



10

PRIME MINISTER

21 February 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS TO THE CHINESE AUSTRALIAN FORUM
CHINESE NEW YEAR DINNER**

E&OE.....

Dr Ang, to my many Federal and State parliamentary colleagues, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Can I first of all thank you Doctor for the words of welcome and can I thank all of you for the warm welcome tonight. I decided a couple of months ago that I would like an occasion associated with the Chinese New Year to address a large gathering of Australians including the goodly number of Australians of Chinese descent. To take the opportunity on the occasion of the Chinese New Year to do a number of things and the first and most important of those things on behalf of the Government of Australia and on behalf, therefore, of all of the people of Australia first and foremost to honour the enormous contribution that Australians of Chinese descent have made to the building of the modern Australia. The association of Chinese people with Australia is a very long association. There have been occasion in the past when it has not been a happy association. But to the great bulk of Australians the contribution of Chinese people has been generous, it has been immense, it has been impressive and it is very much part of the miracle which is modern Australia. Chinese people have brought to this country industry, integrity, a respect and commitment for the importance of the family in Australian society, a flair for entrepreneurial expertise, professional skills, entertainment skills, recreational skills. Indeed, in every walk of Australian life in the 1990s we find Australians with a Chinese descent or a Chinese background and the particular association of Chinese Australians with the city of Sydney is very well known indeed. Sydney is a different city from what it was when I was born here in 1939 and grew up here through the 1940s and 50s. I didn't know many Chinese boys at Earlwood Primary School in the late 1940s. I did know one at Canterbury Boys High School in the early 1950s. My children, by contrast, as they've gone at Primary School to Greenwich Public School and later to private school on the lower north shore they have known many and that is just a function of the changing character, the diversifying character of the modern Australia.

The other reason that I wanted to come here tonight, I wanted to take the opportunity of honouring the Chinese New Year, is to say something about the fundamentals that bind all of us together as Australians. I certainly agree with Dr Ang that there is no country in the world which has a finer appreciation of the values of freedom and openness and tolerance than does Australia.

Australia has its flaws, Australia has its blemishes, Australia has had its failures in the past but if you compare this country with the other nations of the world there are many things about it which entitle us to boast of tolerance and openness and warm heartedness and of decency. Of course there are some within our ranks who harbour prejudice and bigotry and who do display intolerance whether it's on ethnic or racial grounds or other grounds. I want to say that for my part and for the part of my Government that that is no part of the true Australian spirit. Any manifestation of racism in our ranks is repugnant to everything for which Australia has always stood. It ought to be denounced, it ought to be identified and it ought to be guarded against.

The other side of the equation, of course, is the remarkable tolerance and the remarkable receptivity and generosity that this country has displayed towards so many, especially over the last 30 or 40 years. It remains the case that in the late 1970s Australia took on a per capita basis more refugees from war torn Indo-China than any nation in the world and that was a very special demonstration of the contribution and the generosity of the Australian community towards an area of very particular need. It is necessary that we debate issues of sensitivity, issues such as immigration, issues such as the character of Australia what contributes to the modern Australian personality and the modern Australian character. We recognise in the course of that debate that the composition of the Australian population has changed a great deal over the last 30 or 40 years.

We are a more diverse, we are a more vibrant, we are a more cosmopolitan, we are more global, we are a more internationalised society than what we were several generations ago. One of the many contributions that Australians of Asian, especially Chinese, decent make to the modern Australia are the links that they provide with the countries often of their birth and certainly of their family association. I've lost count of the number of Australians of Chinese descent who over the last couple of years have provided me with valuable insight into the culture and the politics and the attitude of countries within our region.

Within a few weeks I'll be visiting mainland China, I'll be visiting the People's Republic of China. It will be the first visit that I've paid to the country as Prime Minister and the relationship between Australia and China is very important to my Government. I recognise that of the Chinese Australians here tonight, not all of you of course have come from the People's Republic. Many of you, perhaps a majority of you, haven't. And I know there is a variety of views in this room about the People's Republic of China as there are a variety of views about a whole lot of other issues. But nothing can gainsay the fact that the association between this country and the People's Republic is an important one. Our values on many political issues are different. Australia is an open democracy, the People's Republic is not. But we have very close and important economic and other ties, and it is the responsibility of any Australian government, be it a Liberal Government or a Labor Government to look

always to Australia's national interest, and Australia's national interest lies in fostering the economic, the cultural and the other links that now exist between Australia and not only China but the Chinese diasporas in other parts of the world.

So it is with those things in mind and with a determination to further build a pragmatic commonsense relationship built on mutual respect and on a recognition of the importance of welcoming China into the family of nations in the Asia-Pacific region. It's on that basis that I will visit Peking, Beijing and Shanghai during Easter of this year.

I spoke earlier, ladies and gentlemen, of many of the contributions that Chinese Australians had made to our country. It is impossible of course to think of the Australian economy, particularly the small business sector, without thinking of the contribution of so many entrepreneurs of Chinese and of Asian descent in this country. The lively way in which so many members of the Chinese Australian community have contributed to the building of the modern Australian economy is very widely recognised, it is very warmly appreciated and we wouldn't be the people we are, we wouldn't be the success we are, we wouldn't be the increasingly respected community that we are becoming amongst the economies of the world, had it not been for the contribution of so many of those members of the Chinese Australian community.

I can't let an opportunity like tonight go by without expressing a few words of optimism about Australia's economic future. I don't pretend to you that all of the economic challenges that beset an industrialised nation such as Australia are behind us. We still have a rate of unemployment that is too high although recent figures are more encouraging than I thought they might be. We still have balance of payments problems although they are not as severe as they were three or four years ago. The level of business investment is high by any comparison over the last thirty years, and the latest advice I have is that the level of business investment in Australia at the present time is higher than what it was at the time of the resources boom at the end of the 1970s or at the time just before the recession and the stock market crash in the mid 1980s. Company profits have shown a welcome upturn over the last few months. We have a rate of inflation which is lower than its been since the early 1970s and we have home mortgage interest rates which are lower than they have been at any time since the late 1960s.

But more importantly than all of those things there is a greater sense in the Australian community now of the importance of this nation integrating herself not only into the economic infrastructure of the Asia Pacific region which is so important to Australia's future but indeed into the entire world. And I do have a sense of growing optimism and confidence about the state of the Australian economy and the medium term future of the Australian economy, because the fundamentals now are as good as they have been for decades. We do have low inflation, we have falling interest rates, we have very strong business investment, we have broken down some of the cultural inhibitions towards greater globalisation of the Australian economy, and in a few weeks time, I think probably about the middle of March, I'll be announcing a comprehensive response to an investigation into the impact of red tape and regulation on small business in Australia and I believe that the announcements the Government will make in that response will make a further very important contribution towards creating a

better investment climate for small business in Australia. Because all of my political life I have believed very strongly in the role and the importance of small business in the Australian community. If we are ever to break the back of high youth unemployment, if we are ever to break the back of high unemployment in this country, it will be the small business sector and no other part of the Australian economy that is going to achieve that task.

But tonight ladies and gentlemen is not an occasion to give any kind of lecture in macro or micro-economic policy. It is not an occasion to talk about the Gross Domestic Product or the implicit price deflator, or any other kind of graduated index, or even to speculate about what might happen on the Future's Exchange overnight. It is an occasion, above and beyond that, it is an occasion to honour and to celebrate and to respect the massive contribution that Chinese Australians have made to the modern Australia. And on behalf of that modern Australia, I want to say to all members of the Chinese community in Australia, you are an integral part of Australian society. You are welcomed, you are honoured, you are respected; your right to dignity, to security, to peace and to tolerance and respect is something which is part and parcel of what I regard as a civilised and acceptable Australia in the 1990s.

It is part and parcel of Australian democracy to have vigorous exchanges and vigorous debate. Some of it on occasions is not the most intelligent of exchanges that one could be engaged in. But it is never part of civilised or acceptable or robust debate to think of people in terms of the colour of their skin or - except in a humorous and entirely fun loving way their country of origin.

Australians are I believe a tolerant people. They are a fundamentally very decent people, the most decent in the world, and I think the great majority of Australians hold very dear that most cherished of all of the Australian ethos, and that is the ethos of the fair go. And I want to say to all of you that a fair go for all is as much a part of the Australian ethos now as it has ever been. So to all of you have a very happy year of the ox. I hope all of you have the occasion during the year to have peace and prosperity and personal happiness and personal success. And once again on behalf of the wider Australian community and on behalf of my government can I say a word of very warm thanks and deep appreciation for the contribution that you have made to our country and how much a pleasure it is for me to celebrate with you our joint great good fortune and that is to celebrate the miracle together of being Australians.

Thank you.