

The Beauty of Difference

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In the Aboriginal Welcome to Country we are reminded of what it is that unites us no matter where we have come from. This is an Aboriginal land. We are gathered here on Gadigal Country, the traditional lands of the people of the Eora Nation and our respect for their elders, past and present, honours their extraordinary accomplishment as the world's oldest multicultural and multilingual society.

With at least 250 distinct Indigenous languages and a huge diversity of clans I believe that this is our starting point, the very foundation of Australia's multiculturalism.

There is a valuable lesson here and we should become familiar with it and prize one of the most important concepts in the Indigenous system of intellectual knowledge.

For Aboriginal people, despite the amazing diversity of Cultures and languages, the common ground, the underlying unifying force, remains the same. We are all *of this land*. We share a responsibility for custodianship and this is the key to our wellbeing and that of future generations, indeed it may be the decisive factor in the longevity of our species.

Think of this when someone asks you, *who are we as Australians* and *what is it that unifies us* as one of the most hopefully diverse nations on earth? The answer is simple but profound. We are all *of this land*.

Who are we? Why are we here? These are the kind of *why-is-the sky-blue* questions we ask as a child.

As a very young boy, living for a time on the island of Penang, I watched Malays at work in the rice paddies, Chinese trading down in the old port of Georgetown and Indians tapping into the rubber trees. The Malays went to a Mosque, the Chinese to a Buddhist temple and the Indians worshipped nearby at the Hindu Snake Temple.

What was going on here? The Nuns back home had told me that Satan was a serpent and yet here were people offering incense as snakes crawled all over the smoking candelabra.

I learned at that young age that rather than being held back by any wired-in biological fear of difference, if such an evolutionary trait even exists, I found that life was much more interesting and enjoyable when you were crossing the borders of predictable knowledge and discovering the delicious beauty of difference. The many shades of human creativity, problem solving, thinking, singing, dancing, art, music, food, work and play, make our human family a wonder to behold.

In those tender early years my brothers and I were handed a lesson by our parents on how to see in a multicultural society the many fine distinctions in people and yet at the same time appreciate the common humanity we share. My father was in the RAAF fighting what we then called terrorism and I also came to understand the connection between poverty, hunger and conflict.

When the monsoons came to Penang, in our *kampong* old men with wrinkled skin and their ribs poking through came up from the storm-water drains where they slept on cardboard. They were usually followed by groups of impoverished beggar women holding their little babies right there at our open front door. My mother would share what we had, food, clothing and shelter around our covered verandas. Our big kitchen table was always overflowing with people.

“You know they will keep coming back,” my father would say with a smile, and my mother would reply, “Yes, but they have children and we have more than enough of everything here.”

Isn't this the case in Australia, which surely has more to share...including hope... than anywhere I have been in more than fifty years of world wandering.

Instead of being side-tracked on our journey towards becoming the most hopeful society on earth or demoralised by outbursts of racism, ignorance and intolerance, yes we have plenty of that, we will have a much stronger and clearer sense of the way ahead if we celebrate what we share here tonight.

Let me repeat. On this common ground, this land that holds us all in the Aboriginal sense, we have all we need to be the most hopeful human society on earth.

I am not romanticising our past or present. I am not minimising our persistent racism and discrimination. Ask Aboriginal footballers like Adam Goodes and Timana Tahu about the pain caused by individual displays of the ugliest and most ignorant racism. The Cronulla race riot reminded us of the violence that can be so easily manipulated in human hearts and minds. I have seen that happen on a vast scale, to whole populations, especially during the genocide in Rwanda where almost one million people died in less than one hundred days, in Guatemala too where some 250,000 of the last Indigenous majority in the Americas were butchered by soldiers wearing crucifixes around their necks and of course in the killing fields of Cambodia where millions died. In all of these cases, a dangerous manipulative minority with power and no democratic checks on their terror tactics, were able to fill the heads of millions of people with lies about the threat posed by just one part of their society.

These are the patterns of human behaviour around the globe that we need to understand to build unity in our own multicultural society.

We are ignoring the Big Picture and the global patterns in our decade long political partisanship over the issue of refugees and asylum seekers.

The deaths of desperate men, women and even tiny babies in the dangerous seas off Christmas Island surely tells us that it is time to overcome the political bickering and to settle on a united, lawful, human approach here in Australia.

Australian anxiety over asylum seekers is vastly exaggerated and those politicians and media voices manipulating the constant chatter about terrorism and a threat to the Australian way of life are playing into the hands of dangerous forces that *are* opposed to our open democracy.

Turning back boats at sea, as the Federal Opposition proposes, is sheer folly. In the rough seas where the people smugglers voyage this could well increase the danger for the desperate passengers and for the naval forces from both Australia and Indonesia. A policy aimed at deterrence by simply challenging leaky boats at sea is not going to stop the flood of desperate human beings around the globe. Let me explain why.

There are now over 40 million human beings adrift across borders, the greatest mass movement of people in the history of the world.

The global population has been growing at an unprecedented rate and will reach 8 billion by around 2025, climbing to around 10 billion by 2050 and then, hopefully stabilising. This pressure underlies the war, famine and contest for the most essential life supporting resources, food, water, arable land and energy. Since the end of World War II humans have devoured more raw materials than in all of previous history. I have witnessed the results in Africa, Asia, Europe and South America.

Our species is at war with one another and with the earth itself. I have seen thirty of those wars, along with terrible genocides, man made famines and millions of refugees living in unbearable conditions. Some are stranded for years in transit camps inside countries like Pakistan that are struggling with their own development.

It is very clear to me that Australia could do far more to alleviate the dangerous and quite inhuman pressures so many of these people are forced to endure. All of these people are members of our human family and they have the right to live in peace and safety wherever they can find sanctuary.

It is wrong to quibble about whether they are so called economic refugees or political refugees fleeing war and persecution.

The global pattern I have described has created an inextricable link between conflict, ethnic cleansing, religious and political persecution and the struggle over food, work and shelter.

Those who designed the United Nations Refugee Convention understood the impact of war and its link to the flood of human beings across borders. We should be proud that Australia was one of the first nations to sign the 1951 Convention and not weaken our resolve to set a shining example of what it means to be human.

Our human rights and our human responsibilities compel us to show more understanding of what our good neighbours such as Indonesia and Malaysia are dealing with as the new arrivals put great pressure on struggling locals in their poorer neighbourhoods.

It is not only a question of understanding the huge challenges Indonesia is handling with the complex development issues for 240 million people, it is recognizing that our strongest security, our true national interests, will be enhanced by working together on a human, regional solution. This goes for smaller neighbouring nations like Papua New Guinea which have too much to handle already without the burden of refugees who plainly believe all the while that a developed nation, Australia or New Zealand, will give them that human opportunity to live and contribute.

I have heard no one in this shallow and sickening political debate, ten years of it, make a convincing case that shows these people coming to our shores are weakening our society.

Look at the choice another way. If we stubbornly keep our heads in the sand and refuse to accept more immigrants and more refugees we will only exacerbate the dangerous pressures that fuel tension in these nearby countries and we will be limited in our lifetimes by our own fearfulness.

If we want a safer, more stable world then Australia must play a far more constructive role and I call on our political party leaders to show more genuine leadership.

If we engage constructively and openly with our neighbours in the planned regional conference we can develop a far better approach to process asylum seekers. Those whose lives are threatened at home such as the Afghans, Iranians or Sri Lankan asylum seekers need our understanding and support. We should not keep their children impounded in compounds anywhere for prolonged periods. Process asylum seekers rapidly whether they are abroad or here and give them their human right to work for a dignified wage.

As to those who are fleeing war torn countries and oppressive regimes looking for a better life, if some of these Iranians for instance do have education and skills, then why can't they be rapidly processed as immigrants and future citizens? We bring in many workers on temporary visas and have skilled shortages around the country. If you are going to shun the Iranians for seeking a better life bear in mind that their Government refuses to take them back. Put yourselves in the shoes of those families, I say, and you can see clearly what responsibility we share.

Look around the world in turmoil and admit that only when we play our part, and that means doing far more to help ease conflict and ease the pressure of this mass exodus, only then will the world of our children be a safer and even happier place.

The truth is that Australia can overcome its current anxiety over refugees and demonstrate to the world that modern societies can be multicultural and successful.

We are a work in progress, a new society, and the more we get involved in personally crossing these self-imposed cultural borders the more of life's joys we will discover.

We are not there yet. But the idea of a great society, a human family united, respectful and celebrating our many faceted strengths and virtues, should be clearly in sight.

We do need to erase the stain of racism from our *White Australia* Constitution, recognizing the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and ensuring, constitutionally that there is no discrimination against anyone on the basis of race, colour, religion, age or gender. Hopefully that can be done in a successful Referendum but we also need a legal compact to recognise the self-determination and sovereignty of Australia's First Peoples.

While ever we cling to the race powers in the out-dated Constitution and refuse to specifically bar all kinds of discrimination we weaken the foundations that we need to build on for genuine greatness as a nation.

We must also grapple with some structural problems that always hold potential to weaken the foundations of our multicultural society.

We still have a British Monarch for our Head of State. Even some members of the current Royal Family are bemused that we have not opted already for a more vigorous independence. They clearly understand that this is a decision for Australians when we are unified and the time is right. Clinging to the British Monarchy is a false stability. In fact it is an anachronism in our multicultural nation that apart from the First Australians now has citizens from some 270 other ancestries and 260 different languages.

The British Monarch not only is our Head of State but also happens to be the head of the Church of England, which tends to convince some Australians that Australia in some official sense is a Christian nation. The truth is, constitutionally speaking, it is not. Section 116 of the Constitution specifically prohibits Australia from having a state religion and also guarantees citizens the right to practice the religion of their choice. We don't always get the separation of church and state right, as evidenced by funding chaplains in schools instead of skilled teachers or ethicists capable of giving all children a well rounded understanding of morality and the various interpretations of ethics by various religions. But I daresay Australian parliaments, like this one, not only reflect the diversity of people of religious faith but also the approximately 20% of Australians who profess no religion at all. Any citizen elected to parliament surely has every right to swear the oath of office on the Bible, the Koran or the Torah.

I am certain that our Governor General, Quentin Bryce, was right to celebrate Ed Husic's swearing in as Prime Minister Rudd's new Parliamentary Secretary. Ed Husic's decision to take the oath on the Koran was applauded and defended by Jewish and Christian Members of Parliament, surely a show of strength of Australia at its best.

What the critics are missing on this matter is that Ed Husic's religion, or Kevin Rudd's or Tony Abbott's, is only one facet of their identity and their place in this nation. Join your own children at any event at their school or university and watch the shining beauty of difference and diversity that allows us to be ourselves as individuals and yet to find that common ground and so many other important things in life that we can share easily and joyfully.

When Ashton Agar made his brilliant debut with the bat and ball in England we saw the glorious smiling face of modern multicultural Australia. A mother born in Sri Lanka and yes it was her smile too, a father born in Australia, brothers like Ashton raised to believe that out on the oval, on that common ground, we are all equal and entitled to a place in the sun.

At the State of Origin Rugby League game in Sydney last night or at any Grand Final in any sporting code around this nation, look around at the cheering crowds and you will see the beauty of diversity and difference.

The critics of multiculturalism like the historian, Geoffrey Blainey, always feared that we would be a cluster of tribes, divided and constantly struggling for social cohesion. The opposite is true for most people.

Those tired old Culture War warriors who are still so afraid of even the word “multiculturalism” have simply failed to notice that overwhelmingly most of Australians are part of the diversity and difference.

We quite enjoy diversity because it is in our blood and bones, in our families, in our many coloured layers and shapes of identity and history.

My own partner was born in Hawaii and raised in mainland America and so our children too are among the 45% of Australians who have one or more parents born overseas. Look around this room and you see we *are* the United Nations.

Around Western Sydney about 60% of the First Australians have married someone from somewhere else and this continues my major theme. Aboriginal people have known and welcomed others coming and going from this land for 60,000 or maybe 80,000 years.

We are today a wonderfully mixed up mob. Draw strength from this and don't live in fear.

We need to build bridges of understanding. Share the hard work still to be done and do our best to dispel the stereotyping that makes us see the worst in people instead of their best. Instead of constant negativity, we need more positive reassuring affirmation that we really have far more in common and that we can share this common ground.

I want to see Australians recognize who we are already, what we have built together, this beauty of diversity and then we will be unified for the rest of the journey to genuine equality.

Address at NSW Parliament Dinner hosted by Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Hon Victor Dominello and Affinity Intercultural Foundation. July 18th 2013.