agreement can be credibly pursued.

The barriers of distance and communication are down and, in the end, it is not easy to say why others should not follow.

We only need the courage to ask the question.

In APEC we did ask it.

And suddenly we are talking as a region – in many forums, like this one, thinking as a region.

That was the source of the little puff of euphoria.

The feeling that what we had just done could be done again.

We can break down language and cultural barriers - and increase the understanding and respect between us.

And we can break down the barriers to trade and investment.

We can prevent bottlenecks before they develop.

We can find creative ways to deal with issues before they become problems.

Global communications, for instance.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact that global communications will have on the daily lives of all of us.

And, for that matter, on the daily operations of the media.

Interactive multimedia, in particular, now has the potential to become a new force in education, art, culture - and the media.

That is why in the Australian Government's cultural policy, *Creative Nation*, we took a number of major initiatives to generate a vibrant multimedia industry as part of our push into the information age.

These specific initiatives seek to build on our creative abilities: a substantial and innovative film and television industry; our software skills and our entrepreneurial traditions.

They also seek to utilise what is one of the more advanced telecommunications networks in the world as a platform upon which the multimedia industry can be developed.

Most of you here will be aware that our two major telecommunications players, Telstra and Optus, have plans to install broadband cable to millions of Australian homes before the turn of the century.

The plans involve some of Australia's biggest and best known media corporations - which should come as no surprise given the convergence taking place across media, information and telecommunications industries.

These developments have profound implications for media organisations right around the world and I am sure that all of you here are already grappling with the challenges they pose.

I think it is worth making the observation that in all this, there is the real possibility that those large media organisations, which have traditionally relied on the broadcast nature of their medium, are going to come under increasing pressure as the democratisation of our information-gathering via networks like the Internet takes effect.

That is not to say that the major media organisations won't remain global players.

They will - because some people will prefer to have their information handed to them in an easily digestible form.

In fact, there will be so much information available that it may well be those who can best package and tailor it to specific needs who will gain a large share of the global information gain.

But for those who actively search for information and news, the means of communication available will enable them to sidestep the hierarchical nature of broadcast news and entertainment.

Via their PC they will be able to pick and choose publications and authors at will.

This will also lead to an explosion of communities of interest: groups of people interested in a particular topic - macroeconomics or microbiology, Chinese medicine or the music of Chile - will have access to all relevant information on the subject world wide and the ability to communicate with others expert and interested worldwide.

Recipients of information will have far greater choice in the information that they choose to receive, and this will have considerable effects on media organisations which are not used to the nature and level of their competition.

As the technology becomes more sophisticated, anyone with a small camera and notebook computer will be able to show the whole world events taking place virtually anywhere on the globe.

And, even if they don't have a camera, they will still be able to describe events taking place as they occur.

Broadcast will continue to exist, but it will be broadcast from the bottom up rather than the top down.

And anyone who wants to will be a journalist.

As the technology becomes more sophisticated more parts of the globe will open up.

This will, of course, have profound effects on the extent to which individual governments can regulate the flow of information both within and into their nations.

In some cases, it may well be near impossible.

Governments can take steps to restrict the flow of information and ideas: but they do so at the risk of limiting access to the very communication technologies that, in the information era of the next century, will be so critical to national economic development.

This is one of the key challenges facing governments in the region, particularly those governments which are less open than others.

And in one sense, this is why last week's Bogor Declaration of APEC leaders was so profound.

It committed the developed APEC countries to achieving free trade by the year 2010 and the developing APEC countries by the year 2020.

It was a recognition that in the coming century, economic advancement will be inextricably linked to the openness of national economies.

Those who embrace the world economy and the information revolution now driving it will prosper.

Those who don't will pay a heavy price.

I don't for one moment want to underestimate the task of translating the political commitment of Bogor into an economic reality.

I don't underestimate the challenges we face.

But Bogor means we will face them.

It means we have faced the future.

The commitment we made is an enormous step forward.

For instance, it can hardly have escaped anyone's notice that the Bogor Declaration involved both developing and developed countries.

It wasn't a case of developed countries trying to drag developing countries along to a table they didn't want to sit at.

To the contrary, the Bogor Declaration was very much the initiative of the President of one of the world's most important developing countries.

It is a great tribute to President Soeharto's leadership and standing in the region.

It is also a measure of his vision and grasp of the possibilities on offer in the next century.

The fact that Australia was able to play such an important role in the whole APEC process, by launching the initiative in 1989 and then by turning it into a Heads of Government and leaders' meeting embracing a free trade agenda, shows just how much Australia has changed in recent years.

While I am sure that many people in the region have a reasonable appreciation of the nature of contemporary Australia, there is no doubt that the vast majority are not so well informed.

That is something we want to rectify.

I know, for example, that it is still widely believed that the White Australia policy still operates.

It was abolished more than twenty years ago.

Australia is, after all, a country where one in five of our population was born overseas.

And if you add to that number all the children of overseas-born parents you have 44 per cent, or almost half, of our total population.

While Australia is neither a monocultural nor a monolithic society, and while Australian communities are separated by vast distances and vastly different regional and cultural affections, profound ties of fellow feeling unite us.

These days we are increasingly united by the pride and the pleasure we take in the difference itself - in multicultural Australia.

Our respect and enthusiasm for cultural diversity has become a defining element of Australia's national sentiment.

It was some indication of this fact when a recent poll revealed that a clear majority of Australians viewed the recent wave of Asian immigration as of significant benefit to Australia.

Whatever way you look at it, the contrast between the Australia of today and the Australia of thirty years or even twenty years ago could not be more marked.

The economic changes have been as profound as the cultural ones.

A decade of reform has given us one of the most open economies in the world.

Some time ago now, we floated the dollar, deregulated our financial markets, knocked down the tariff wall and pushed ahead with a widespread program of industry and microeconomic reform.

That reform process has delivered substantial benefits.

We are now growing at 4 to 5 per cent. *The Economist*, believes that next year we will continue to grow faster than the other major industrialised economies in the world.

We also have increasing business investment, a big rise in employment, an underlying inflation rate of two per cent and continued growth in exports.

In fact, 60 per cent of all Australian exports are to the Asian region – a share that has doubled in less than thirty years.

Exports to the ASEAN countries, for example, are at least equal to those going to either the United States or Europe.

This major shift of national focus to the region has also seen the reach of the Australian media extend further into the Asian region.

Radio Australia, which has been broadcasting to the region for many years, now has an estimated sixty million listeners worldwide.

More recently, we have seen the establishment of Australia Television International which now broadcasts to millions throughout the region.

Its charter is to build on Radio Australia's reputation as an authoritative, independent and impartial provider of international news and information, and of high quality entertainment which is sensible to the cultural mores of a highly diverse audience.



Accompanying this whole push into Asia has been a large increase in the numbers of Australian journalists based in the region.

One problem with the coverage of Asia and the Pacific in the Australian media is that, in my view, there is not enough of it.

But things are improving as the foreign pages of most of our newspapers show.

All of us get deluged with information about the US or Britain, but if greater regional coverage generates only a regional equivalent of an O J Simpson or House of Windsor media soap opera, we're better off without it.

But what we really need is better coverage: and that depends on first, ensuring we have a flow of information from a wide variety of sources and second, that those sources are well-informed.

This works both ways.

Coverage of Australia in the Asian media also tends to be limited and to fall too easily into caricatures of Australians preferring the beach to work.

In the ignorance stakes, things are pretty well matched.

Not surprisingly, the reportage of Australian journalists has sometimes created difficulties in our relations with some regional countries, particularly those where the views and policies of the Australian media are seen by some as interchangeable with the views and policies of the Australian Government.

Media freedom is a fundamental and unalterable tenet of Australian democracy and Australian life.

Here in Australia, from time to time, those on both sides of politics may wish it were a more positive and altogether less irksome and contrary beast, but these sensibilities only exist at the margins.

At the centre, Australians hold the right to be objectively and critically informed about current political developments as inalienable.

We do think, however, that when our media go to the region - to the extent that they are "our media" - they should be responsible and sensitive to the specific circumstances of different nations.

Objectivity and knowledge about a regional audience which constitutes a mosaic of different ethnic and linguistic groups is essential if the Australian media are to gain widespread respect.

However, as we seek to understand our Asian neighbours we are equally justified in expecting that they should do the same of us - that the tolerance and understanding should be applied equally to Australia and its media.

At the same time, it is important not to overlook the positive role that our media can play in building a sense of community among regional countries.

With the advent of multimedia as a means by which culture can be delivered, there is a real risk that local culture will be swamped by imported products.

That is even more likely to be the case where the imported culture is of a higher technical quality: in education and information programs, for instance, our children are more likely to learn through a medium which is more intuitive, and more fun to operate.

That places a great responsibility on us to provide programs which take account of cultural diversity and sensibility.

That was one very important reason why we launched the multimedia initiatives we did - to build within Australia a multimedia industry which will ensure that we continue to sustain and originate our own culture.

Given Australia's strong links to many of the Asian countries in the region, including the great link of migration, I think there is significant scope for Australia to develop content for the region, content which is sensitive to local cultures and promotes them.

While we should seek to use the new communications technologies as a vehicle to develop greater understanding and a greater regional identity, we should also encourage the maintenance of distinctive and diverse cultural values.

Australia is perhaps better placed than most to do this.

In this, as in so much else, technological change will have greater impact than government fiat.

In the end 'cultural sensitivity' - if we mean by that a thorough understanding of the cultural and political background within which events are taking place - can only come from the media themselves - from journalists, editors and managers who know what they are talking about and appreciate the complexity of the region.

Most importantly, it will come from informed consumers whose knowledge of the countries they are reading about or hearing about is deeper than what they pick up from a five paragraph news story about riots or political change or economic growth.

That is why Australia has been putting such emphasis on Asia in our education system.

We are developing a national Asian Languages Strategy designed to increase the number of Asian language teachers and to develop teacher training courses as well as national student proficiency levels in languages such as Mandarin, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean.

We are very conscious that we must continue to increase our understanding of the countries in the region - that we will become a more effective player and a more effective partner as we do so.

Obviously, the Bogor Declaration has committed us all to this.

It committed us all to a greater level of regional consciousness.

It therefore committed us irrevocably to paths of change.

In this we feel confident that we can say we are at least as well advanced as anyone - even, maybe, that we are more advanced than most.

It is now more than a decade since we saw the need for major structural reform in Australia.

In that time we have learned a lot about change - both about implementing it and about managing it.

We learned that it is a tiring process, but it is also an exhilarating one.

And because it is so rich in possibilities for all our countries and all our people, surely none is more exhilarating than the process which so rapidly took us to the declaration in Indonesia last week.

Perhaps the most important element at work in Bogor and Seattle was the one too obvious to earn much reporting.

It was that all the countries of the region, in all their diversity, were talking to each other, in a common forum, with a common interest.

The act of communication was the important one.

Ultimately it is from this that all those vast post-Cold War possibilities derive.

We need to keep the communication going.

We need to keep it expanding and deepening.

That is why you, the region's media, have such a crucial and creative role to play - and why I am so gratified to see you here in Sydney.

Thank you.

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