

PROTECTING ANTARCTICA

Address by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Gareth Evans, at the official welcome for the Trans-Antarctic 1990 International Expedition, Sydney, 19 March 1990.

Tonight we welcome to Australia a group that is an inspiration to all those around the world who care about the future of our global home.

The Trans-Antarctic International Expedition, which on 3 March completed the first unmechanised traverse of the continent of Antarctica, is only a milestone in Antarctic expeditions - perhaps the most significant expedition there since Scott and Amundsen.

It is also a testament to both endurance and commitment. A seven month expedition by dog-sled over 7000 kilometres of magnificent but difficult Antarctic terrain is, by any standards, a remarkable example of courage, planning and determination.

But more than a feat of endurance, the Expedition stands out as an expression of commitment: commitment to the preservation of the unique wilderness that is the Antarctic continent; commitment to scientific research; and a more general commitment to work together to solve the environmental problems which face the world.

In all of this the Expedition's objectives have had the strong support of the Australian Government and of the Australian community. Here, as elsewhere in the world, across the country hundreds of Australian schools have followed your progress through workbooks and computer links. Your efforts have struck a responsive chord not only because of the intrinsic fascination of anything to do with the Antarctic, but because the protection of the environment has emerged as one of the most pressing issues facing the world today.

The fact that yours is an international team highlights the interdependence of the global environment. We cannot erect national fences to insulate us from the threats of environmental degradation which are global in scope. We cannot legislate to keep out of our national territories gases that destroy the ozone layer or upset the finely tuned rhythms of nature.

The only way in which we are going to solve the threats that face our global environment is through international cooperation. We need today, in the words of the UN Secretary-General, an "Earth patriotism as strong as any national patriotism, to relieve the distress of our ailing and exhausted planet".

The Australian Government is committed to this course of international cooperation. One of our highest priorities is achieving an international consensus on a comprehensive environment protection regime for Antarctica. It is Australia, together with France, that has taken the lead in international efforts to prevent mining ever taking place in Antarctica.

In the diplomatic market place, where realism is the currency of trade, it is unusual to seek to redefine upwards the definition of what is possible. But that is precisely what is required, and it is what our Antarctica initiative sets out to achieve.

Prior to last year's Australia-France initiative, the general consensus among parties to the Antarctic Treaty was that it was possible to reconcile mining and oil drilling in Antarctica with environmental protection. It was argued that it was unrealistic to exclude such activity in Antarctica forever, and that it was better to have mining and drilling take place under strict controls than under no controls at all. Australia was originally part of the consensus to this effect, which was embodied in the 1988 Antarctic Minerals Convention now awaiting ratification.

Whatever appeal arguments of this kind may have had in the past, we are now very clear that they should not be our guide for the present or the future. Australia does not believe that it possible to have mining or oil drilling in a unique, fragile and irreplaceable environment such as the Antarctic without the risk of extensive environmental damage.

And we do not believe that the international community ought to accept that risk, however distant actual mining in Antarctica may be. The Exxon Valdez incident off the coast of Alaska, and the incidents which have already occurred - albeit on a much smaller scale - of oil spills in Antarctica itself, clearly show the environmental damage that can occur, even where tight environmental controls apply.

The Antarctic environment is simply too unique, too fragile and too irreplaceable to allow even the possibility of an Exxon Valdez type incident occurring there. Mining and oil drilling, should they ever come to Antarctica, are most likely to take place in that two per cent or so of the continent near the coast and off-shore areas: the very areas where wildlife is congregated and where human interference could be disastrous.

The Government believes that rather than support a Convention which, at the end of the day, may allow mining and oil drilling in Antarctica, the parties to the Antarctic Treaty should instead urgently negotiate, under the auspices of that Treaty, a comprehensive environmental protection regime for Antarctica. This is the basis of the Australia-France initiative. It is aimed at preserving Antarctica as a "nature reserve and land of science": twin objectives shared by the Trans-Antarctic Expedition, and which also capture the hope of the original Antarctic Treaty that the continent would retain its pristine natural

qualities, and that it would become a laboratory for science.

In a relatively short time the Australia-France initiative has made significant progress. Belgium, Austria, India, Italy and Greece spoke out early in support. The Soviet Union has been positive, as have other countries in Eastern Europe. Influential voices in the United States Congress have called for the Minerals Convention to be put aside. New Zealand - the main architect of the Minerals Convention, known in fact as the Wellington Convention - has also indicated that the time has come to set aside the Minerals Convention, and Prime Minister Palmer has pledged to work closely with Australia on a comprehensive environmental protection regime for Antarctica.

We have yet to convince everyone, but it is already apparent that the weight of public opinion is beginning to overwhelm entrenched bureaucratic opposition to our initiative. It is increasingly recognised - not least at that important level of consciousness of people the world over - that only a comprehensive approach along the lines of the Australian initiative can provide really effective protection for Antarctica. I believe that public opinion will soon very surely begin to force the hand of policy makers in those more formidably resistant capitals such as London and Washington, which have so far not been responsive to our efforts of persuasion at the government-to-government level.

Later this year, most likely in November, parties to the Antarctic Treaty will meet in Chile formally to consider our proposal for a comprehensive convention, and other proposals for environmental protection. We will be looking to that meeting to maintain the momentum which has clearly developed behind the Australia-France initiative. We will also be looking for ways to further strengthen - as an interim measure - the existing moratorium on mining in Antarctica.

I want to emphasise that our initiative on Antarctica is in no way a repudiation of Australia's long-standing support for the Antarctic Treaty System. For thirty years the Antarctic Treaty has protected the Antarctic environment, kept Antarctica free of political conflict, and preserved it as an area of scientific inquiry from which nuclear weapons and military activities are prohibited. Australia's Antarctica initiative seeks to build on this unique achievement, and we seek to do it through the structures of a Treaty system which continues to serve our strategic, environmental and research interests.

The progress of the Australia-France initiative owes a great deal to the rising tide of community concern about the environment, and it is a telling lesson in what can be achieved on international environmental issues with good timing and political will. What was seen in many quarters less than six months ago as hopelessly unrealistic is today judged possible and will, I am confident, eventually be seen as inevitable, not least through the consciousness raising value of efforts like the International Trans-Antarctic Expedition.

We are honoured that you chose to come to Australia on the completion of your remarkable expedition. It is a very great pleasure for me formally to welcome you to a country which admires what you have done to bring the issue of Antarctica to a wider international audience.

We honour you for the strength of character, skill and endurance with which you have confronted and triumphed over all the many obstacles that have arisen since this epic journey was first conceived. And we honour you for what you have done to ensure that this magnificent continent of Antarctica retains forever its character as the world's last, and greatest, wilderness.

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