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PRIME MINISTER

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

**PRESENTATION OF NATIONAL MULTICULTURAL ADVISORY COUNCIL'S
REPORT, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA, 27 JUNE 1995**

I am pleased to be here today to accept this report from the National Multicultural Advisory Council and its Chairman, Mick Young.

It's particularly good to see Mick around these parts - I've always thought he left them much too early. But the talents he brought to politics - his intelligence, humour, his great love of his fellow Australians and his great rapport with them - suited him for this task, and I'm sure he has performed it superbly.

The 1989 National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia set the scene for the Government's response to the changing composition of the Australian population.

If we are now able to say that our cultural diversity is one of our great national successes - and one of our great national assets - we can also say that the 1989 Agenda is a document of considerable stature in our recent history.

Today's report marks another step along the way.

And it is important that we make progress - that we pay more than lip service to our cultural diversity.

I think sometimes we talk about multiculturalism as a mirror of our achievements - when really it should be seen as a mirror of the realities we have to face.

That is why, if multiculturalism is to continue to work for us, it has to continue to evolve and adapt - and, in communities, government and the bureaucracy, those in positions of leadership have to keep their minds open and responsive.

The success of this multicultural society does Australians great credit; and, as Volume 2 of this Reports makes clear, the achievements since the 1989 Agenda was handed down have been very substantial ones.

But the future certainly cannot be taken for granted.

Multicultural programs must continue to evolve to meet disparate and changing needs.

We must keep pace with contemporary issues, seek out the benefits and opportunities as they arise and maintain a watchful eye on prejudice and intolerance.

The architects and administrators of modern multiculturalism must resist the tendency of ideas to ossify and habits of mind to take on the shape and characteristics of ideology.

Every step towards ideology will distort the liberal aims of multiculturalism. Platitudes and jargon will stunt its growth.

It is not just in the number of programs that multiculturalism must grow - it must grow philosophically.

It must look for new directions and be alive to the way Australia is going.

That is the function of this Report - to keep the process moving.

I note, for instance, that the Report is concerned to acknowledge more fully than before the place of indigenous Australians in the arena of multicultural affairs, and that it attempts to deal with areas of common concern and policy overlap. And I think it goes without saying that this Government entirely approves of this development.

An altogether different recent example of the capacity for new thinking has been the development of strategies for "productive diversity". This requires us to see beyond the needs of ethnic communities to the **advantages** contained in their linguistic and cultural understanding.

These days the designers of our investment, trade and industry policies, and an increasing number of business people, are conscious that this unique human resource offers a competitive edge in dealing with the world.

At another level, as we approach the centenary of our nationhood and come to grips with questions of our identity and our place in the world in the 21st century, multicultural policies must define themselves against our national interests and ambitions.

At the Global Diversity Conference in Sydney recently I proposed something resembling a model of multicultural rights and responsibilities. None of these mark in any way a departure from the fundamental multicultural principles laid down in the 1989 Agenda.

The Australian Government continues to assert the right of all Australians to express their individual cultural heritage and their right to equality of treatment and opportunity.

But it also asserts that the first loyalty of all who make Australia their home must be to Australia - and that the tolerance on which multiculturalism is built must be recognised as a universal principle of Australian democracy, and practised universally.

As a practical expression of this ambition, we are keen for migrants to take up citizenship - we think it will build more national cohesion without diminishing at all the liberal, tolerant *multicultural* qualities of Australia.

But in asking migrants to take up their democratic responsibilities we reaffirm our own.

We are very much aware that the best thing we can do for ethnic groups in Australia is create an economy and society in which there is opportunity for people of energy and ambition to succeed, to create, to build good lives for themselves and their families.

At the same time, we have to maintain the kind of social safety net which will give migrants and others the support they need when they are establishing themselves and when things go wrong.

We are doing this through a social security system which is infinitely more sophisticated and efficient than it was a decade ago - even five years ago.

We are doing it through Medicare, employment education and training, housing and community services.

These basic policies are not marked "multicultural" - but on them, more than anything else we do, a successful multicultural society depends.

We can, of course, develop them in accordance with the needs created by our cultural diversity. And that is what we do. It is what access and equity is all about.

It is why we take those steps to eliminate the barriers which arise from different languages, cultures and religions.

It is why we insist on such practical steps as translating materials, targeting non-English speaking communities in information strategies, and the cross cultural training of government staff.

These things really do help, because they really do address practical realities.

They are part of a government's responsibility in a culturally diverse society.

But cultural diversity is a matter for all Australians.

It falls on communities, schools and businesses - on every one of us - to practise tolerance and garner the talents and ambitions of all who live here.

It will help, I think, if we recognise that we have reached a point where it can be said that in these things we have a proud tradition to uphold.

Among other things this Report makes that clear. It is an update, a report on progress and a signpost along the way which began with the immigration program fifty years ago.

Some would say the tradition began long before that.

Whenever it began, the tradition describes the evolution of a uniquely tolerant and culturally diverse democracy in Australia - and the lesson is, we must keep working at it.

That is why I am very glad to receive this report.

The Government will give serious consideration to all the recommendations.

I thank the Chairman, Mick Young, and the members of the National Multicultural Advisory Council for their conscientiousness and the work they have done for Australia.