



PRIME MINISTER

*****EMBARGOED UNTIL 6.45PM, 25 JANUARY 1996*****

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

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
PRESENTATION OF THE AUSTRALIA DAY AWARDS
OLD PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA, 25 JANUARY 1996**

Thank you for coming to this 1996 presentation of the Australia Day Awards and thank you to the Australia Day Council for staging them. And thank you for inviting me along to present the Awards.

Australia Day provides us with a chance to reflect on the country we live in: on the year past and the one which lies ahead.

Because it falls just a few weeks after New Year it is, in a sense, a second chance. A chance, maybe, to make a few adjustments if not grand new resolutions.

It is a day when all around the country Australians offer up their assessments of where the nation stands and what direction it should go.

But on the whole, there is relatively little pomp and ceremony, and a great deal of general enjoyment.

There have been various efforts down the years to give it more formal shape and meaning, but it has evolved as essentially an expression of our freedom, and a quite unselfconscious celebration of our way of life.

At all sorts of sporting fixtures; in lounge rooms, gardens and backyards; in the bush, on beaches; in pubs and clubs and cafes; in city streets and country towns - in a thousand different ways, we commune with each other and the continent.

And no amount of official direction or attempts to invest the day with more formalities can resist the popular sentiment - and nor should they.

Perhaps across the country we **should** all stop at a prearranged moment, pause for a second or two, and give thanks to our fellow Australians - of all generations. Because we **do** all depend upon each other.

And, if we are to make the best of the great gifts and opportunities we have, we always will depend on each other.

Few years in our recent history have demonstrated this as clearly as the last one.

In many profound ways, 1995 was a great year for Australia. In economic terms, no country in the developed world did better. We made great strides among the countries of the region where our future largely lies. On this Australia Day there can be no argument that Australia has advanced - our economy is a little stronger, our future a little more assured, our horizons a little wider. As a nation and as a society, we have made real progress.

And there can hardly be a better reason to celebrate than that.

Yet, I think the events of last year from which we have most to learn - and most to celebrate - occurred in a different sphere of our national life.

It was not in economics or any other area of national policy, or arts, or science, or sport, or any of the other things in which Australians continue to excel.

It was in the area of what might be called the spirit - the national spirit.

Last year we celebrated a whole generation of Australians - the Australians who loved this country and their freedom and cared enough about Australia's future to give everything, even their lives, in its defence.

In celebrating them, we learned a lot about ourselves. Our children learned a lot about their parents and grandparents, and thus a lot more about what Australian means. They learned, and we were reminded, that we are all part of the same story.

We all learned a bit more about Australia. And - most gratifying of all - we learned that the spirit which inspired that generation is alive in our own.

The enthusiasm with which *Australia Remembers* was taken up all over Australia was a reassuring statement that all the great changes of the past fifty years have not dampened our affections.

And, of course, in remembering the war we were also reminded that nothing about our freedom and the way of life we enjoy can be taken for ever granted. It was hard won and it will always have to be defended.

Similar lessons were there to be learned from the nation's response, to the worst drought in living memory.

In rural Australia we saw scenes of environmental devastation and human hardship which most people in the cities - certainly most young people - never imagined possible in their own country.

And, again, the response was overwhelming and immensely reassuring to anyone who might have doubted that the old spirit lives on. From one end of the country to the other, Australians pitched in to help farming families and farming communities to survive.

It became a great national cause. And, as a result, when the rains finally came to most of the farms, most of the farmers **had** survived.

In the process a lot of Australians learned something about the resilience of rural Australians. They learned how much they had in common with them.

Perhaps most importantly, we were all reminded - again - that our good fortune can never be taken for granted.

That's why I think 1995 was such a very good year for Australia. It was proof of the spirit of the place: if you like, proof that the values of Arthur Boyd's generation, including his love of the landscape, still inspire us in this post modern, globalising, information age.

It couldn't be more timely.

If the lesson was that there are times when only our own collective effort will see us through, then the lesson is a good one for now - because this is one of those times.

I believe we have begun a whole new chapter in our history.

It used to remind me of that earlier one, before the long overdue arrival of the Second Fleet - when, cut off from Europe, unable to adapt to the environment and feed themselves, at odds with the Aboriginal people and unwilling to learn from them, horribly conscious that they were alone and adrift, the survivors of the First Fleet waited helplessly at Port Jackson for supplies.

And while we are not in any way abandoned and starving, we are in every essential respect dependent on our own efforts and ingenuity.

And, if we needed any reassurance, last year should have provided it - we have learned the lessons of experience and we know what it takes.

The challenge is to enter the next century economically strong and dynamic, at home with both the rapidly changing realities of technology and the modern world, and thoroughly engaged with that part of it in which we live.

And because, obviously, it will make us more able to succeed in this, the challenge is also to enter the next century strong as a **community**; confident that the cultural and social differences between us, like the physical distances, are no impediment to our common purpose.

At the same time, and for much the same reasons, we need to come to just terms, once and for all, with the original inhabitants of this continent, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

And also come to terms with the natural environment on which our future prosperity and our way of life significantly depends.

In both cases, we need to repair the damage of 200 years. We need to find a way to live in harmony with the continent and the people who have lived on it for more than 40,000 years.

These are challenging and exciting times. No previous generation of Australians ever had such an opportunity. No other country in the world has such an opportunity now.

So long as ~~we~~ we retain faith in ourselves, practise tolerance and reward initiative, we should be in no doubt about succeeding.

That is why Australia Day is so important - it is an expression of the essential things about our national life.

And it is why Australians of the Year are such important people - by their achievements they give us a clue to what we all can be.

And it is now my great pleasure to announce that the Australian of the Year for 1996 is - Dr John Yu.