



PRIME MINISTER

****EMBARGOED UNTIL 8:30PM****

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

**WALTZING MATILDA CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS
WINTON 6 APRIL 1995**

This is a great honour. It is one to tell our grandchildren about: we were in the North Gregory Hotel when Australia celebrated the first performance of *Waltzing Matilda* 100 years ago.

And we were all in evening dress. Which is something the swagman would have found amusing - but maybe the squatter, the troopers and Banjo Paterson would have appreciated it.

I'm sure they all would have liked the irony in it.

It is a great pleasure to be here and to see for the second time in two days the spirit of rural Australia.

I was in Bourke yesterday - another place in the romance of the swag. And another place suffering the drought.

Yesterday in Bourke the town was gathered for an extraordinary event - an international marathon race from Bourke to Parramatta to raise money for the Fred Hollows Foundation.

Fred Hollows is buried in Bourke and they celebrate his memory as a man who loved the bush and the values of the people who live there.

His work was, in many ways, an extension of the old idea of mateship, and through it he lifted all our spirits and raised our goals.

Here in Winton, in an altogether different way, these celebrations are reminding us of the same things.

They are reminding us of the spirit of the bush and commemorating a song which has lifted our spirits for 100 years.

There are no limits to the power of a good song.

I read on the way up here that 10,000 people would be in Winton this weekend: so this has to be a very considerable boost to Winton as it struggles through the drought.

You see, music has more than charms - it has profound economic effects.

In times like this it is not as good as rain, but it may well be the next best thing.

Waltzing Matilda was born in a drought era of course, and it is not hard to imagine that this might have had some effect on the melancholy theme of the song. And there is equally no doubt that in all the varieties of hard times *Waltzing Matilda* has galvanised the spirit of countless Australians.

If culture is that which defines a people, if it is the expression of their collective sentiment, *Waltzing Matilda* sits at the centre of our culture - it's a well-spring of the national sentiment, a pool, a billabong.

I suspect there is no one here who has not at some time, somewhere in the world, heard or remembered the tune and felt deeply affected by it.

I'm sure it has brought Australians home before they intended to, and given others the strength to stay away a bit longer. For a century it has caused Australian hearts to beat faster.

I venture to say it has caused more smiles and tears, and more hairs to stand up on the backs of Australian necks than any other thing of three minutes duration in Australia's history.

It has long been our unofficial national song. Not our anthem - as I've said before, one can't sing too solemnly about a jumbuck. But *Waltzing Matilda* is Australia's song and it always will be.

Think what it has withstood down the years. Wave after wave of American and British popular music. The cultural cringe and all that post-colonial posturing. The urbanisation of Australia which might have been expected to dilute the old bush sentiments. Mass immigration and multicultural Australia which changed the face and the fabric of our society.

Waltzing Matilda has endured them all. It has endured through wars and depressions, good years and bad. It has endured some terrible renditions - by both local and overseas performers.

I don't think we should make it official and issue some kind of decree; but I think we all know that *Waltzing Matilda* is at least as beloved as the anthem. It is to we Australians what *Land of Hope and Glory* is to the British, or *America the Beautiful* and *God Bless America* are to the people of the United States.

And, entirely without prejudice to the status of *Advance Australia Fair*, we might sing *Waltzing Matilda* at a lot more public occasions than we presently do.

I hope these celebrations serve as a bit of a trigger for this.

I have no doubt that all through these celebrations people will be talking about why *Waltzing Matilda* endures. Why it means so much to us.

I know some will also be asking who the swagman was and what, therefore, the song was meant to signify. I won't be buying into the historical debate, but I suppose every Australian is entitled to say - even obliged to say - what the song means to him or her.

I don't think I was the only Australian kid who wondered when he learned the words at school - what sort of swagman is this? Jolly one minute, drowning himself the next?

These questions about the psychology of the swagman have never had the weight of the social and political interpretations - the ideological interpretations.

Paterson's words describe a class struggle, and if ever there was a class struggle in Australia it was in the 1890s.

It's not hard to see the song as an affirmation of the idea of the fair go, which still strikes a powerful chord in Australians. And may it always do so.

It is also about freedom. The swagman is a free spirit.

We can interpret *Waltzing Matilda* as a celebration of our rebellious nature, as part of the tradition which began with the convict rebellion at Castle Hill and runs all the way through Frank the Poet, the Eureka Stockade and Ned Kelly. We can think of the swagman's jump into the billabong as an Australian statement of liberty or death.

But, the truth is, none of these things come into my mind when I hear it sung.

They didn't come into my mind when the entire crowd gathered in Croke Park in Dublin sang it before the Gaelic football final when I was there two years ago.

I don't know what came into my mind then - I think the experience emptied it of all rational thought. But afterwards I was aware of the extraordinary power of this song on an Australian's senses.

All sorts of music can move us, but to hear *Waltzing Matilda* sung so fervently and beautifully by the people of another country 12,000 miles from home is to know that nothing can move us like our own song.

It is to know that a national song is not something to be interpreted intellectually. When you hear it, you don't think about a political position, or social and psychological issues. You don't think about the historical context.

What *Waltzing Matilda* tells us in an entirely uncomplicated way is that we are Australian. And it tells us in a way that I think is equally Australian in character - it tells us without beating drums or waving flags, or pounding our chests. It tells us with a simple melody and a story, and a whimsical and ironic story at that.

There is no national song I know of quite like it in the world.

I'm sure what happened with Banjo Paterson and *Waltzing Matilda* happened in the realm of the spirit.

I think he wrote a story to a tune which quite mysteriously - in ways we'll never know - picked up the spirit of the place as it was then; and, like the ghost of the swagman, it never died.

And it touches us as a ghost might. As the spirit of the bush might.

When we were kids the other line I think we used to wonder about was the one which says that "his ghost may be heard as you pass by the billabong". I confess to wondering what you would hear. What sort of noise would the old swagman make - what does it sound like when you stuff a jumbuck in a tucker bag?

It took me ages to realise that this was Banjo Paterson's whole trick - the song is the ghost of the swagman, and a hundred years later we are hearing it as loud as ever.