

This is the text of the Bicentenary speech given in the Sydney Opera House forecourt on Australia Day, 1988, by the Prince of Wales.

### **"The True Celebration of this Nation is in its Constitution"**

My wife and I are delighted to be able to return to Australia at this very special time to celebrate with you your nation's Bicentenary.

It is an historic and splendid occasion for all of us - not only here in Australia, but all over the world, and not least in the United Kingdom.

The modern nation of Australia began here, 200 years ago today. They were harsh beginnings, and the people who were sent here against their will had little cause to rejoice.

And all that was just yesterday. As history goes, 200 years is barely a heartbeat.

Yet look around you, and see what has happened in that time. A whole new free people. The people of a whole new free country, Australia. If it takes regular visitors from an old country to help you decide whether you should be celebrating or not, my wife and I will be glad to be of assistance. We are both very happy to have been invited to the party.

When Captain Cook discovered this part of the Great South Land and claimed it for the British Crown, he was sailing in quest of knowledge.

And whatever is said about the founding of the British Empire, the astonishing courage and resolve of many people like Captain Cook who dramatically advanced the sum of human knowledge in their quest for discovery and trade should not be ignored amidst the less worthy aspects of the story.

But as still happens today when knowledge is invariably examined for its less exalted application, King George III's ministers fairly soon saw the practical possibilities of a place where inconvenient people could be transported and forgotten.

There is no point now in trying to gloss over the circumstances in which the country of which you are rightly proud began. Indeed, to face those facts is a necessary part of realising just how proud you should be.

For the sad truth is that in those early days of the colony nobody was free. The men who guarded the convicts were in prison along with them. They were all a long way from home, and they all no doubt thought that Australia was the worst place in the world.

But the best part about the story is that they made their prison into a new home, where freedom became not just the dream of those in shackles, but a reality for everybody.

It didn't happen by accident. It took the intelligence and courage of brave men and women.

Even within the astonishingly brief span which covers the whole history of modern Australia, the process of making liberty an institution took time.

For the original people of this land it must all have seemed very different, and if they should say that their predicament has not yet ended, it would be hard to know how to answer beyond suggesting that a country free enough to examine its own conscience is a land worth living in, a nation to be envied.

Anyway, most people who live here, now, seem to think Australia is the best place in the world, and the rest of the world finds it difficult to argue.

By now, almost every country on Earth is the old country to some family in Australia. Coming from your first old country, and celebrating the 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary, to the month, of my first transportation to Australia, let me say on behalf of all the lands and peoples who have contributed to your heritage, that you have the best of us.

Australia is its own creation, but in a very real sense it belongs to the world. Australia is an international nation.

People from anywhere feel at home here in Australia. It's that sort of place. In two world wars, Australians fought whole-heartedly against intolerance and tyranny. They didn't just fight for the old Empire, which has now receded into history. They fought for freedom, which lasts, if it is looked after and nurtured.

One of Australia's oldest ties with the oldest of its old countries is the rule of law. They were harsh judges who sent the first Australians out here, but they were wisely framed laws that turned convicts into free men and women. And free men and women helped make a democracy which has become a model for the world.

They didn't do it just by being good-natured and easy going - however famous they were, and you are, for those qualities. They did it by carefully writing down the laws of a reasonable and humane society.

The spirit of liberty that they felt within themselves they made legible to others. The true celebration of this nation is in its Constitution.

In those dry-sounding but hard 'fought-for rules' and regulations, every family in this remarkable country has its rights protected and cherished.

As it happened so long ago, many of you may not realise that part of my own education took place here in Australia.

Quite frankly, it was by far the best part and something which I shall always cherish. It gave me an insight into the character of this country and the individuals who have shaped it by the force of their personalities and by their infectious good humour.

While I was here I had the Pommy bits bashed off me, like chips off an old block, and the results are only too obvious.

I keep coming back for more, and it is always a special pleasure. But my wife and I are particularly glad to be here this year, on this great day, to help you - as if the Aussies needed help in anything! To celebrate your good fortune and to wish you well for a future that holds out such great promise.