

The Prime Minister's Centenary Dinner Speech —Corowa, 31 July 1993

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It is a great pleasure to be in this very beautiful, historic, classic Australian town. It is particularly good to be here to join in the commemoration of the moment a hundred years ago when Corowa was host to one of the more important gatherings in our nation's history: a meeting which, in a combination of national idealism and equally characteristic pragmatism, helped propel Australia towards nationhood. Enough of the Victorian architecture has been preserved, enough families have remained, enough memories handed down for Corowa to still speak eloquently of the past.

And then there is the river: the Murray tells a story of its own, including of course the part it played in the federation of the continent. For it was the dividing line between the two most populous and prosperous colonies and, in 1893, on the other side at Wahgunyah there was a customs shed, a real and symbolic manifestation of the divisions the people of Australia had to overcome. You don't have to look hard in towns like this to see the labour that has been done, and the aspirations of those who did it. Far more than in the cities and the suburbs, you can sense the traditions born here of work and leisure, of individual enterprise and community cooperation, of a common effort through good times and bad.

In one sense the story is all Corowa's own. In another it is a typically Australian story. The monuments to war, for instance, can be seen in every Australian town. They bear witness to the sacrifice of families in this region, but also to the common cause Australians *everywhere* recognised in times of crisis. There are other kinds of monuments: monuments to imagination and effort, monuments to belief in the region's future, and ultimately in *Australia's* future. I mean the farms, this township, the industries, the clubs. And it is useful to reflect on how they

came to be. What were the essential elements in their success? The answer is: private initiative, public cooperation, loyalty and commitment to the region, confidence, belief. In every Australian community you will see the same combination of elements, and over time, they form a collective national experience.

For all our disparity—including the great gulf between rural and urban—there is in the end a collective Australian experience which should unite us. Nationally, we have shared in triumphs—in sport, in the arts, in industry and science. But the greatest by far is the creation over the years of one of the world's great democracies, one of the great multicultural societies, and surely the very best place in the world to live. And we have done this substantially because our effort in the last century has generally been towards including all Australians in Australia's wealth. This is a loose federation on a vast and varied continent whose population is immensely diverse in origin and culture. These factors can encourage division or fragmentation—they can encourage jealousy and rivalry, between states, between cities, between the urban population and the people in the country. There is always that tendency, latent or real. But the great majority of Australians understand, as the founders of federation understood, that we work much better when we work as one nation. These individual and collective efforts, these successes and failures, constitute the unifying experience of our national life. Whether we live in Corowa or Darwin—or Wahgunyah—this is the story of us all, and the means by which we recognise each other as Australians. And this gives us strength.

This and future generations living here in Corowa will continue to draw their strength from these traditions and from their love of the country, and it will be this as much as anything else which carries the district through another century. But I daresay if the people of Corowa were asked what most concerns them today, it would not be the past but the future: What industries will employ them and their children? What businesses will grow to replace those in decline? How will the future of Corowa be secured? They are the same questions which Australians are asking everywhere—in every town and suburb, in every factory and farm. How will the future of Australia be secured? It is a question which every generation has asked, including the generation of 1893. They had every reason to ask: they were living through the worst depression in our history, the worst civil strife and the worst drought. The answer to the question in 1893 or 1933 or even 1963 tended to be—by secure British markets for our agricultural products, by the protection of local industry, by the exploitation of our minerals and energy. But by 1973 the secure British markets for Australian agriculture had gone. It was becoming plain that protection had left our industries hopelessly uncompetitive. And dependence on commodities left us still exposed to the uncertainties of world markets.

So if Britain would no longer secure our future, nor the United States or any other country, and our commodities alone would not alone secure it, and wholesale protection of our industries would not, how could it be secured? The answer was, and remains, by our own efforts, by our own imagination, by grasping the opportunities which our region provides, by confidence in ourselves and our best traditions, by belief. By those same familiar things which carry Corowa through. And I know we will secure the future. I know we can be prosperous as never before. We can find a place in the world as never before. We can find it primarily in our own region, in that part of the world which the Australians of a century ago looked at with a mixture of fear and disdain. We can secure our future in the huge and rapidly growing Asia-Pacific region. And in the rest of the world. And I'll tell you why I know this. Because of the success we have already had.

In 1993 we are losing industries but gaining new ones. We are replacing old markets with new ones. We are steadily growing less dependent on commodities. We are growing new companies—clever manufacturing companies, born entirely of the export culture created in the last decade. In the last five years they have boosted their exports to Asia by an average 20 per cent per annum. They are exporting elaborately transformed manufactures. High tech products. Last year exports of elaborately transformed manufactures to Europe rose by more than 20 per cent; to South East Asia by 17 per cent; to East Asia by more than 40 per cent. The opportunities for Australian companies in Asia and the Pacific are boundless, and as we continue to transform ourselves into a competitive and sophisticated manufacturing nation, and a leading supplier of services as well as agricultural products, minerals and energy, we will begin to see the huge rewards to be reaped from the changes we made in the eighties. And I might say the great agricultural regions of Australia, regions like this one, food-growing regions, will play a pre-eminent role in the future. That is why I believe we will succeed: because of the success we have already achieved. Because of the proven willingness of the Australian people to embrace change. Because when faced with necessity they were prepared to do what was necessary. So while the answer to the question has varied with time, one thing has not changed: the future of Australia, like the future of Corowa, will be made safe by the enterprise and work of the people. And by their faith in themselves, in their communities and in Australia. We will always need that faith. In this last decade of the twentieth century we have a chance the like of which the Australians of a century ago could not have imagined. There is the chance to succeed in the world's fastest growing region, and to do it by our own initiative, our own effort, our own genius. There is, as I have said before, the chance in this decade to set Australia up for the next century. I can tell you that that is my one great goal. It is the Government's goal. But reaching it, needless to say, will depend on it becoming the goal of all Australians.

Last week I made again the point that I have made many times in the past eighteen months: to meet the challenges we face we need a renewed sense of national unity. I quoted someone who I am sure retains more than a little respect in this district, Robert Gordon Menzies. It was Menzies who talked about the need to convert 'a mass of individuals into a great cohesive nation'. Menzies understood the power that a common national sentiment commands. And even if there is little else he said with which I would agree, I agree with him on this. Of course, he saw the British monarchy as the powerful unifying element. But these days, while the British monarch still has our affection and our regard, there is no question that the monarchy commands much less of both. In truth I think this decline has less to do with the problems the royal family has recently faced, than it has to do with changes in Australia, changes in the relationship between Australia and Great Britain, and an understanding in both countries of the different necessities we face. The monarchy has had family problems at other times in the past, but Australians did not draw the conclusion that the monarchy had lost its relevance. Today they draw that conclusion because the monarchy is remote from their lives and perceived as inappropriate to the sort of nation we must become. If the challenge is to enliven our spirit, to create a new unity of purpose, to make this a more inclusive Australia, or to use Menzies' words, to convert a 'mass of individuals into a great cohesive nation'—there is only one place it can come from. Australia. From faith in this democracy. Our shared values and hopes, shared understanding of our past and the necessities which confront us. That is why I believe Australian affairs should be managed by Australians. It is why I am for a republic. Not because I am against Britain—I like Britain very much. I was raised on her heritage and the exploits of British heroes and remain a grateful and, in many regards, a

passionate advocate of things British—from the parliament and law bequeathed us to the art and architecture and music. But Australia’s diverse heritage is uniquely our own. So in many respects is our democratic heritage: it includes not just the fabled spirit of the ‘fair go’ and the collective egalitarian tradition, but a number of constitutional innovations which were achieved here well in advance of Britain—among them the secret ballot, payment of MPs, universal male suffrage and votes for women. Nor am I against the British monarch—I count myself among her countless Australian admirers. But the Queen of Australia is not Australian and, however conscientiously and skilfully she performs the role of Australian Head of State, she cannot symbolise or express our Australianness. Nor am I against the British monarchy—the British monarchy works in Britain. But it is a hereditary British institution and in the multicultural post-imperial world in which we live and, with all the regional imperatives now facing us, it no longer constitutes an appropriate Australian Head of State. Nor am I against the British Commonwealth of Nations—Australia, so long as I am Prime Minister, will remain in the Commonwealth. Membership of the Commonwealth—comprised of more republics than any other category of government—is not part of the argument. Nor do I think the republican debate distracts from the economic problems which currently beset us—it is no more a distraction for Australians than federation was for those Australians of the 1890s whose economic problems make ours seem insignificant. And, as Barry Jones said the other day, we don’t hear people saying that we should give up all sport until the economy improves, though much more time is spent on sport than the Constitution. Nor am I for the republic because I am against the states—like many Australians I am conscious of the shortcomings of the federal system, and I would like to see regions like this one given a more dynamic political role. But I believe the states are an organic part of the Australian nation and quite possibly inseparable from it. I do not believe they could be easily abolished even if the nation thought it was worth doing.

Some say the republic will undermine our stability. I value stability and place the highest value on the social peace we enjoy in Australia. To the extent that British institutions have contributed to this—I appreciate that too. But Australian institutions also gave us these things. The idea of social justice, and government policies which gave that idea concrete expression, played a major part in our stability. We did not build this stable, sophisticated and harmonious multicultural society with British institutions half so much as we built it with Australian principles and policies. It is also said by opponents of the republic that it is primarily a manifestation of my ambition. Insofar as I have played a role in instigating the debate, they are right. I have an ambition for Australia and the republic forms part of it. If an ambition for Australia disqualifies the republic, then those who met here in 1893 should have been disqualified from federation, along with every one else who ever had an ambition for Australia and acted on it. I am for the republic not for what I am against, but what I am for: not for what a republic will throw away, but for what a republic can deliver.

It can deliver a new sense of unity and national pride in which Australians of this and future generations can share. It can deliver a re-cast Australian identity defined by the commitment of Australians to this land above all others, which will say unequivocally to the world who we are and what we stand for. Among them I would number democracy, fairness, tolerance, justice, invention, industry, pragmatism. They will all serve us well in the new world we have entered. I would go so far as to suggest that had we long enshrined the values of tolerance and fairness, and had we more faith in our own traditions and more commitment to them, more confidence and pride, the debate about the Mabo judgement would not have taken the shape it too often has in the past few months. Had those values become the basis of our national pride

we might have asked: what good would it do us as a people, what would it do for future generations of Australians, what would it do for our reputation in the world as a mature democracy, if we said the High Court was wrong—Australia was never occupied before 1788, there never was native title, injustice and dispossession did not occur—what good would it do us if we enshrined lies in preference to the truth? What would it say to future generations if in 1993 Australians could not face up to what the United States, Canada and New Zealand faced up to a century and more ago? What would it say about this generation of ours if, when we were offered the truth, we chose to perpetuate untruths? What would it say about us if, a hundred years after sixty men in Corowa had the wisdom to see the necessity for federation, the will to do it, and the wit to know how, we recoiled from the chance to find a national solution to our oldest problem? If we turned away from our responsibilities? If we failed to see the legal recognition of prior ownership and post-European dispossession as providing a basis for reconciliation? Our duty is to find a mature national solution. My hope is that in finding one we will relearn a little of the value of Australian democracy, the principles of tolerance and justice, and the necessity to find common cause as a people—that we will relearn it and pass the lesson on to future generations. Perhaps that will be the lesson of Mabo.

By their initiative the people who met here in 1893 served generations of Australians. I believe in this last decade of the twentieth century we need to look beyond the day-to-day and towards the next generations of Australians. If it is true, as I think it is, that this and future generations will be best served by revisiting the Constitution drawn up a century ago, then we can learn something from the approach taken at the Corowa Conference. In 1893 federation was, as one commentator observed ‘dead as Julius Caesar’. The Corowa Conference revived it. And it revived it by turning federation into a *popular* cause. The Conference itself was not a government initiative, but one promoted and paid for by private enterprise—by private industries. The decisive resolution which was passed here called on the colonial parliaments to pass legislation that would provide for the popular election of representatives to a national convention to draw up a federal Constitution. That Constitution would be submitted to referendum in each colony. The Corowa Conference gave the people of Australia the opportunity to claim their own destiny—to forge a new national entity from a far-flung colonial population. And the people grasped the opportunity. The Constitution was the foundation of the new national entity. Read in 1993, it is an uninspired and uninspiring document: complex, legalistic and virtually impossible to relate to contemporary Australian life. It was framed as a routine piece of nineteenth century British imperial legislation. It shows its age. A great many Australians don’t even know it exists. Very, very few have ever read it, let alone understood it. How many Australians could quote the opening words? Not half as many, I suspect, as could quote the opening of the US Constitution.

In the 1990s there exists the chance—and I think the need—to revisit our Constitution and reclaim it, not for the lawyers and the politicians, but for the people. In Australia, surely—in this most democratic of countries—we can have a Constitution vested in the people. It is hardly radical to suggest that our Constitution should be remade to reflect our national values and aspirations, evoke pride in our Australian heritage and confidence in our future, and help to unite us as a nation. It is hardly radical to suggest this, and hardly beyond us to do it. We want Australians to consider the strengths and weaknesses of their Constitution. We want them to debate the advantages and disadvantages of making our Constitution more closely reflect Australian reality, Australian values, Australian hopes. In the end we want an Australian Constitution in which Australians believe.

As I see it, the republic can be very much the precursor to enabling the people to reclaim the Constitution. Last April we established the Republic Advisory Committee to work on an options paper which will set out some of the ways Australia could become a republic and the consequent changes to our Constitution. The Committee has consulted widely over the past few months, and the debate—as you have probably noticed—is now flourishing in the community. Following the report of the Committee in September, the Government will consider ways to ensure that people have sufficient information about our system of government to participate fully in the decision-making process. In the end, as with federation, it will be the people of Australia who decide. After they have had time and information enough to consider the issues, the people will decide by referendum whether we move to a republic or remain a constitutional monarchy. No one should forget the fundamental point enshrined in the existing Constitution—the only way this or any other constitutional change can take place is by referendum. It can only occur if the people want it—if a majority of electors voting, and a majority of electors in the majority of the states, vote for change. Changed or unchanged, the Australian Constitution belongs to Australians and only they can decide how and when and if to change it.

By way of conclusion, let me go back to the Murray. The Murray says it better than I can. This is the river which divides New South Wales and Victoria, the river along which customs houses were erected in colonial days. Viewed one way it can be a real and symbolic obstacle to unity. Yet the Murray is both a national resource and a unifying national symbol. We hold it in common. The Murray did not dictate that customs houses be built along the banks. The Murray was not a border until Australians made it one. It was not the existence of the Murray which persuaded politicians to run a railway line south from Sydney in one gauge and north from Melbourne in a different one. Yet Australians also combined in the national interest to remove the customs and to standardise the rail line. They combined to harness the water for power and conserve it for irrigation. They are combining now to restore the environment of the Murray–Darling Basin and to rectify the great problem of salination and land degradation. I believe we can combine in future to make the Murray–Darling the basis of a hugely expanded Australian food-growing and food-processing industry. The choice is always ours: we can pursue local interests or sectional interests or state interests. We can always find in our landscape, our laws, and our history reasons for division. Or we can combine. We can pursue the national interest. We can do as the Australians of the 1890s voted to do and draw our strength from the Commonwealth.

The republic seeks closer identification with the nation, and a more spirited sense of national goals and purpose. It also seeks to bring our institutions and symbols into line with reality. The states are part of that reality, as the states are part of United States reality. The proper aim is to get all three tiers of government working for national ends. My argument is that in this era above all others the overriding loyalty must be to the nation.

Let me conclude by addressing the most common argument against an Australian republic. The one which says ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. It partly depends on your definition of broke. If it’s an anachronism is it broke? If it no longer inspires us, or fails to unite us, or offers us no belief, and therefore effectively doesn’t work, is it broke? If it does not coincide with contemporary reality, is it broke? And if we decide now that it’s not broke, and in twenty or thirty years time that Australians not only fail to identify with Britain but also with Australia, will we decide then that it was broke all along? Broke doesn’t really come into it.

We didn't throw out the horse and cart because they were broke. We abandoned them; we affectionately and gracefully retired them when they became obsolete. We took a considered decision to trade up to something that would serve us better. That is what the people who gathered here in 1893 did. They knew that federation would serve Australia better. They saw themselves as having a responsibility to their country and its future. Who would say to them now—why did you fix it when it wasn't broke?

Thank you for having me here tonight. It has been a great pleasure for me. Corowa was there in 1893 when a great national endeavour began in earnest. I hope that some of what I have said tonight has helped define to you what I believe is another great national endeavour. A hundred years ago when the colonies—soon to become states—were supreme, and their primacy was manifest in those customs houses along the river, the people who gathered here in Corowa stepped out of the orthodoxy and said, we need to be a nation. We need one government in charge of our national affairs. I should hope in the prevailing orthodoxy of today, having made the step to a national government almost a century ago, the people gathered in Corowa here tonight can see the sense again in stepping beyond the orthodoxy. I hope they can see the sense in that final assertion of nationhood—the confidence to elect one of our own to preside over our affairs. I notice today the *Sydney Morning Herald* writing off the people of Corowa as conservative; not blatantly but patronisingly, seeming to suggest that the people here tonight can't see as far as the people of Corowa one hundred years ago. Well I doubt that. I think, like an increasing number of Australians, they will see the need to put the seal on our nationhood. I think they will feel themselves very capable of taking the view that the affairs of Australia cannot forever be presided over by a British monarch. Tonight we are celebrating the vision which found expression here a century ago. I think no more fitting tribute could be paid to their memory than to complete the work that they began. In 1993, as in 1893, I think we must have the courage to see beyond what is to what can be.

Federal Greetings from Balhurst

