

P J KEATING
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Mr. Chancellor, Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply grateful to the National University of Singapore for this honour. NUS is an outstanding national educational institution and, as it moves towards the government's target of a twenty per cent enrolment of foreign students, it will become an increasingly important regional institution too.

This honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws gives me great personal pleasure because it brings together two of the things that mattered most to me in public life – education, and Australia's relations with the region around us.

Public life only gains meaning and reward from what you can accomplish through it. When I look back at the things I was able to achieve in public office, the one that gives me most personal satisfaction may be the increase in school and university retention rates in Australia while I was in government.

In 1983 when the government of which I was part came to office, only three in ten Australian children completed secondary school. When we left office in 1996, it was eight in ten, and half of them were going on to places in tertiary institutions. We nearly doubled the number of university places in eight years.

I am proud of that achievement for two reasons. First, because of all the individual lives that were changed, as young people, and especially young women, were given the opportunity to exercise their full potential. And, secondly, for broader reasons of national interest. Because, in the information age, education will be the decisive advantage for any country. Governments can make no more important or effective investment than the investment they make in education.

This honorary degree also recognises, very generously, the commitment of my government to Asia and especially to the relationship between Australia and Singapore. That is also something I am proud of. When I came to office it seemed impossible to me that Australia in the last years of the 20th century could pretend that we were still a European enclave which had somehow become misplaced and had drifted to the margins of Asia. Australia occupies a continent, our citizens are drawn from almost every country in the world and our indigenous people have been custodians of the land for perhaps 60,000 years. So we can't be European or North American or Asian or anything else but Australian. But in my view we could be, and were, an integral, rightful and committed part of this East Asian regional community, and we had to work to show it.

Prime Minister Goh once described the relationship between Australia and Singapore as an 'easy partnership'. He was correct, but it is interesting to ask why this should be so. Why should two such different countries form this easy partnership?

In international terms, Singapore and Australia are an odd couple. One is a small, dynamic, prosperous city state, surrounded by larger neighbours, whose people think of themselves as hard working, even driven. The other is a sprawling continent, surrounded by a moat of sea, with an economy traditionally based on resources, and people who think of themselves as laid back and leisure-loving. Why do such disparate places get on so well? How did it happen? And where should the odd couple go from here?

The first point to make is that there are more similarities between Singapore and Australia than might first appear, and they are important in giving us a high level of comfort in the way we operate together.

We each began our lives as British colonies. Of course one of us stayed closer to Britain than the other and decided to share its head of state instead of getting one of its own. I'm very keen to wave a friendly and respectful farewell to the monarchy in Australia, but that is another story.

Both Singapore and Australia took from our common and valuable British heritage similar institutions of law and government that help us to understand the experiences and processes of the other. We have each remade those institutions in our own ways, of course, but the fundamental legacy of strong and uncorrupt public institutions remains. We also inherited the inestimable value of the English language which has become the world's principal medium of communication in the information age.

Second, we are both immigrant societies which have had to struggle with issues of national identity. We understand that immigrant societies have to forge their own identity which is different from, and transcends, the cultures from which our people came. We have had to think harder about what it means to be a Singaporean or an Australian than our Thai or French friends, for example, would have to think about the same issue for themselves.

Singapore has constructed a strong sense of how being Singaporean differs from being Hokkien or Cantonese or Malay or Tamil, and Australia has had to do the same sort of thing. For twenty seven years in the Australian parliament I represented the working class electorate of Blaxland, centred around the western Sydney suburb of Bankstown, where I had grown up. By the time I left office in 1996, around 20,000 of my 70,000 electors were of Lebanese background, both Moslem and Christian, 18,000 had come from Vietnam and the rest from a huge variety of European and Asian backgrounds – Italian, Greek, Chinese and so on.

This is the society Australia has become, and compared with the Anglo-Celtic monoculture of the same area during my own childhood there, it is a change I welcome.

What is more, it happened with remarkably little tension or unrest. I believe it is one of Australia's proudest achievements.

Singapore and Australia also have another thing in common. We are not big enough to impose our will on others. We know that if we are to put our ideas into practice we will need to build coalitions of countries who share our approach to the world. We know we have to work and to think and to create and to not just proclaim.

And the two of us have found that we share another approach: a belief in a strong Asia Pacific region which builds its prosperity through economic openness. Economic openness was part of Singapore's tradition as an entrepot port from the beginning. It wasn't always true of Australia but, thanks to the changes we made from the 1980s onwards, it is now.

A final point I want to make is that the differences between Singapore and Australia are not as great as our images of ourselves suggest. Australians will go to great lengths to give the impression that they would rather be enjoying themselves relaxing on the beach than working. But we know that, in fact, Australians work harder and more productively than almost anyone else in this region. It's just not done culturally to give that impression. In the other direction, Singaporean friends of mine are just as inclined to relax and enjoy themselves as others. They just feel more guilty about admitting it.

This issue of images was one of the problems I faced when I became Prime Minister. Although Singapore and Australia had known one another for a long time, I believed it was time for us to look at one another freshly.

I had been as critical as anyone of the old Australian dispensation, but Australia had changed. And I wanted to redefine the region's image of us. Because, even in Singapore, the view persisted that Australia was a lazy, strike-ridden, racially prejudiced, society; a second-rate outpost of Britain that survived on the bounty of its resource base and its lucky isolation. The view was tenacious, well after the reforms that I had been involved in as Treasurer through the 1980s had opened the Australian economy, floated our dollar and dismantled the tariff barriers that had protected our industry from competition.

It was harder to persuade our neighbours of this change than it later became, because Australia was emerging from recession and the Asian countries were still in a buoyant growth phase that seemed as if it would go on forever.

Australia has produced four Nobel Prize winners. It has a university system that numbers, among countless distinguished alumni, the current Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University. It produces the world's most efficient photo-voltaic cells as well as the twin hulled catamarans that ply the waters between Hong Kong and Macao. The water treatment in the city of San Jose in California is provided by Memtech membrane filters, which had their technical origins at the University of New South Wales, with which I have been associated since I left office. Gene shears technology, so important to

the new biotechnology industry, came out of the same university. But this message about Australia was slow in getting through. Australia had a branding problem.

From the time of my first visit to Singapore as Prime Minister in September 1992, it was clear that my own aims for closer regional cooperation and for the strengthening of Australia's bilateral relationships with the countries around us were very close to the views of Prime Minister Goh. This was one relationship which really did benefit from high level engagement by political leaders.

In particular, we had a very similar view of the importance of regional cooperation through APEC and the Prime Minister and I worked as a very effective tag team to help build APEC's free trade aims and to develop the institution of leaders' meetings. I am glad that the results of our building project are on display again this week in Auckland where Mr. Goh and the other APEC leaders are gathering.

We saw good opportunities on the bilateral front as well. We wanted to encourage Australian and Singaporean companies not only to build direct relationships but to explore ways of working together in third countries, especially in the region, through what we called strategic linkages. To help this process, we instituted a Singapore-Australia Business Alliance Forum which we backed with government seed money.

This is another part of the construction work of those years which is still holding up, and I am pleased that the Business Alliance Forum is meeting again in Singapore today.

Singapore and Australia also recognised that we had much to contribute to each other in the defence relationship. Australia has had a long commitment to the defence of Singapore dating back to the Second World War, as the lines of Australian war graves at Changi cemetery attest. And more recently we have worked together closely as part of the Five Power Defence Agreement.

But over the period I was Prime Minister we took the bilateral defence relationship to a new level of intensity. Singapore established its own airforce flying school at RAAF base Pearce, which was opened in November 1994, and which I was very pleased to visit. The Singaporean armed forces also increased their use of other Australian defence facilities like Shoalwater Bay in central Queensland.

On my final visit to Singapore as Prime Minister in early 1996 Prime Minister Goh and I signed a joint declaration called A New Partnership, which reflected the results of a comprehensive review of the relationship that he and I had asked our officials to conduct the previous year.

The New Partnership declaration referred to our common view of the global and regional strategic environment, our commitment to free and open international trade and investment, and our support for the United States presence and strategic engagement in Asia. Most importantly, it noted that the significance of our partnership went beyond the bilateral relationship. It said, 'For Australia, [the relationship] is a very important

element in its engagement with the Southeast Asian region. For Singapore, it is recognition of the value it places on Australia's role in regional affairs.'

That recognition, and our mutual respect, is what has kept the odd couple together.

But I think there is a lot more for us to do together yet.

The worst of the Asian economic crisis may seem to be behind us, but the region faces many new dangers. Some of these are immediate, like the uncertain transitional period ahead in Indonesian politics. This will have a direct impact on the whole ASEAN region as well as Australia and Singapore. Some are medium term, like the dangers that a correction on Wall Street will re-ignite economic problems in Asia before the structural work needed to strengthen regional financial institutions has been completed. Some are longer term, like the profound environmental dangers, ranging from water and air quality to food production, that Asia still faces, and that will only intensify as the regional economies recover.

The answer to these problems won't be found in national action alone. In the aftermath of the economic crisis, and the new political stresses that have come with it, we need very urgently to start rebuilding a sense of an Asia Pacific community. And, as before, Singapore and Australia can contribute to that. It means developing economic and financial cooperation in this region to a new level that will enable us to cope with a globalised economy. It means taking risks to greatly strengthen the institutions for political and security cooperation in the Asia Pacific. It means reinvigorating APEC, not least by giving it a stronger secretariat here in Singapore. It means building our regional cooperation in everything from education to the environment.

The biggest deficit in the world is always the ideas deficit. Australia and Singapore have shown in the past that we can help fill it, and we need to do so again.

When I talk about building an Asia Pacific community, I am not saying that Australia and Singapore should not go out into the world and test ourselves against the best. That is something we have both done, and need to keep doing.

But we also need to be able to recognise that the best is sometimes found in this region, and that with cooperation we can make the best here even better.

And 'the best here' brings me to the graduates today. Let me end by congratulating you on all you have achieved. Your hard work and commitment brought you this success, and you are entitled to celebrate. But the responsibilities and opportunities come next. Most of you are from disciplines associated with the built environment. That means you will have the opportunity to affect your country and your region in a very direct and physical way. You will not only shape the way the built environment looks and functions but your work will also shape the human interactions that take place within it. This is a heavy responsibility. Use it well.

My heartfelt thanks go to the National University of Singapore for this honorary Degree.

And my heartfelt hopes rest with the young graduates in this auditorium.