



PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
LAUNCH OF *OUR NATION*
SYDNEY, 20 JANUARY 1996**

***** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY *****

Even allowing for this year's relatively awful weather everywhere from here to Bass Strait and beyond, there are things about Australia in the summer holidays which never fail to remind us that to live in this country is to be very fortunate.

The long warm days, the beaches, the barbecues, the family, the friends; the sport, the arts, the space - it's generally enough to help wind down from the year gone by and to wind up for the one ahead, even one which contains an election. You stop reading the papers, give up on the evening news - it is a nag-free environment.

We take the good things pretty much for granted. But sometimes all of a sudden it hits you, that we are profoundly lucky to have a country as good as this - a continent as big and wonderful, and a society as strong, free, democratic, rich and unpretentious.

I think it's a time of the year when, in an entirely understated way of course, we celebrate the country and the pleasure we take in being Australian. There are even times when I think we should all stop and drink a toast to the place, to the fact that we are here, and to our fellow Australians.

And just as quickly go back to whatever we were doing - or not doing.

This may be an unconscious reflection of a Celtic heritage. The Celts love toasts.

But I don't think it's got much to do with the Irish. It takes a lot less time than my family have been in Australia to develop a purely Australian form of sentimentality. We might retain a certain self-conscious pride or interest in our ethnic origins, but after a generation or two it is not much more than a hobby.

Yet in an immigrant society the knowledge of where we came from is knowledge worth having.

Even after several generations of experience has made us incorrigibly Australian, we old Anglo Celtic Australians retain a certain affectionate curiosity about our ancestral seats, and almost certainly reflect a little of the culture from which we are derived - not to say the physical characteristics.

A hundred years ago there were plenty of people in this country who knew exactly what Henry Lawson meant when he said: "I am Australian. I know no other land".

And I have met Australians who migrated as children in the 1940s and 50s, who would say exactly the same thing. Even as they eat dolmades and gefillte fish and tabouli and toad-in-the-hole and tagliatelle.

Even as they practise their traditional religions, observe their traditional rituals and celebrations and display, in all sorts of nearly imperceptible ways, their traditional culture and habits of mind.

In other words, we are all to a greater or lesser extent, immigrants. And we are all equally Australians. That is the reason for celebrating.

There have been many reasons advanced for the success of Australia's immigrant society. I think most of them are valid and none of them are sufficient reason to be complacent about it. All of them put together are no reason to be complacent about it.

There seems to me no doubt that the great physical spaces of Australia also create psychological space and this helps the cause of peace in a diverse society.

And that is also a reason to bear in mind the need to plan our development in clever ways which use the space and its resources optimally.

Immigration always teaches us things about ourselves.

The old democratic fabric and institutions of this country, and the egalitarian traditions, have also helped us accommodate the cultural difference. The idea of the "fair go" has been a real force in shaping Australia, including multicultural Australia.

And that is also a reason to insist that all Australians, and especially our children, know the value of the democracy and the democratic traditions they have inherited.

If there is a third substantial reason for the success of multiculturalism in Australia, it may be that we have been multicultural since the beginning of European settlement. The First Fleet was multicultural and every generation since has lived with significant cultural, religious and political difference - not the least of them of course the difference between the Irish and the English.

And that is another reason not to be complacent - our generations are not the first to live successfully with diversity, we inherited a lot of our knowledge.

If these are three broad reasons for the success of modern multicultural Australia - the fact of our environment, the fact of our democracy, and the fact of our experience in cultural diversity - they tend to suggest that to keep succeeding we need to keep working and take nothing for granted.

Above all, we should remember what all free immigrants to Australia had in common - and that was the search for a better life. Nothing so effectively made the cultural differences seem unimportant as the common pursuit of prosperity and freedom.

It follows that if we want this diverse modern Australia to remain harmonious, productive and cohesive we have to maintain both the standards of our democracy and the energy of our economy and our society. Whatever sophisticated multicultural programs we devise, these are the most important prerequisites of success.

I think the essential thing to understand about a society like ours - an immigrant society - is that immigration is a two-way street. It involves a cultural exchange.

When I was growing up, I worked for a while in Pyrmont and I would often go down and watch the ships from P&O and the Orient Line come in and dock, loaded with immigrants; families crowded to the rails looking at the city with who knows what sort of feelings.

And who knows what sorts of feelings were felt by those of us who watched.

But I am sure that not all the fear and apprehension were on the other side of the ship's rail. I am sure there was some kind of exchange of feelings. I think whatever hope they felt was matched by our admiration for their courage in crossing the world - and, perhaps even more admirable, to have come among us.

In retrospect you can see how it was a leap of faith on both sides. That's the great strength of Australia's post-war immigration policy. It took courage on both sides and I believe the experience has given Australia that much more courage.

It gave us many things and I don't think this audience needs me to tell them what they are. ~~But I do think that this is a point worth making:~~ when you open yourself up to the world, when you are brave enough to look cultural difference in the eye, you learn a great deal. And half of what you learn is about yourself. And you are made stronger by that and more mature.

That is what I mean by immigration being essentially an exchange. For everything we have given to the people from 160 countries who have come here, we have been repaid. For a new start in life, they repaid Australia in their energy, ideas and ambitions, in their skills and in their culture. But, just as importantly, in the greater maturity, self-knowledge and the courage they have given us.

In the global environment we now find ourselves in, and amid the intense competition, these qualities have a value for us which is beyond measure.

We can define multiculturalism in any number of ways. Some people like the concept but hate the word so much they would like to define it out of existence. Yet, as I have said before, so long as it is not mistaken for an ideology or a bureaucracy or a set of rules in political correctness, the word is a perfectly accurate description of what we are, what we must be and what we want to be.

I think we should live with the word and enjoy the reality. Above all, we should recognise that this multiculturalism massively enlarges our democracy and our democratic traditions. It adds to our freedom as well as to the richness of our lives.

That is why we should enshrine the principle of tolerance among our most basic democratic principles.

And that is why the suggestion made in the statement we are launching today, that we begin to think of our country in terms of a Multicultural Compact seems to me such a good one. Essentially it gives expression to the idea of immigration as an exchange.

The Multicultural Compact states that we share this land with the first Australians, whose cultures are oldest of all; and that, as a result of immigration, we also share a wealth of diverse histories and traditions.

The Compact asks of all Australians, irrespective of background and generation, that they invest their main allegiance in Australia; that they accept the basic structures of Australian society - the rule of law, tolerance, equality of opportunity, parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language and equality of the sexes and races; and that they extend to others the same freedoms they claim for themselves.

And the Australian community is asked in exchange: to ensure equality of access, opportunity and participation, unimpeded by barriers of race, language or country of birth; to ensure that our institutions reflect and respond to the diversity of the population; to ensure that the potential contribution of all Australians is recognised; and to provide opportunities for all Australians to learn both English and another language.

I will be writing to Premiers and Chief Ministers seeking endorsement by all Australian governments of the principles contained within the Multicultural Compact.

A healthy multicultural society has no need for rules and sanctions. But there is value in describing the logic by which the country works, and in defining the minimum standards required in a civil society.

And this is the time to begin that process of definition.

Because in the last decade of the twentieth century, for the first time in our history, we have a real chance to decide our own destiny - to pull together all the strands of Australian identity.

We have dismantled all the barriers which quarantined us from the rest of the world and we are becoming ever more deeply engaged in our own region.

These are exciting times and we need Australians to engage in them. I believe this statement will help that process. We have derived immeasurable benefits from immigration and from the multicultural programs of the last two decades. These days we tend to think in terms of the economic and cultural benefits, and there is no question that they are immense.

However, I am inclined to think that the greatest benefits are literally without measure; and that they go not only to governments, nations and communities - but to every one of us. They make all Australians, whatever their backgrounds, a little bit richer and a little bit stronger.

In part, Our Nation is a response to the report of the National Multicultural Advisory Council, and I would like to thank the Council for its work in reviewing the architecture of multicultural Australia.

I want especially to thank Mick Young for his great work as Chair of the Council.

Mick comes from the same ethnic group as myself.

But - and I'm sure you will excuse my using the word in this context - we are both thoroughly assimilated.

In his own way Mick Young is proof of the greatness of this democracy: in not every country is it possible for a shearer to reach the highest rungs of office; but then not every country produces shearers like Mick.

Mick is stepping down for health reasons; and I hope he will forgive me for reminding him that everyone in this room wishes him well.

I must also welcome the new Chair of the National Multicultural Advisory Council, Mr Neville Roach, who is with us today.

I am now delighted to launch Our Nation.

ends