Here in Jerusalem, I acknowledge the first Australians, whose culture we honour this evening as among the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

So we gather at Yad Vashem.

I have been to this place before and so has my wife Therese. We have been here not as the representatives of any government; we have been here as private citizens; as individuals; as human beings. And together we have wept here.

It matters not how many times you come to Yad Vashem. It matters not what capacity you come in, because this is a place which reaches into the deepest part of the human soul.

It is a place which pierces between bone and marrow into our common humanity. It matters not whether we are Christian, Muslim or Jewish, whether we are of faith, of any faith, or of no faith, because what happens when we come here is that we come face-to-face with evil.

When we visit the halls of Yad Vashem, we are reminded afresh of the enormity of the evil that was visited on the Jewish people. We cry for the millions of the lives lost. We cry for the one and a half million children that were lost. Families uprooted, scattered, torn apart. We cry particularly for the children. This truly was the death of the innocents.
So in this sacred place, we come to cherish the memory, and with the rest of human kind to remind ourselves afresh never, ever, ever again, in any place, for any people, at any time.

As we cherish those of blessed memory, we also cherish the possibility of hope.

It has been mentioned tonight that we, as Australia, among the other nations of the world, attended the conference at Evian in 1938, and we, in Australia, like so many other countries around the world, closed our hearts. And what we did then as a nation was wrong; just plain wrong.

And we know what happened, when others did the same, the Jewish people under such extraordinary persecution then in Europe, and yes Albert, it was well-known, the Nazis had come to power some five years before; what we did then in closing our hearts to the needs of the Jewish people was unspeakably wrong.

And when it was all said and done, and six million people lay murdered, the world thought again. One of the things the world did was gather together to support in international law, the establishment of the modern State of Israel.

We in Australia then sought to play our part.

My predecessor, Foreign Minister Evatt, chaired that Palestine Committee, which recommended to the Councils of the World, of the United Nations, that there be a modern State of Israel, and a homeland for the Palestinian people as well. And when we gathered as the United Nations to agree on whether that should be the case, as history records, we in Australia, were the first to put our hand up and say “yes”.

And the international community reflected again, and said “what can we do to make sure that this does not happen again?”

And one of the other things we did as a community of nations was agree on the Convention on Refugees so that this would never happen again to any people anywhere at any time.

And solemnly we agreed through that Convention that we would offer protection; offer safe haven to those fleeing from persecution. And we in Australia, then and now, have sought again to play our part.

So as we gather tonight here in Jerusalem, at Yad Vashem, we reflect on these things.

What we have done wrong, what we have sought to do right. We come again to reflect on the pain, suffering and the murder and the death; and we come also tonight to reflect on an extraordinary story of courage, and of hope; and until the recent times, a little known story in Australia.

The story we come together tonight to particularly honour, ekes its way through the pall of darkness that is the Holocaust. It is a story of hope that urges us forward again, because we speak of the courage of a single man in Australia. A 77-year-old man, who on the far side of the world, heard of the persecution that was Kristallnacht.
He wasn’t among our delegation at Evian, because as we have been reminded tonight, he was a person without any legal status in Australia at all. He was a man who knew what it was to be oppressed. He knew what it was to be a man who was counted as nothing. And therefore he was a man who understood viscerally what injustice was.

So he knew by instinct, not by learning, not by having attended the finest universities in the world – he knew by instinct as a human being, that a great evil was being perpetrated on the other side of the world. And so he did as good men do. He stood up to be counted. He led the protest to the German Consulate in Melbourne. Can you imagine the reaction of the German consular officials, as this delegation arrived, Indigenous Australians, walking along the street, down to the Consulate General to hand them the petition?

They would have reacted, I’m sure, with disbelief and derision. But maybe, just maybe, the small fires of conscience, in one of two of them, may have been slightly put alight. We do not know.

He carried with him a resolution on behalf of the Aboriginal people of Australia, condemning, and I quote him “the cruel persecution of the Jewish people by the Nazi Government of Germany”. And with language that was simple, elegant and to-the-point, said quote “it must stop”, unquote. There is elegance in simplicity and in an economy of words. I’m sure those around him, not least those in the Consulate General, concluded that this was a little like Don Quixote tilting at windmills.

But with William Cooper’s action, we are reminded of the great wisdom of the ages – that evil triumphs when good men remain silent. William Cooper was an Aboriginal man of the Yorta Yorta people, and tonight I want to particularly acknowledge that we have among us, fifteen of the descendents of William Cooper, including his grandson Uncle Alfred ‘Boydie’ Turner, who can be so proud of their grandfather’s life. Would you please put your hands together to honour this family.

The applause I am sorry, has been too long in coming. It should have come much earlier. William Cooper, of course, protested at a time when to be an Indigenous person in Australia was to face injustice all the time, and therefore, as I said before, he understood injustice by instinct. William Cooper was a prolific letter writer, he wrote to the King, the Prime Minister and others seeking proper representation for his people. He saw injustice and he acted, using the resources which were available to him. Of course, William Cooper’s story did not end there. Because his spirit very much was taken up by others in Australia who sought, also, to stand up, to fight injustice where they have seen it.

In the Jewish community in Australia, those fuelled by what occurred in the horrific events of the Holocaust, also stood up for injustice as they saw it in Australia, injustice also experienced by the Indigenous people of Australia. We think of great Jewish Australians, Ron Castan, Jim Spigelman and others, who having been moved by injustice that they had experienced themselves, stood up again this time in support of the Indigenous people of Australia. And so the principle remained alive.
Ladies and Gentlemen, the bond between the Jewish people, therefore, and Australia’s Indigenous peoples continues to strengthen. We gather this evening to honour William Cooper at Yad Vashem by establishing the Chair for the Study of Resistance during the Holocaust in tribute to William Cooper. I pay formal tribute tonight to him, to William Cooper, and his family.

I also acknowledge the extraordinary contribution of Albert Dadon, and the Australia Israel Cultural Exchange. Those of you who know Albert well, as I do, know that he is not a man to get in the road of. Once he sets his mind to something, Albert gets it done. Albert, you have got this done as well, and we thank you.

Friends of Israel, friends of Australia, tonight we reflect on how one brave Aboriginal man stood up three-quarters of a century ago because he saw injustice. He then spoke out against injustice, and urged others to do the same.

For the future, let us all resolve again tonight to keep alive the spirit of William Cooper.

I thank you.

END