



PRIME MINISTER

**STATEMENT TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES BY THE
PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, 2 FEBRUARY 1995**

BEATIFICATION OF MARY MACKILLOP

On behalf of the Leader of the House, I move that this House:

Acknowledges the Beatification by His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, of Mother Mary MacKillop, founder of Australia's first religious order, the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph; and

Recognises the contribution to the people and society of Australia by Blessed Mary MacKillop and the beneficent and enduring work of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph

Mr Speaker

The recent beatification of Mother MacKillop by His Holiness the Pope bestowed a great honour on a great Australian.

Mary MacKillop's aid for the poor, particularly the rural poor, and her creation of the Order of the Sisters of St Joseph to spread and maintain her vision and her work is now, of course, a part of the Australian legend.

I hope that hereafter it will form a much larger part.

I say this in the first place because the qualities of charity, sacrifice, courage and perseverance are qualities for a nation to live by and ideals to encourage in future generations of Australians.

We would all hope to see them inform the lives of Australians, including the lives of governments - those whose privilege and responsibility it is to make policy.

Mary MacKillop's sympathies were with those of the underdogs of society, the people on the margins and that is where, traditionally, Australian sympathies have lied.

We should never lose, I think, those sympathies or lose sight of them. We should be guided by them. They are as relevant now as they were a century ago.

That seems to me the great contemporary lesson of Mary MacKillop, to look after those on the margins, to care for them, to bring them in, and to give them hope.

I hope Mary MacKillop becomes a prominent figure in our history and our consciousness also for another reason. And that is because she was a woman.

As I said on the arrival of the Pope in Australia, while women pioneered this country as much as men, the contribution of women has not always been adequately acknowledged.

Women brought their labour and courage and moral strength to the frontier of Australia, which in earlier times needed some moral strength, and they continue to bring it to the modern Australian community.

They have been defining forces in our economic and social development and in our national character.

That is why I say that, in honouring Mary MacKillop, his Holiness has honoured all Australian women and I believe he has honoured us all.

Indeed, in moving this motion today, I want to stress the broad appeal and significance of Mary MacKillop.

In a sectarian age, she was avowedly non-sectarian.

She drew support from Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Protestants and Jews were her friends and supporters.

Years before the federation of the nation, her view was national. She thought as an Australian in Australian terms. Born into a Gaelic-speaking Scottish family, she spoke as an Australian. She began in a letter to the Vatican, and one has to remember it a century ago, with the words: "It is an Australian who speaks."

For a century ago, though most people would refer to themselves as Australians, the notion of writing as an Australian would, I think, have been somewhat unusual. She said as an "Australian who speaks."

I trust honourable members will see what I mean when I say that the beatification of Mother Mary MacKillop rings with significance for all Australians.

The qualities she embodied - openness and tolerance, courage, persistence, faith, care for others - are qualities for individuals, communities and nations to live by.

The Josephites continue to practice these virtues in their work for the poor in Australia, New Zealand and, increasingly, in the countries of the Third World.

I think all honourable members will agree that we will serve Australia well, and future generations of Australians well, if we allow the values which inspired and guided Mary MacKillop's work to inspire and guide our own.

There is nothing to be gained from pretending that religious faith and the place of the church in our communities has not declined since Mary MacKillop's day.

Yet the message of her life easily translates to our much more sceptical and secular society.

And it would bring a blessing on Australia and on future generations if, as a result of the beatification of Mary MacKillop, that message spread.

Societies, I think, always need faith, they certainly need hope and charity and they are the things which Mary MacKillop had in abundance. Our children will always need a spiritual dimension to their lives. A point His Holiness made very poignantly during his visit to Australia and one I'm sure everyone in this House endorses.

I happen to think that in the traditions of this country and the quality of our people and institutions there is fertile grounds for these ideals to flourish. I think people are looking for guidance and a spiritual dimension to their lives and the lessons which we take from that great strength that Mary Mackillop had is something, I'm sure, the country can emulate into the future.

I commend the motion to the House.

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