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PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP THE UNITED NATIONS SOCIAL SUMMIT COPENHAGEN 12 MARCH 1995

In a world which is changing at extraordinary speed, the central fact of our age is interdependence - from the globalisation of the world economy to the information revolution, our prosperity and security are now linked inextricably.

We Australians know that our future depends on equitable and sustainable development in the rest of the world.

And we know that such development depends in part on flows of development assistance from the rich to the poor countries, partly on opening up the world's markets to trade and investment, and partly on the efforts of each individual country to support its own social and economic development,

No nation's experience is likely to be directly transferable to another's needs, but I think Australia's experience has some relevance to our concerns at this conference. I certainly do not pretend that Australia has solved its problems, but we have made progress in developing a social democratic society where equity and egalitarianism are integral elements of economic and social policy-making.

We believe that our experience of the last decade furnishes unmistakable proof that the pursuit of equity within and between nations is not an option but a necessity; that greater equity and productivity are not opposed but complementary; and that the best means of delivering both is to empower people and communities with the means to solve their own problems. Sometimes the social task is more to steer than to row.

The first principle of Australian government policy is inclusion. We believe that our country's success is best measured - and best achieved - by policies which enable all to share in the bounty of the nation.

And we believe that the starting point is economic growth - which is the means to creating a bounty big enough to share. Economic growth not only enlarges the bounty, it creates employment - which is by far the most effective means of distributing wealth and opportunity.

Employment is the principal means by which developed and developing countries can share the bounty and alleviate poverty.

Employment requires economic growth - and education. In the modern world, in both developed and developing countries, education is more than ever the great liberating force. Equal access to education is therefore an essential foundation of opportunity.

These have been the primary goals of the Australian government for a decade: an inclusive philosophy made concrete by economic growth and strength, employment growth, and greater access and equity in education.

Just as we know that social development and social justice are crucial to national progress and well-being, we also know there is a two-way relationship between economic efficiency and social justice. In the words of Arthur Okun: "[social justice and markets] ... need each other, to put some rationality into equality and some humanity into efficiency."

In other words, we need cool heads and warm hearts.

The international trend towards the globalisation of economic activity is both dazzling and demanding. Through both competition and cooperation between nations it will promote efficiency and create wealth.

Yet we will fail every test of our maturity if, as we make economic progress, because of their gender, race, cultural background or any other reason beyond their influence, large numbers of people are left behind.

Governments used to think it possible to pretend that economic growth alone would eventually sort out our social problems. But it was never a genuine option. For example, we know that economic growth alone will not get jobs for the long-term unemployed - new jobs tend to go to new entrants to the labour force and the longer people are unemployed the less "employable" they become.

There is more than a human dimension to this, and more than a social dimension: it is an economic folly. Unemployment is a waste of talent and energy. What is more, the greater productivity and more flexible labour market which flows from getting people back into work leads to lower inflation and increases the speed at which the economy can safely grow.

We cannot disown responsibility for the unemployed; but any honest assessment will tell us just as emphatically that the days when setting up another government bureaucracy could be offered as the answer to every social need have also passed. We are all familiar with inefficient government services and their lack of responsiveness to individual needs.

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Last year, in a comprehensive Government White Paper on Employment, we introduced a Job Compact - a scheme by which the longer term unemployed are offered appropriate training or assisted to find employment through short term wage subsidies. Two basic notions underly the Compact: the obligation of society to help the most disadvantaged, and the obligation of the disadvantaged to take up this assistance or lose their entitlement to income support.

Our aim is not punish or coerce - but to encourage and empower.

It is a valuable lesson of the past decade that governments alone are not responsible for delivering desirable social outcomes. We work in partnership with many people: community groups, business, unions and individuals. This approach engages more people in finding solutions to social problems, it delivers services which are tailored to individual needs, and it is an antidote to the unproductive relationship between bureaucracy and "victim".

Many Aboriginal Australians live in communities whose unconscionable standards of health have long defied the efforts of governments to improve them. It is a situation we must change. We have begun by giving indigenous Australians that which will most empower them - legal recognition of their prior title to the land, and a Land Fund as the means by which they may get land back.

Following the same principle, that we must give people the means and incentives which will help them solve their own problems, we are determined that the next step - the delivery of adequate health and education - will this time be effective.

Just as transfer payments are necessary within nations, they are necessary between them. As far as possible, Australia provides aid according to the same principles which inform the provision of our social services: I mean we design them for effect, especially the effect of breaking the cycle of poverty, unemployment and marginalisation.

To give just one example, our \$130 million population policy will expand the range of choices available to women by giving families the ability to decide the number and spacing of their children.

Improving the education, health, living and working conditions of women is not only a humanitarian ambition, it is essential for economic and social progress. We know the benefits of development will not flow to women automatically, so our assistance programs address their needs directly.

One area where Australia's efforts are particularly concentrated is the South Pacific.

The 22 island countries of the South Pacific comprise only 0.1 per cent of the world's population. They are among the world's smallest and most vulnerable societies - vulnerable to limited resources and fragile eco-systems, to population pressures and global warming.

But these countries have proud cultures and robust social systems.

They are working together in the South Pacific Forum to strengthen their capacity to manage their limited resources effectively and sustainably.

Some of them are represented here in Copenhagen where they will tell their stories for themselves.

But they cannot succeed alone and in this meeting I want to add Australia's voice to theirs. As Chair of the South Pacific Forum this year, I want to ensure that their interests and the interests of the world's other small island states are not forgotten.

Let me conclude on the theme with which I began. Social progress depends on economic growth. It depends in part on access to markets. Nowhere in the world has this been more obviously the case than with our neighbours in the Asia Pacific. That is one good reason why we have worked so hard to secure a good outcome in the Uruguay Round of the GATT, and why we have been promoting APEC.

The GATT outcome is by far the most tangible and effective step to be taken in recent times toward international equality of opportunity. APEC represents a step of comparable dimensions for our region: by moving towards a community of the most developed and developing countries it is turning the so called North-South dialogue into a functional reality.

If there is one general comment we would make at this Summit, it is that governments must strive for economic growth. Not to do so is to deny their own citizens jobs and security - and to deny the citizens of other, poorer countries the opportunities they deserve. Most certainly it is to deny the ambitions of this Summit.

This will be called an historic meeting because of the number of heads of state and heads of government who have met to endorse the declaration: but history won't judge it an important meeting if, afterwards, governments squander their resources and do not treat their people well.

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