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PRIME MINISTER

29 January 1997

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP UNVEILING OF BRONZE BUST - BALLARAT

E&OE.....

Councillor James Coghlan and Mrs Coghlan, to my colleague the Federal Member for Ballarat, Michael Ronaldson, to my State Parliamentary colleagues, to the artist amongst us, well there are probably many artists amongst but given the nature of the occasion, the particular artist amongst us Peter Nicholson, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Firstly, can I say what a great delight it is to be in the beautiful gardens of Ballarat. Australia is blessed by the fact that in many parts of our country, particularly in the provincial and rural areas of Australia we have very fine gardens. I don't think you could find a finer example anywhere in Australia than those of the Botanical Gardens of Ballarat. And, of course, the city of Ballarat has a very deep association with the history of Australia and as a community, as we approach the 100 years of the centenary, the Centenary of Federation, it's only a few years off now and we will celebrate 100 years of the Federation of Australia from the first of January 1901.

It is natural, inevitable and I think highly desirable that Australians increasingly reflect upon what has been achieved during that 100 year period and increasingly reflect upon the history of Australia. And when you reflect upon the history of Australia, not only over the last 100 years, but also in the years that went before that you can't, of course, omit a reflection on many of the historical associations between the Ballarat area and the development of Australian nationalism, the development of distinctively Australian attitudes back in the 19th Century which, in fact, pre-dated the Federation of Australia on the first of January 1901.

And, of course, this avenue of Prime Ministerial busts is itself a contribution to the history of the country. As I wandered down observing the various likenesses of my 24 predecessors I reflected briefly on the changed circumstances in which each of them came to the office of Prime Minister. I thought of the circumstances of Australia in 1901 when Sir Edmund Barton was sworn in as the first Prime Minister of Australia. I thought of the trauma of World War I which was grappled with by a number of Prime Ministers and not least, of course, Billy Hughes who became famous with the

description of 'The Little Digger' and of James Henry Scullin who had to grapple with the depths of the depression in the early 1930s and of the various terms in office of Sir Robert Menzies, Prime Minister at the outbreak of World War II, ceasing not long thereafter to be Prime Minister only to return in 1949 to govern for a record period until 1966.

I think of the great leadership shown by John Curtin, the Prime Minister of Australia during World War II and the toll that it took on his life and his being and led to his early death in 1945. Many of the other Prime Ministers of this country on both sides of the political fence, we all have our views, you have your views about me, you all have your views about my predecessors. This is not an occasion for partisanship rather it is an occasion to acknowledge the rich history of Australia, to acknowledge that the things that bind us together as Australians are far more important and more enduring and more significant than the things that push us apart.

I'm delighted that Peter Nicholson is here today. I've observed his work over the years, it's hard not to. It's compulsive viewing and I agree that he's bipartisan, he certainly gives me a flick from time to time and he's given the other blokes a flick too from time to time. I mean, from rubber to bronze is a remarkable, it's a mark of his artistry and of his craftsmanship. I understand there's a bit of a tradition here that occasionally the Prime Ministers get dumped, you know, and one of my party room commentators said that it was the only circumstance in which I would become a "wet". But, ladies and gentlemen, I think one of the things that marks Australians out from any other group of people in the world - I made this remark at an Australia Day speech I gave a few days ago - is that we have a very healthy irreverence and a very healthy scepticism as a community.

We are not a gullible people. We are, on occasions, blessed with a great amount of scepticism and I think healthy scepticism in any community is a very good thing provided it doesn't lurch into cynicism. We shouldn't be so sceptical that we become cynical, equally we shouldn't be so gullible that we're not a wake up to somebody who's trying to have us on. And that really is one of the great strengths that we have. It is one of the things that marks us out from other people with whom we may have similarities and the political cartoonists of Australia are in that long tradition of political scepticism and it's part of our system. It's annoying sometimes but, can I say, that scepticism is one of the things that has kept us a free people. It's one of the reasons why Australia is listed amongst only eight countries, only eight nations, that has been continuously democratic for the whole of the twentieth century and that is a remarkable thing.

And these days where sometimes I think people are too ready to see fault in Australia and too ready to apologise for Australia, I think that particular achievement is one of the reasons why instead of apologising we should as a community be immensely proud of what we have achieved as a nation and particularly what we have achieved since the Federation of the then colonies of Australia in 1901.

So there are many things that are interesting and enriching in the life of a Prime Minister. The most important is the regular contact with the people of Australia, the reminders of the marvellous diversity of our country, the reminder of the spirit of people wherever they may live in Australia and it is always to me a great pleasure to

visit different parts of the country to meet the citizens of different communities and today is no exception.

So can I thank you Mr Mayor, can I thank you Councillor Coghlan, to you Michael my colleague, the Federal Member for Ballarat who gives such terrific representation to this electorate in the national parliament, can I thank you very much for inviting me here and without any further ado I shall perform the deed. There is one thing I forgot to mention - Councillor Coghlan said this was the second unveiling that he's presided over, can I assure you Sir it will be the last!

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