



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP RESPONSE TO CIVICS EXPERT GROUP REPORT, 6 JUNE 1995

Thank you for your invitation to address this conference today. Your discussions concern matters of great importance to Australia, and I am as grateful for your interest in them as I am for the invitation.

That we set in train the process which has led to this investment in Civics Education gives me great satisfaction. From the Government's point of view it has been a special project: and it is one which has already produced considerable rewards.

The big returns will come later of course: but to have received a report of such quality from the Civics Expert Group and so promptly, and to have generated such interest, activity and good-will has made this a particularly gratifying initiative.

Sometimes in politics - at least in the politics of reform - you strike a seam immediately. I have no doubt that we have struck one with Civics Education. The response is proof of an urgent need - better still, the report and your presence here, proves that we have the capacity to deal with it.

One hundred years ago, the Australian people were engaged in a debate of great moment. Whether the peoples of six separate colonies could find within themselves the courage and confidence to come together as one nation - one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth.

These Australians were also engaged with the worst drought in Australia's history, the worst depression, the most traumatic strikes and lockouts - and the usual business of living. They nevertheless found that it was possible to cope with these oppressive circumstances and still carry out their democratic responsibilities.

Their general education levels were much lower than those of today's Australians: their means of personal advancement were much more limited. The imperatives of daily life were at least as demanding. Yet they made a decision about the future of Australia. They made a responsible political

decision, an informed decision - what we would call these days, a *visionary* decision.

While their political leaders attended conventions to thrash out their differences and frame a federated Australia, around the continent ordinary Australians talked about it in their homes and work places, in the pub and at the races.

And when the referendum was put to them, they voted for the "one indissoluble Commonwealth" of Australia.

From where we now stand one hundred years later that appears to have been a most enlightened decision. What is more, on the basis of evidence which the Civics Expert Group has discovered, we are justified in wondering whether, with all their educational advantages and opportunities, our own generation of Australians know as much about the virtues of democracy and the potential of Australia as those of the 1890s. I suspect they don't.

That is not a reflection on Australians, but on our education systems. It may also be a comment on the modern condition. There is no doubt that in Australia, as elsewhere in the developed world, many people, especially young people, are alienated from their political system and from their past.

We have to correct this. Governments alone cannot put meaning and purpose into the lives of the young but they *can* help. They can certainly help create the conditions in which faith might flourish. If you teach history well you can help young people believe that they have a part in the nation's story. If you teach politics well you can help them to feel engaged. You can help them to feel that they have influence. We can help young people - and migrants - discover their attachment to this country and its traditions, and give them hope about its future and theirs. We can help them see that in the fulfilment of their hopes lies the hope of the country.

Before the Civics Expert Group attempted to set down what Australians *should* know about our system of government, they sought to find out what Australians *already* know.

The results of the Group's research are distressing. Of the Australians interviewed:

- Only 19% showed any understanding of the effect of federation on Australia's system of government.
- Only 18% displayed any understanding of the content of the Constitution
- Only 40% could correctly recall the names of both federal houses of parliament.
- Only 24% knew that the Senate represents the States.

- Only 28% perceived judicial independence.
- And only 33% felt reasonably informed about the rights and responsibilities of Australian citizens.

It is clear that the archive of civic knowledge is close to empty.

And it would seem that our education systems are doing very little to re-fill it.

I have been told about a survey in Victoria which reveals that the number of Year Twelve students studying Australian history has fallen from 42 per cent in 1972 to 6 per cent in 1993 - and it is still falling. The same sort of pattern reveals itself in the numbers studying politics.

Now, I probably don't have to tell this audience that we are currently engaged in a much more modest undertaking than that of our predecessors one hundred years ago. We are not creating a nation and writing a constitution for it. We want no more than to persuade Australians that their head of state, and the head of state they bequeath to the Australians of the twenty first century, should be an Australian.

Remarkably enough, there are some in positions of political leadership who find themselves unable to share this ambition or support us in our efforts. This is making a relatively simple step a more complicated one - and I sometimes think we should give thanks that these people were not our leaders in the 1890s.

By contrast we can give thanks to Stuart MacIntyre, Susan Pascoe, Ken Boston and all those people gathered here who want to see Australian democracy advance. Who want to see our young people learn enough about Australia's history, traditions, values and institutions to feel that they have a stake in our future and can play a part in shaping it.

The report of the Civics Expert Group, *Whereas the People*, may yet prove to be the means by which we find the way to engage them.

As I said when I first received it, this Report is a credit to its authors.

It is also an invitation to Australian governments, and a challenge to the Australian people.

In responding to *Whereas the People* I think we should set ourselves a national goal. Not one that will be easily measured, admittedly; but one which, if we come close to achieving it, will pay obvious dividends. I think we should dedicate ourselves to seeing that by the end of the century the Australian people know as much about their country and are no less engaged in its political life than their counterparts a century ago.

A comprehensive civics and citizenship education program is the best start we can have.

We can give young Australians a knowledge of their past and a sense of where they belong in the story. We can tell them about the gift of Australian democracy and how it should be defended. We can imbue them with a faith in the core values of Australia - not a conformist ideology, but an awareness of the principles of freedom and tolerance which are still emerging in our community.

If we can do this we can help to keep ownership of the Australian political system with the Australian people. We can keep the democracy alive and that old value of egalitarianism functioning - and with new meaning, with women and new migrants and Aboriginal Australians included in the ethos that used to keep them out.

Let me tell you the Government regards Civics Education as one of its major initiatives. In a tight budget we have provided \$25 million for a civics and citizenship education program in line with the expert group's recommendation. The program spans all formal education sectors and the broader community.

The centrepiece is \$20.26 million for a program of Civics Education in Schools, to be administered in close cooperation with State and Territory Governments.

The Expert Group said that schools are the key to this undertaking. The Government agrees.

It should be an essential part of each child's education to learn about the privileges and responsibilities of being Australian.

That does not mean an exercise in ideology, but lessons in democracy and history. Civics, properly taught, is no more political than Maths or English or Woodwork. And it is just as fundamental; in a society like ours it is just as important.

The Government does not pretend that it will be easy to create an effective schools civics program. As the Expert Group reminded us, other programs have withered on the vine.

The challenge for the Curriculum Corporation is to develop a program which is practical, comprehensive and engaging. It will have to look to the new media for assistance and we welcome that.

But there will never be a substitute for good teaching, and the \$5.2 million we are spending on the professional development of teachers of Civics is essential. It must all be a cooperative effort. School education is primarily

the responsibility of the States and Territories, and we look forward to working with them.

The Government will also be providing \$2.4 million over four years to produce materials on civics for citizenship applicants and to develop voluntary civics and citizenship education courses for those who want to become Australian citizens.

There is also \$2.3 million for community education initiatives, to be administered by a committee with expertise in Australian culture, heritage and government.

Let me close these brief remarks by thanking all those who have contributed to the Expert Group's report, this conference and what we might now reasonably call a civics *movement*.

I said that I have the feeling we have struck a seam: there is no doubt about the need for civics education, and equally no doubt that both educators and parents want to meet that demand.

The Expert Group consulted widely and consultation will be a feature of the Government's civics program. For more than three months we have taken submissions on the findings of the Expert Group. Almost all of them have been supportive.

My colleague, the Minister for Employment Education and Training, has briefed all State and Territory Education Ministers on the Government's package. And we now propose a series of consultations, of which this forum is the first, to bring other key groups into the planning process.

This is a large investment in our children, our democracy and our future.

And I thank you all for contributing to it.

Most of the reward is in the giving. But posterity will bequeath a small one too. As the Australians of the twenty first century look back on the 1990s they will see that a democratic spirit was alive and well in Australia as it had been a century before.

And it is not unreasonable to think that, like us when we look back on the 1890s, they might draw a bit of inspiration from it and be grateful that we invested in Civics Education.