

Tony Abbott address to Australia-New Zealand leadership forum

Written by Tony Abbott

Friday February 2015. I've maintained a very, very close relationship with New Zealand ever since I met my wife. Closer relations between Australia and New Zealand were very much boosted by this particular liaison.



It is great to be here, it is a sign of the strength of the Trans-Tasman relationship that so many people at the summit of business and indeed of government are here today. I'm delighted to acknowledge my friend and colleague the Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, the Minister for Trade and Investment, Andrew Robb, has spent much time here today and also with many of you over the last few days. We have Parliamentary Secretary Fletcher here as well and I should also acknowledge a former constituent of mine who left Australia to make good in New Zealand, a fellow called John Key. You have done quite well since you left my electorate, John.

Look, when you consider the relationship between Australia and New Zealand there are no two juridically separate entities anywhere in the world that are as close as our two countries. Yes, we are legally independent but we don't feel like separate entities, we feel like family, not just distant cousins, we feel like close siblings. The problem with sibling relationships is that they can sometimes be taken for granted and the challenge for all of us is not to take the Australia-New Zealand relationship for granted just because Australians can get on a plane and come to New Zealand and Kiwis can get on a plane and come to Australia. That's the challenge.

I've got to say, John, that certainly since the advent of your government there has been a very great interest in New Zealand on the part of Australians. I think it would be fair to say that for the first time in many years – in recent years – the economic performance of New Zealand has been making Australians sit up and take notice. Any sense of superiority that might have been felt on one side of the Tasman certainly has been dispelled by the economic performance and indeed the governmental performance of New Zealand in recent times. I'm very conscious of the fact that over the last few years you have gradually taken the size of government from 35 per cent to 30 per cent of gross domestic product. A magnificent, practical demonstration in how to be a prime minister who doesn't just believe in smaller government but delivers it and there are some lessons here for us in Australia.

I'm conscious of the fact that while my Government has made a good start there is a way to go. I don't want to underestimate just what good a start we have made. We're releasing an intergenerational report in a week or so's time and while the intergenerational report that we are releasing will reveal the ongoing budgetary challenge that Australia has, it will also demonstrate the progress that has been made in just 18 months.

It's not often that an Australian prime minister needs to stand before a New Zealand audience and trumpet Australia's economic achievements, but you would allow me for a moment to do so and economic growth in Australia today is 2.7 per cent – not quite as good as yours, John but certainly a lot better than it was a year ago when it was just 1.9 per cent. Over the last 12 months, our export volumes are up seven per cent, our housing approvals are up nine per cent, consumer confidence is up, business formation is up, the number of new business registrations are at an all-time record high in Australia. All of this, in the end, feeds into economic growth which is the key to everyone's success.

As we were at pains to stress during the G20, economic growth is the key to almost everything. Everything that we hold dear, from our humane and decent and generous society to the highest

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standard of living that we crave, all depends upon economic growth and that is at the heart of everything this Government in Australia is attempting to do.

This is a practical audience and you all want to know what, apart from pious aspirations, what, apart from noble sentiments, are governments working towards right now when it comes to this relationship. I hear you, Adrian, when you talk about the need for Australia and New Zealand together to be more outward looking – not just outward looking individually, but outward looking together.

We tried to be outward looking a few years ago when Australia and New Zealand jointly negotiated a free trade agreement with the ASEAN nations and, to be honest, that has been a bit of a disappointment. It has been a bit of a disappointment because once New Zealand had achieved its objectives, the shop was shut so to speak, and the agreement that we have with ASEAN is not as ambitious an agreement as, frankly, Australia would like to have in all of our successful free trade negotiations.

Both of us are now interested in an agreement with the European Union. If we are prepared to learn the lessons of the ASEAN negotiation, if we are prepared to do it differently and much more together, why shouldn't we have a go at doing this as partners rather than as competitors?

At the moment, because of the Cricket World Cup which is going to be a magnificent triumph

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for one or other of us, I'm sure, we have a form of mutual recognition of visas. This seems to have gone well over the last little while. Why don't we look at this and see if this can be taken further in the months and years ahead?

As you know, Australia has been playing catch up over the last 18 months when it comes to free trade agreements. We have been playing catch up. I don't think we've done too badly, if I may say so, over the last 18 months when it comes to catching up, but it was President Xi of China who told the Australian Parliament in November last year, he said, "If you want to walk fast, walk alone, but if you want to walk far, walk together."

I think that is a marvellous modern adaptation of ancient Confucian thinking and, John, I am certainly looking forward to walking together with you, far and fast into the future and, certainly, I'm very pleased at the fact that by finally negotiating our free trade agreement with China, we at last have a chance to catch up with you when it comes to dairy exports.

Thank you so much.