



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE NEW VICTORIAN COLLEGE OF THE ARTS BUILDINGS, MELBOURNE, 2 NOVEMBER 1995

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We hear a lot about economic development and about growth. But when I come to places like this - we just had a little tour through the Art School and through the Television and Film School - and I often think that when a country gets a chance to reflect upon itself, when one's development is to such a point that there is actually a premium and a value on reflecting upon yourself and thinking about the essence of who you are and what you have become and what you might be, well then I think you are starting to really make it.

That is, it is not all about widgets and making things, or boring holes in the ground, or growing paddocks full of wheat - we can do all those things. The world is out there making widgets these days, some make them better than others, some more innovative than others, some more competitive than others.

But in a lot of the countries we compete with, the one thing they are not doing is they are not doing this and that is, I think, one of the things that marks us out as a society and why we should always have a premium on the arts which are about, of course, the mind and the soul and the heart and the things that are dear to us all. And I have often thought that anyone that has ever had an emotional connection with the arts could never forsake it, could never leave it off, never not support it. And we were just reminded, if ever so briefly by Natalie Christie's rendition of those two Strauss songs, what distilled genius always means - you know the things that are up there with the sublime, that are just under the subliminal barrier, that haven't quite got through it, but are so close to doing it that it doesn't matter.

So I thank you very much for the introduction and the songs. I have often thought that it has always been a great pleasure for people to write songs in German because it is such a great speaking language and I often think what I could have done in the House of Representatives with it. It is one of those things that lends itself to some poetry. Well with English you have got to really work hard at it.

But I am very pleased to be here today because we have got Jeffrey making a nuisance out of himself this morning in the press and in Federal politics you are always swatting blowflies. I mean you are always trying to blow them, shake them, off. But I am glad that Dick is here to remind us what an old fashioned Liberal he is. He has always had his heart in the right place and his head in the right place and I think we have, all of us, always appreciated him and the things which Louise said about his role here.

I think that national governments should think about such things as the arts and culture. Not because it is the thing to do, it is the thing we can't be without and that in undertakings such as this ... it takes a long time to build an institution like the Victorian College of the Arts. It doesn't happen overnight, it happens with a long gestation, it happens with performance, it happens with commitment. It takes a long time for something like this to grow and, therefore, when a national government gets involved with it you know that if you can basically provide some of that financial and moral support to an institution which is already up and running, you can actually do a lot more with it.

So it is more than a pleasure to be involved here, with the Victorian College of the Arts, and to be engaged with others today in opening these new and refurbished buildings housing the school of Film and Television, the School of Art and, of course, the Library and the Student Union.

I mean these things are always about, in the end, assets of the Australian people and I am very pleased that they are in the State of Victoria, which has given so much to this country in terms of its art and its artists. And, of course, so many people - famous Australians and famous artists - have had their association and their connections with the VCA and its predecessor schools, such as Tom Roberts and Fred Williams and Clifton Pugh and Suzanne Johnston and Gillian Armstrong and Geoff Wright and Richard Lowenstein just to name a few. So there is a very deep heritage here and one that I think we should be very solid in supporting.

Now we introduced this Creative Nation statement last year, it was \$250 million expenditure on the arts and \$100 million, I think, of it now has been spent and that is starting to percolate its way through the Australian arts community.

And we are in the course of establishing the National Academy of Music here in Melbourne to provide a training centre of excellence in Australia for young musicians of outstanding talent and I think that is going to be a significant thing.

We have established the Australian Foundation for Culture and Humanities here in Melbourne with a budget of over \$6 million for three years with, as I said, that distinguished Victorian Dick Pratt as its Chair and I know you know that he has already given \$3 million himself to it, which must be the biggest single private donation to the arts in our history, I think.

But it is not the money so much we appreciate. We appreciate that because it is about raising private finance. But what we appreciate most about that gesture is it is not simply a snip from a very large cheque book, but it is rather the importance and the meaning which it has from somebody who knows how important the arts are. I think that is appreciated as much as the money - in fact more.

We are funding the Australian Ballet School and through the Australia Council we are supporting the Australian Ballet which, of course, is headquartered here in Melbourne as well as the Melbourne Theatre Company, Circus Oz and the Victorian State Opera. And I am very proud that the Government has been able to contribute to this development here.

Now, I might just say a couple of things about Jeffrey because I don't want to leave him out. He has got this ad this morning which, even for Jeffrey, is quite a nasty little ad. It says 'why is Mr Keating punishing the Victorian arts community?' And he has got the Victorian College of the Arts, School of Film and Television, recurrent spending \$1.3 million; capital spending \$35 million and equipment maintenance \$35 million. That is the spending for 1994/95, but if you take it over the period of the development which is 1991/92 to 1993/94 we have spent \$16 million here and this more than favourably compares with the \$10 million and not the \$14 million in Sydney's Australian Film, Television and Radio School which, of course, was established during John Gorton's period, way back there.

Jeffrey is playing a very seedy little game here and we don't expect this sort of thing from Victoria and I think he has been comparing notes with Richard Court or reading from the Bjelke Petersen style manual. I notice the other day when I went into Treasury Place that Jeffrey has got his new offices done up like the Reichstag down the back of the building. He has got flags decked off it all over the place. His Casino awash with money, I mean his and Ron and Lloyd's casino, but of course there is no money for the arts. Victoria spends less money on the arts per capita than any other State. He has got no money for the arts, no money for public transport, no money to run an ambulance service, no money for lavatories on railway stations but he keeps increasing the capacity of the Casino to gather up the earnings of Victorians and he keeps selling off everything that moves. Every public asset in place, but he has got no money for the basic amenities of the civilised society. I often think that these casinos are a tax on the poor and a massive blight on Australia and this one is a massive blight on Victoria. To cover his embarrassment about having no money for the arts and no money for this college because he gave it, basically I think some land and that was not much, he decides to spend a very large sum of government money to tell some untruths about the Commonwealth.

The truth about Jeffrey is he is becoming a worried man and he should be. He runs one of the nastiest outfits in the country which is nearly as nasty as Richard Court's. There are a lot of questions being asked about Melbourne and around Australia about this government and I don't think trying to sell the Commonwealth short on the arts is a way around the problem.

I rather like Jeffrey on occasions, but I don't like him today at all. We have spent \$18 or \$19 million here and \$16 million of it has come from the Commonwealth. As I said \$11 million for the new School of Film and Television and \$5 million for the refurbishment of the Art School and as well as those other important cultural identities which have come here, but more importantly than all of this is that we are developing arts institutions of substance and of depth and this will stick to Australia like nothing else.

Whenever we get a chance to put some public money into the arts, you've got now a lot of critics of public commitment to the arts and that is fair enough and we need some more private funding of the arts, but it still is important, I think, for a country to put a premium on what it is doing - a premium on itself, on its identity, on its culture and to make that commitment - and I think that every Premier and Prime Minister who have made commitments to the arts in the past have always understood this and have understood how important it is. It is why Australia can stamp itself out as a unique country which has got good values and good belief and why we are, as a civilised country, it is important for us to focus on these things.

These days all the artistic disciplines of this institution are represented on this four hectare site in the heart of Melbourne's art precinct, even that is important. We are in the new building of the School of Film and Television which in another life was the famous Swinburne Film and Television School. I was interested to see some of the work just in a very brief visit I had before coming down here and to know as we know that in a country like ours the premium is going to be on the ideas we generate - on the products we generate which have got ideas and intellectual content - that we are not going to be in there competing with low labour cost countries on low value added products or products without value adding, but rather on things which have got these important artistic and intellectual components to them. I think what we are seeing is a measure of, you know just walking through the Art School, just seeing what people have done in particular sectors whether it be in landscape, painting or just painting objects or people or situations. It is all a focus on trying to distil the essence of the country, of ourselves as a people. These are the things, I think, which will travel. We are an English speaking country and a large part of the worlds market in entertainment and art is generated from countries such as Australia and it is one of the things that we can do well and that is why the Government invested quite a lot of money in multi media. Moving again as we move from theatre to film, from film now to multi media and seeing that will generate a lot of creativity because I think the more we increase the milieu of creativity, however it spins off in whatever discipline, the greater the critical mass, of course, the better it is for the sort of things we produce and that we are famous for.

I always think of those people who look at our productivity or GDP per capita or whatever measure it might be and we do alright in all these things, but there is never a premium in any of this sort of thing as I said earlier which a lot of countries do not do and really don't understand and haven't put the premium on it.

So, I regard this as being another very solid addition to the capital stock, but rather the creative stock of our institutions and our country and you have just got to get such a good feeling about Australia now. Here we are towards the end of the century, the place is growing strongly, we have licked the scourge of inflation, we are now on the edge of the fastest growing part of the world, we are much more confident about who we are now, about our identity, we are more proud about the country than we have ever been and our children have an education, by and large, across the board which was not true when most of us were at school and the sheer capacity to do new things, the excitement of it is profound. I have never in nearly 30 years of public life struck a more exciting period than this. These are the things that excitement is made of.

I have just come away from quaffing down a red wine over on the Southbank, which is definitely not a Jeffrey creation, it is one of yours and it is just another measure of the way in which this great city is growing - intellectually, culturally and every other way - in the middle of one of the important international festivals of the world. That is so successful this year too.

Wherever you go in Australia you find this all around the country now. This burgeoning of intellectual thought, of enjoyment, of pride in our culture and pushing out the envelope of the things that we might be able to do. This is what this institution is about and it is a very proud day, I think, for all of those who have been involved with it. Those who have supported it over the years, those who have helped it grow, those who have directed it, to know that the product of it the statistician may not be able to measure, but we all know in the end it will be a more important measure than almost any other thing the statistician is able to measure.

Thank you for having me along, to be involved in the declaration, of the opening of these important buildings.

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