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PRIME MINISTER

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP

AUSTRALIA DAY 1995

**ADDRESS GIVEN TO THE AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS, SYDNEY,
25 JANUARY 1995**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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This last year has been a good one for Australia and for Australians.

Think of the individual success: in sport, the unprecedented triumphs at the Commonwealth Games, great performances at the World Championships, Kieran Perkins, Cathy Freeman, the Kangaroos, the wallabies, the cricket team; and in the arts, the Australian Ballet triumphing in Washington, the Australian Opera in Edinburgh, Priscilla and Muriel's Wedding in Cannes, Toronto, New York, everywhere.

Meanwhile the Australian economy grew faster than that of any other developed country.

And whatever necessities of careful management such growth may impose upon us, growth is without question what we want.

We want it to get unemployment down and employment up; and we managed to do that, too. In fact we have seen 450,000 jobs created in the past eighteen months, and long term unemployment has fallen - and fallen much faster than after any other recession in our history.

Our obligation to unemployed Australians and those who will be seeking to enter the workforce in the next few years obliges us in turn to keep the growth going.

We must also remain true to those principles of fairness and equality which we have always held to be definitively Australian.

The truth is Australians do hold to them - and that fact continues to shape the way we are. It shapes policy. The Australian community would not let an Australian government leave the unemployed behind: the radical steps that were taken to bring them with us in last year's White Paper, *Working Nation*, were taken in response to that sentiment.

This remains one of the great things about Australia: the weight of public opinion continues to come down on the side of that broad set of values we summarise as the "fair go".

Through all the changes in the shape of our economy the imperatives of international competition, and against the ideological tide of unrestrained self-interest which pervaded the 1980s, in Australia the notion has persisted that the pursuit of personal success ought to be balanced by care for others, self-interest by the common interest.

We have had a perfect example of this in the last year.

The extraordinary public response to the drought was a heartwarming reflection of Australia's national consciousness; it was also a persuasive reply to anyone who believes that individualism and materialism, or global mass culture, or state parochialism, or multiculturalism has replaced our sense of belonging to one nation and with it our national identity and national feeling.

It was also reassuring evidence that a common sentiment continues to flow between the city and the bush, that the legend lives on, that the bush and its recurring themes - her beauty and her terror, as someone once said - still grip our imagination.

The bush is undoubtedly one of our great challenges: probably our most profound duty to the Australians of the next century is to leave the land both more productive and intact.

That means we have to establish a regime of sustainable development across the country: the process has started and, what is most satisfying, the impetus is coming in large part from farmers and farming communities - from the regions.

Sustainable development - clean profitable Australian industries for the twenty-first century allied to a concerted effort to conserve and restore the natural environment - will need to be a national effort, and between now and the end of the century that is what we can make it.

Regional Australia has an essential role to play.

In fact, this seems to me one of the most significant contemporary developments in the life of Australia: the regions are developing a life and identity of their own. They are developing futures of their own.

They are defining themselves in terms of their unique advantages and the niches they can find in the modern Australian and international economies.

It is a development we certainly should encourage; not only because it will be to the nation's economic advantage, but because the more varied and vibrant the regions become, the more people will be drawn into our national life and the richer and stronger will be the cultural and social fabric of Australia.

A revitalised regional Australia has the potential to enliven and enlarge our national life in ways comparable to the role played by immigration and multiculturalism.

The lesson is the same - there is strength in diversity: and in the tolerance, care and imagination required to build and maintain it; in the mixture of mutual aid and self-reliance on which modern multicultural Australia has been built; in other words, in our best traditions.

It seems to me that in this era of unprecedented and necessary change - change which we must make ourselves and changes which will inevitably be foisted on us - it is essential that we hang on to these traditions, remind ourselves of them, teach them to our children.

Nothing has ever served us better, and or will serve us so well in the future, as these things which are grown from our own experience.

I need hardly say that that is why, I think, we should be teaching these values in our schools; why Australians of every generation and every national and cultural background should know something of Australian history and tradition; why our national symbols and institutions should more unambiguously reflect them; why we really must, before the end of this century, appoint for the first time an Australian as our Head of State.

There has always been a dark side to Australian egalitarianism, of course: we have had this tendency to hack at tall poppies.

It is hard to say whether in general this thwarts ambition or makes it burn all the fiercer. Those Australians I mentioned who have succeeded so brilliantly in the past year, suggest the latter.

Better still, perhaps it means the tendency is fading.

The crucial thing is to keep up the ambition of Australians, encourage their creativity, delight in their individual efforts and achievements - and not just in sport and the arts, but in science and technology, business, in service to the nation and its people - and yet maintain the ties that bind us to this country, to our communities, our families, our human values.

In the next year, as in every other one, we may expect to hear daily examples of where we are failing, where we are going wrong, where we should do better.

In all this criticism there will be one consistent theme - the voice which, in various guises, urges us to abandon our collective egalitarian values in the name of liberating the forces of rugged individualism.

We will hear it in debates about unemployed Australians, Aboriginal Australians, Australian women. We will hear it in debates about the economy, the environment, the arts, health and education.

We should of course heed all reasonable criticism and never lapse into complacency.

But nor should we forget that very few countries have managed so well in the difficult art of balancing individual freedom with collective responsibility - and collective strength. And we should not forget that, largely as a result of this, few countries are so good to live in and have so much potential to get better.

That might be the lesson to draw from our commemoration this year of the end of World War II. For all the countless individual acts of initiative, heroism and sacrifice, what we remember most of all is a great collective effort - a communal effort in a common cause.

I think that is always the way - in the end real success depends on finding what we have in common, because in the end it depends on all of us.

So in congratulating the Young Australians of the Year and the Australian of the Year I am inclined to say that perhaps tomorrow all Australians might take a bow - and resolve to make this year even better than the last.