



# PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP  
SPEECH FOR THE LAUNCH OF THE "WALTZING MATILDA"  
CENTENARY, NATIONAL ART GALLERY, 12 DECEMBER 1994**

## **E&OE PROOF COPY**

It is the parallels between the last decade of this century and the last decade of the last century are almost uncanny as they reveal that in times of hardship - of economic change - that in these times, the spirit of Australia and our sense of ourselves, has become so much more obvious perhaps than at times - certainly in the 19th Century after the great growth and wealth in the gold era of the 1860s, 70s and 80s, to the recession of the 1890s to the familiar problem of drought, to problems in the countryside. We saw in this decade of the 1890s this great period of Australian social experimentation which was, of course, snuffed out by the First World War. But in this period, as Ken (Cowley) has just mentioned, we saw the pulling together of the Federation, in the midst of all this difficulty those thinking through the screen of troubles to see a nation emerging from the other side and not losing the opportunity with the chance to federate. At the time this song was written - itself part of the ethos of the period - the Labor Party was formed, and we then see the quite amazing period of social change leading up to 1914. Now, you would wonder it would take another century to do these things again, but of course as we know, there was a bout of prosperity between the Wars, and then the Second World War basically took the gloss off all that, and then we had a period of growth and prosperity, but all set in the terms of the post-War era, not particularly about us, but about us being part of the western world as it then became. This is probably the first time, the 1990s, where the world is returning to the sort of world it was before the First World War, with these great states joining the world economy for the first time since then, like Russia - first time since 1917, but again partly a consequence of the First World War - and we are seeing these other great states joining it - China, India and South America. So we are entering a period again somewhat similar, but we are doing it at a time when Australia's confidence about itself - pride in itself has I think coalesced and come together, perhaps as we might not have expected a decade ago - and it is that confidence and that

expression of ourselves that is powering on now - our national identity and our place in the world, particularly the world we live in.

Now, all these threads tend to come together, and it is a most unlikely thing that Ken Cowley from News Ltd - well I think it is unlikely anyway - is one of the driving forces of the Stockman's Hall of Fame, and is the proprietor of Australia's most famous riding boot and country shoe - R M Williams - and that he is mixed up with Hugh Sawrey and the brushmen of the bush, because that in itself is a celebration of the great ethos of rural Australia. But here we are with Ansett - one of our two great airlines - celebrating the centenary of this, what has become our national song - "Waltzing Matilda" - and doing it with these painting so evocative of the time by Hugh Sawrey. This is a very good thing to do - it is an important thing to do in it's own right because in this country where we for so long were left as an outpost of Britain and the British Empire, the bits that were ours we tended to hug and keep, and one of them of course is this song "Waltzing Matilda". Now, apparently no-one quite knows who wrote the music, but we know that Banjo Patterson wrote the lyrics, and Ken said he went out to a property, but apparently it was sang at the North Gregory Hotel in Winton on the 6th April 1895. Now, I don't quite know where that was recorded, but I am sure it's true. And it was apparently sung throughout Western Queensland, but there is no doubt that Banjo Patterson wrote the words, and famous words they have become. And it is a song that has been chosen by the Australian Olympic Federation as our National Song at the Montreal Olympics, it has been recorded by over 400 artists I'm told, it has been sung by Harry Belafonte and Bill Halley - I mean for just trivial bits of information - Tom Waites - and almost every generation has sung it and there is no doubt that all of us, where we are in a place where it is sung are very moved by it. Now, the place I was most moved by it was in Ireland about eighteen months ago, where the whole stadium sang it and see if that doesn't grab you. I can tell you it does. When they had mass bands who then played it and apparently all of the verses are well known in Ireland and they were all sung. Anyway, as they went from one verse to the next nobody missed a beat and it was a terribly moving thing.

So, I think that it is, again, an evocation of the rural ethos of Australia and Ken Cowley made the point about people doing it tough on the land now and that is true - probably never tougher - this is without a doubt, I think, probably the worst drought we have ever had. I think on of the great challenges for Australia is to understand that the rural family, the farm family, the grazing family have been so much the backbone of our country's way of life, particularly outside of the cities, that we have got to do now those things within our power to keep it together while this natural phenomena exists and to give them a hand through it and to give them a hand out the other side and that is why the Government has taken now the opportunity of announcing particular policy packages to try to keep ahead of the problem and we can only hope that widespread rains in breaking the drought solves the problem. Because that, indeed in the end, is the only thing that will solve the problem, but it is important, I think, that the people in the country understand that they have the sympathies of all of us, especially those of us who live in the big

urban aggregations, the cities and the large provincial cities to say that we haven't forgotten them and that we are with them.

So, to have the song - this great song, this great rural song - celebrated for its centenary and to have it done with this spectacular array of pictures which Hugh has painted for us. I had quite a bit of contact with brushman of the bush because being the member for Blaxland around Bankstown in Sydney they have a sister city relationship with Broken Hill and has a great contact there and each year they have a great exhibition of the brushman of the bush pictures. So, I am somewhat familiar with them and I have always thought that they have been capturing, in a very contemporary way, that feeling of the bush and that part of our history that might have started to fade or be it somewhat lost to us.

So, let me first of all, congratulate Ken and Ansett for this initiative which is a good thing to do in national terms and thank Graeme McMahon who runs Ansett with Ken for that too. I would like to congratulate Hugh on his pictures and, of course, also did the 737, the people of Winton, the Waltzing Matilda Centennial Committee and everyone else associated with these events. As I say, this is a mood, I think, in the 1990s very much as we found it 100 years ago and we should lose for a second the opportunity to drive home the fact that Australia is a unique place, what we have created here ourselves is completely different than what it was, what Australia has become in a country with an enormous power about it and a huge sense of confidence. We have got this debate now about the republic, we'd often say to people 'the republic is not the instrument of our confidence or our identity, but rather the manifestation of it'. It will be the cherry on the top rather than the cake itself. The cake being our own confidence about ourselves and what we are and who we have become.

So, this song has been right through these years, part and parcel of whatever we are, because it always brings the hair up on the back of our neck - most of us. So, I would like to, again, thank Ken for inviting me to launch this today and to officially launch the Waltzing Matilda Centenary at Winton in 1995 by declaring this exhibition formally open and unveil the plaque which I will have much pleasure in doing for the Ansett 737. Thank you indeed.