

THE 2005 VICE-CHANCELLORS' ORATION

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AUSTRALIA'S MULTICULTURALISM: TIME FOR ASSESSMENT AND RENEWAL

WINTHROP HALL, THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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I acknowledge the traditional custodians, past and present, of this land upon which we are privileged to gather.

Your Excellency, the Governor, Mr. Premier, Professor Robson, Dr Leela De Mel, Chancellors, Vice Chancellors and members of the Universities, Minister, Members of Parliament, Distinguished Guests all.

Harmony Week 2005, the Anniversary of the Sharpeville Massacre and the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination combine to provide a challenging and sad, but nonetheless most appropriate, context for my comments this evening. For I have no doubt that true multiculturalism based on mutual understanding, respect and acceptance is the most effective way of combating the evil of racism, nationally and internationally.

Having made that dogmatic assertion, I should immediately make a disclaimer. To some extent, "multiculturalism" has become a field for expert study and analysis. Notwithstanding that my comments this evening are somewhat grandly described as an "Oration", they do not pretend to be a contribution to the specialised literature or learning. Rather they should be seen as an attempted explanation of a perception of values and nation to which I am, and have long been, personally committed.

Some years ago a former leading United Kingdom Labor politician told me a story which came unbidden to my mind last week when I was thinking about what I would say this evening. It was about the Chinese statesman, V. K. Wellington Koo, who was one of the outstanding diplomats, scholars and international lawyers of the 20th Century.

In the 1930s, while Wellington Koo was Chinese Ambassador to the United Kingdom, he was seated next to an English trade union leader at an important London Guild Hall banquet. The trade union leader was well intentioned but at a complete loss for conversation with his Chinese neighbour. He devoted himself exclusively to the person seated on his other side. As the first course was being removed, however, he finally thought of something to say. Turning to Wellington Koo, he loudly and slowly enquired: "Likee soup?" Dr. Koo was saved the need to respond by being called on by the Chairman as the evening's distinguished speaker. In his faultless English, he gave a brilliant analysis of the working of the League of Nations to whose establishment he had been a contributor while China's delegate to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. To sustained applause, he returned to his place. After a few moments, he turned to his neighbour. Quietly he enquired: "Likee speech?"

As that possibly apocryphal story may indicate, my own starting point for any assessment of Australia's multiculturalism lies in memories of the religious bigotry and racial prejudice which were prevalent in this country when I was a boy and teenager growing up in the 1930s and 1940s. That was a society whose members, apart from the largely invisible Aborigines, overwhelmingly traced their origins to Britain and Ireland. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, I have no doubt that, in the main, the source of that bigotry and intolerance was a mixture of traditional and inherited prejudice, lack of meaningful dialogue and just plain ignorance. Nor, again with the benefit of hindsight, do those youthful memories leave me in any doubt that, in a context of cultural differences and possible antagonisms, mutual respect and

understanding require more than an attitude of laissez faire or a mere avoidance of specific adverse discrimination on the part of those who wish to foster them, be they governments or private citizens. They are qualities which must be actively cultivated and diligently safeguarded.

(i) "AUSTRALIA'S MULTICULTURALISM"

Our Continent has been the home of a diversity of cultures since the earliest times. We now know that the Aboriginal cultures, which stretch back into the Dreamtime of 60,000 years ago, included great variations in spiritual and cultural beliefs, languages, traditions and practices. During the 217 years following European settlement, many of them were lost. Others have managed to survive.

One legacy of those 217 years has been that less than one in forty of the people of this Continent now claim indigenous descent¹. The rest of us are all immigrants or descended from immigrants. Immediately or more distantly, we come from practically all the inhabited regions, races, cultures and religions of the world. Obviously, Australia is a multicultural country in the basic sense of being populated by people of many different cultures and cultural backgrounds. And that cultural diversity is not likely to lessen in the foreseeable future. In 2002-2003, 52% of our population growth was attributable to net overseas migration.

History abundantly demonstrates that, within a nation or community as well as at the international level, cultural diversity, including religious and racial differences, can be a source of disharmony and dispute and a cause of, or excuse for, injustice, disadvantage, violence and even war. On the other hand, such cultural diversity can be a source of knowledge and understanding, an impetus and challenge to

¹ In the 2001 Census, 2.2% of the total claimed Indigenous origin)

development and improvement, a broadening of human horizons, an enrichment of human life and an economic asset. In a truly democratic culturally diverse nation such as ours, the challenge to ensure that such diversity is a source of advantage and benefit rather than a cause of disadvantage, injustice and conflict is an integral part of the quest for national well being and even survival. In such a nation, the democratic ideals of personal dignity, freedom and true equality of treatment under the law demand, if they are to have real content, a positive policy of true multiculturalism which applies to protect the essential rights and legitimate aspirations of all its citizens.

In that context, the phrase “Australia’s multiculturalism” must be understood in a broad conceptual sense. So understood, it signifies positive acceptance of our cultural diversity as a defining and valuable national characteristic which, to borrow the words of the Premier, Dr Geoff Gallop, in his 2003 Walter Murdoch Lecture, “enriches our social fabric and brings with it a variety of cultural and economic benefits, generating innovation and enhanced flexibility”. In that sense, our multiculturalism encompasses legislative, administrative and social policies, programmes and attitudes formulated and implemented to protect, advance and exploit that cultural diversity. By and large, the positive story of our multiculturalism in that conceptual sense is largely confined to the years since the middle of the 20th century, particularly the last four and a half decades.

Even within that limited time frame, there have been some failures and weaknesses. Yet, subject to the special case of Indigenous Australians to which I shall return, the overall balance is strongly positive and reflects much of which we can be justly proud. Indeed, in this modern world rent by so much hatred and conflict, Australia’s multiculturalism is at least arguably our most significant achievement as a nation. For it is our multiculturalism that has enabled us to

encompass the many within a pretty harmonious whole while largely avoiding bringing to this land old hatreds, prejudices and conflicts.

Nonetheless, multiculturalism is currently being subjected to a variety of pressures and challenges in our community. I specifically mention but some of them. There is a degree of dispute and confusion about its underlying objectives and philosophy. There is a growing tendency to distort its nature and belittle its importance. There are some widely supported attitudes and policies which are antithetical to its underlying ethos and rationale. There are the distrust, the fears and the prejudices arising from political, economic and social pressures, not least the incidence of international terrorism and conflict. On another front, even among some genuine supporters of multiculturalism, there is a rather common tendency to concentrate upon high-sounding rhetoric to an extent that ignores the critical importance of actual attitudes, circumstances and opportunities. And there is a common failure to appreciate the extent to which attitudes towards, and the circumstances of, Indigenous Australians lie at the very heart of a responsible national multiculturalism.

Obviously, this is not the occasion for attempting to deal in detail with, let alone resolve, even those difficulties and challenges which I have specifically mentioned. The most I can do, within the temporal confines of this evening, is make some comments about what I see as the most important of them.

(ii) ASSIMILATION OR CELEBRATION?

By and large, the purpose of the initial adoption and implementation of a national policy of multiculturalism in this country was to encourage a favorable environment for the harmonious absorption or assimilation of the influx of migrants in the decades following the Second World War. On the other hand, the increasingly

altered cultural composition of our population over the last half century has inevitably seen the evolvement of the approach that multiculturalism is not to be seen merely or primarily as a transitory means to an end, namely, the harmonious assimilation of new arrivals into an essentially British and Irish society. On that approach, which seems to me to be well founded, multiculturalism should be seen as an end in itself, namely, the celebration and exploitation of a cultural diversity which should be accepted as a permanent defining characteristic of our national citizenship and identity. It's easy to exaggerate the extent of the antithesis between the two approaches since those who see multiculturalism primarily as an aid to harmonious assimilation are also likely to be appreciative of at least some of the permanent community benefits flowing from cultural diversity while those who see multiculturalism as a concept or policy celebrating the fact and benefits of cultural diversity at all levels including national citizenship and identity are likely to be appreciative of its advantages as regards easing the path of new arrivals. Nonetheless the underlying tension between the two approaches is a cause of real weakness not only to the formulation of policies but in the way we actually view our nation².

(iii): SOME HOSTILE ATTITUDES AND POLICIES

One cannot but be conscious of a tendency in recent times to seek to discount or trivialize policies and attitudes protecting the dignity and self esteem of other human beings by dismissive or occasionally sneering reference to the pejorative and largely meaningless catchphrase of "political correctness". Or, in some more strident sections of the media, by childish reference to things such as drinking chardonnay, or cappuccino or even latte or an undefined "chattering class" from which those who are enamored of the phrase apparently see themselves as strangely exempt. Again, there is the tendency to use misleading labels or generalizations to appeal to prejudice or to

²See, e.g., Professor Jayasuriya, "Chartering a New Way for Australian Multiculturalism", Migrant Action, Vol. XXVI, No.3 2004.

arouse antagonism or distrust in relation to fellow human beings of different cultural backgrounds. Who of us, for example, will easily forget the all too recent and widely accepted attempts to brand asylum seekers, including many genuine refugees, as “queue jumpers” or “illegals” or “people like that” who threw their children overboard. Even more serious is the antithesis between the humanity and decency of the mutual respect and acceptance of multiculturalism and some actual policies, often enjoying popular and sometimes bilateral political support. One example is the incarceration of innocent children for indefinite periods behind razor wire in isolated areas of Australia or in the harshness of a manufactured legal vacuum in a place such as Nauru. Another is the artificial manipulation of national borders to foil asylum seekers, again including genuine refugees. Perhaps reminiscent of the Priest and Levite who, in the Parable, crossed the road to avoid contact with the victim of terrible misfortune.

The extraordinary response in the face of the devastation caused by the recent Tsunami demonstrated how generous Australians can be towards people from different places and cultural and ethnic backgrounds. What then is the explanation of those hostile attitudes and policies against people in real need seeking to reach our shores? It seems to me to lie in a mixture of political and economic pressures and genuine apprehension consequent upon terrorist outrages and conflict and violence in so many foreign parts. With all respect to those who genuinely see things differently, however, those attitudes and policies seem to me to be misguided even from a selfish point of view.

The genuine apprehension of many Australians in the face of terrorism in other parts of the world is, to no small extent, a consequence of the assertion by some involved that they are acting in the name of one of the world’s great religions, Islam, which, on conservative estimates, has more than 1.2 billion adherents world wide,

with some 300,000 in Australia³. In fact, of course, terrorist acts against innocent people are contrary to the teaching of true Islam with its Golden Rule⁴ and its mandatory injunction of “True Charity”⁵. To the extent that they enjoy the support of some rogue Islamic extremists, it is no more justifiable to treat all followers of Islam with disaffection and distrust because of them than it would be to treat all Christians similarly because of terrorist violence and killings by Catholics and Protestants over the years in Ireland and other parts of the world. In recent times, I personally have had considerable contact with the leaders of Islam in Australia. For example, in the last six months, I was, on one happy occasion, privileged to open Canberra’s new Islamic Centre while, on another tragically sad one, as outgoing Chair of CARE Australia, I welcomed representatives of Islam in Australia to a private ecumenical memorial service after the murder in Iraq of CARE Australia’s much loved Country Director, Margaret Hassan. There is no doubt at all in my mind, nor was there any in Margaret’s after a lifetime of direct personal experience and contact, that the most effective opponents of terrorism by those falsely purporting to act in the name of Islam are the leaders and followers of true Islam. That means that, from Australia’s point of view, one of the most effective defences against the evil of such terrorism is the type of informed and reasoned dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims which multiculturalism, with its underlying mutual respect and acceptance, makes possible. Moreover, it is that multiculturalism which is best calculated to prevent the development in Australia of the sort of environment of disconnection, disadvantage and perceived injustice which is most calculated to give rise to dangerous disaffection and resentment on the part of our Muslim fellow Australians, particularly the young.

Quite apart from our own self interest, those policies and attitudes seem to me to be unfortunate in that they reflect a weakening of our sense of shared humanity and

³ 261.6 thousand at the 2001 Census.

⁴ “Do as you would be done by”.

⁵ See, e.g., The Holy Koran, (Published under the authority of the Custodian of the Two Mosques) ,s51, n. 5001 and s.83, n.6011

humane values and a loss of true perspective. In so far as values are concerned, I venture the thought that all but the inhumane would ordinarily recognize what the Pope has described⁶ as a “duty to welcome” fellow human beings who come knocking in desperate need. In so far as loss of perspective is concerned, let me illustrate the point by a contrast.

In the terrorist outrages of September 2001 in America and October 2002 in Bali, a total of some three thousand people lost their lives. Not surprisingly, the media coverage and public outrage and sympathy were overwhelming. We could readily identify with the victims. Our horror and concern have been intensified by subsequent terrorist murders in Madrid, in Beslan and in other places.

In stark contrast to that legitimate horror and concern is the comparative indifference which many of us seem to show to another, less dramatic but constant and overwhelming, set of facts and circumstances affecting people with whom we do not readily identify.

On average, on each day of the past four years, more than 16,000 of the world’s children died of preventable starvation, malnutrition or related sickness. More than 6 million each year. More than the total number of adults and children killed on 11 September 2001 in America, 12 October 2002 in Bali, in Madrid and in Beslan every five and a half hours of every day. Yet day after day one looks in vain in our media for even a word about the approximately 16,000 children who died as the result of preventable starvation or malnutrition on the previous day. Somehow we seem to have managed to disconnect from the basic message of human decency that each of those victims is not just a statistic but a human child ... just like our own. As is each

⁶Message for the 89th World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2003) and see, generally, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference’s 2003 Social Justice Sunday Statement, pp.7-9.

of the innocent children who have been incarcerated by us Australians both within and outside our country, including the children who were not thrown overboard.

It is only when we Australians again really focus on our shared humanity with people everywhere that we will finally rid ourselves of attitudes and policies which are antagonistic to the generosity of spirit and mutual understanding, respect and acceptance which lie at the heart of our multiculturalism. It is also only then that we will properly focus on the overwhelming imperative that all the millions of starving and disadvantaged children of the world, including, of course, the refugees and asylum seekers, be saved and given lives worth living. It is true that that objective will almost certainly not be achieved without a global revolution in thinking and practice, particularly in the world's affluent countries. But it is not unachievable. And its achievement is necessitated not only by basic considerations of justice and humanity but also by cold pragmatism. For it is through such a global revolution in thinking and practice that we are most likely significantly to reduce the current prevalence in the world of the conditions in which conflict is inevitable and the agents of terrorism can flourish.

(v) SOME OTHER GENUINE FEARS

One sometimes hears genuine suggestions that multiculturalism discourages pride in our country's traditions, institutions and achievements. Or that it precludes legitimate questioning and proscription of cultural practices that are unacceptable according to fundamental standards of our society. Those suggestions are ill-founded.

Through its inclusiveness, multiculturalism encourages and makes possible truly national pride – that is pride in which all citizens can genuinely share - in our country and its traditions, institutions and achievements. Indeed, properly understood, multiculturalism reflects and implements some of the basic notions of

equality and fairness which lie at the heart of our traditional values and institutions. In that sense, it should be seen as a fulfillment, rather than an undermining, of our democracy. It is true that multiculturalism may at times be seen by some as challenging or helping lessen the dominance of some traditional influences in our country. But in that it is simply reflecting the working of democracy in the context of our altered identity as a people.

Nor, on any sensible and responsible approach, does multiculturalism mean that introduced or indigenous cultural or religious practices or weaknesses are immune from examination, reasoned criticism or control within Australia. Rather it helps make possible an environment in which there *can be* reasoned and informed discussion, criticism and control. It should not and does not, for example, protect practices which damage or destroy the person or property of other citizens - such as, to take an extreme case, the genital mutilation of young women - or which are simply unacceptable according to the standards of our society - such as polygamy. Nor, for that matter, does it absolve governments or the community of the responsibility to protect the weak and powerless in every cultural group or section of society, such as the obligation to advance the education and welfare of all Australian children and to protect them from the consequences of exposure to alcohol and drug abuse, truancy and domestic violence.

(vi) INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

In the early stages of the story of Australia's multiculturalism, when it was essentially concerned with the harmonious assimilation of new immigrants, Indigenous Australians and their cultures tended to be seen as lying outside its scope. It would now seem to be generally recognized that the circumstances of Indigenous Australians and the relationship between them and their fellow Australians must lie in its forefront. Once that is recognized, it is apparent that Australia's multiculturalism

will remain flawed - and, at least to some extent, a tragic mockery - unless and until true and lasting reconciliation is reached between our Indigenous peoples and the nation of which they form such an important part.

Nine years ago, when I left the High Court to become Governor General, I had high hopes that we would achieve Aboriginal reconciliation by our national Centenary on 1st January 2001. That was at the middle of what has been described as the “Decade of Reconciliation” which culminated in the great bridge marches of May 2000 and the presentation to the Governments and the People of Australia of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation’s landmark Declaration and Roadmap. If it had been possible to achieve national consensus on those documents, it would have constituted an auspicious start to what the Council described as “Australia’s continuing journey”.

However, as we now know, that was not to be. While we had walked far together, no national consensus was achieved.

In the years since Corroboree 2000, relations between Indigenous Australians and their and our nation seem to me to have significantly deteriorated. And the plight of our Aboriginal fellow Australians, particularly our nation’s indigenous children, has remained overwhelming.

Most Australians, I have noticed, tend to tune out when figures or statistics are quoted. And that is not surprising since it is so often difficult to get one’s mind properly around them or to translate dry figures and statistics into human reality. But there is one overwhelming statistic which should always be the starting point and of which we should all always be conscious in any discussion of Aboriginal disadvantage. It is, of course, the simple statistical fact that an Aboriginal baby born in this country on this day will, on average and if things don’t improve, have a life

expectancy of around 20 years less than will a non-indigenous baby ...around 19 years less if the baby is a girl and around 21 years less if a boy. That appalling state of affairs is dramatically worse than the corresponding statistics in what should be comparable countries ...New Zealand, Canada and the United States where the discrepancies, although still unacceptable, are between a third and a sixth of the Australian figure. And it would seem that, in this country, the discrepancy is, if anything, still growing.⁷

Those statistics are not simply statistics of shortened lives. They are statistics of diminished ability, happiness and opportunity during life. For one cannot isolate indigenous ill health from the human suffering, loss and disadvantage that it entails. Nor can one isolate its effects from the other focal points of indigenous disadvantage in our land: educational standards, employment opportunities, living conditions, hope, self-fulfillment and self-esteem or from the related problems of entrenched welfare dependency, alcohol and substance abuse and domestic violence.

I do not, however, wish to end on that discouraging note. For, notwithstanding past and present disappointments, I remain hopeful about where we are placed now for making real progress if we possess the necessary will and determination and can succeed in establishing reasoned and informed dialogue and consultation in the context of a genuine search on all sides for true consensus about the way forward. That hopefulness is largely based on the remarkable change in the attitude of Australians generally in recent decades and on the innumerable outstanding efforts and achievements at the grass roots level. It is also based on the remarkable generosity of so many Indigenous Australians and my confidence in the encouraging number of extraordinarily talented young Indigenous leaders and future leaders. What is missing is a general community sense that those and other changes, efforts and

⁷ See, e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People 2003*, p.182; Commonwealth Grants Commission, *Report on Indigenous Funding 2001*, p.105.

achievements and some impressive Government Programmes, are part of the kind of renewed *national* movement that is essential if we are to achieve true national reconciliation, both practical *and* spiritual or symbolic – for it is futile to talk of one without the other. In that regard, let me respectfully urge you to lend what support you can to the ambitious programme of Reconciliation Australia, of which I am a Patron, to reinvigorate the search for reconciliation at the national level. That programme, which will culminate in a major National Convention in 2007, will really get under way at the end of May this year with an important National Workshop in Canberra in which national leaders, including leader, of Indigenous Australia, will participate. Let us all hope that, as regards relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians at the National level, it will at least help get us back to where we were.

Since this is my first visit to his home State since he stood aside as Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia, I would like to acknowledge the great debt owed to Fred Chaney for his wonderful leadership and dedication over the years. Fortunately he is remaining on as a member of Reconciliation Australia's Board.

(vi) TIME FOR ASSESSMENT AND RENEWAL

As I have indicated, I believe that, until we begin to make much more effective progress towards resolving the searing problems of Aboriginal disadvantage and towards true and lasting reconciliation, Australia's multiculturalism will remain vitally flawed. Otherwise, in what I have said this evening, I have sought to explain why I am convinced of the absolutely critical importance of our commitment to multiculturalism as a national policy and way of life. The challenges and the pressures, to some of which I have referred, seem to me, if anything, to add emphasis to that importance. They combine, however, with the genuine distrust and fears of many of our fellow Australians, to strongly indicate that the time is appropriate for a

concerted campaign, of assessment, education, and renewal at all levels of government and the community. Assessment: to resolve undesirable ambiguity or uncertainty and to ascertain the most effective means of promotion and implementation. Education: to seek to persuade those of our fellow Australians who are yet to be convinced of its fundamental importance to our decency, our wellbeing and our future. Renewal: of our commitment as a nation. I should perhaps add that, in light of its recent and eloquent Charter of Multiculturalism and its encouragement of informed dialogue, I would hope that this State would play a leading role in any such campaign.

Looking back, I had Australia's multiculturalism very much in mind when, in my 1999 Australia Day message as Governor General, I sought to articulate the objectives, the theme and the vision which I believed we Australians should take into our second century as a nation and the third millennium of our time. The objectives were "relief of disadvantage", "reconciliation" and "multiculturalism". The theme was one "of caring ... of tolerance ... of concern for true equality, dignity, opportunity and hope ... for all Australians". The vision was one not "of imposed uniformity but of true and worthwhile unity and mutual acceptance Of Australians walking together, talking together, caring together, working together, achieving together".

Those objectives, that theme and that vision should, I believe, lie at the very heart of Australia's multiculturalism. Some may see them as high-flown and even unrealistic. It seems to me however that they are more important now than they have ever been if we and our children are not to risk losing our generosity, our values and our way.