



PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
VE DAY - AUSTRALIA REMEMBERS COMMEMORATIVE CEREMONY,
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL, CANBERRA, 8 MAY 1995**

It was my privilege to launch the Australia Remembers celebrations last year and I took the opportunity to say that I hoped all Australians would be touched in some way by the commemoration. The program today has certainly touched all of us, and no doubt similar events being staged across the country this year are having similar effects on millions of Australians - including, I hope, millions of Australian children.

Here, and wherever we commemorate the service and sacrifice of Australians in war, we at once pay tribute to generations past and remind ourselves that our duty is as they saw theirs - to the next generation, to the future of Australia.

Major General James and my colleague, Mr Sciacca, paid eloquent tribute to the contribution Australia's servicemen and women made in the European theatre during World War II. More than nine and a half thousand Australians died there: young Australians, men and women with the best part of their lives still ahead of them.

They went to Europe as their parents' generation had gone before them and, perhaps, under fewer illusions about the realities of war.

We know why they went. We know because Australians decided long ago that they would not forget those who made the supreme sacrifice, and that they would pass on to future generations of Australians the message that sacrifice contains.

We know because our parents and our teachers told us, because we attended ceremonies every 25 April.

We learned that these men and women had a notion of duty - they believed that so long as they wanted freedom and democracy, and loved Australia and believed in its future, they were obliged to defend them and even lay down their lives.

It is an example we must keep alive for our children.

Our young men and women should know that Australians like themselves believed so deeply in their country they were prepared to die for it. That Australians like themselves crossed the world and joined forces with men and women from many other countries to defend freedom against tyranny.

They should also know what we mean when we talk about courage and perseverance and the immeasurable value of sticking together in hardship - and they will know it when they learn about these Australians.

It is important that they know these events occurred, that they engulfed the whole world. They should know and we should remember today that vast numbers of Allied servicemen perished in the war; that millions from what was then the Soviet Union, millions of innocent civilians, millions in the concentration camps, perished. They should know about and we must remember the Holocaust.

They should know that, as people thronged in city squares to rejoice in the victory, the horrors of Auschwitz were just being revealed. That as liberation was being celebrated in one half of Europe, totalitarian rule was being imposed in the other. And that on the battlefields and in the prison camps of Asia there were three more months to be endured.

In knowing these things we hope that they will never forget that freedom and democracy are hard-won and must be defended. That peace is the greatest gift any generation can receive, and should never be taken for granted. They should know that these things are to be cherished.

Yet it is no less important to see the message in the jubilation of fifty years ago. What we see in those images is humanity triumphant. We see men and women celebrating the victory of good over evil in the battle they have fought. It is their victory.

Perhaps nothing makes the reasons for fighting the war so clear as their happiness.

For many thousands of Australians VE Day meant beginning their lives again. It meant being reunited with their families. It meant going back to their farms and factories and offices and restarting their lives.

Someone once said of the Americans of that time that they were an heroic generation - they refused to be broken by the Great Depression, they fought the war and then they built a great country. Without a doubt, the same can be said about that generation of Australians. They went about re-building their lives with confidence and purpose and their efforts gave rise to a period of sustained national development.

Among the builders were many thousands who had endured the war in their own countries and left their shattered lives and devastated homes to start new lives in Australia.

I do not think we should let this day pass without reminding ourselves of how much they have given Australia; how much we have gained by being open to the world, generous towards those who have come here to escape oppression and hardship, and tolerant of cultural differences.

In building new lives here they enriched us all. That is one of the great lessons of the fifty years which have passed since the war ended, and one that we should not forget.

Today we pay tribute to a generation whose faith was profound: not just among those who served in the armed forces, but those who kept up the fight at home - and all those who carried the vigour with which they defended Australia in war into building Australia in peace. Through this ceremony and through all the commemorative events this year we hope to sustain their faith in our own lives.

And I believe it does sustain us. This generation of Australians have engineered great changes in their country and its relationship with the region and the rest of the world.

They have coped with change imposed upon them - global change of unprecedented dimensions at unprecedented speed. They have adapted perhaps as no previous generation of Australians has had to. And they are building a country which is stronger, more confident of its place in the world, and more able to play a creative role for peace and democracy than ever before.

To continue to do this is to continue to honour those whose lives we remember today.

It is to say in ways which our children will understand why the war was fought.

If we do that, in future we will be able to say that on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II Australia truly remembered.