

Racial Tolerance Motion - Address to Parliament

10 October 2016

Parliament House, Canberra

Prime Minister

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Mr Speaker,

I move that this House:

- 1.
2. Reaffirms its commitment to the right of all Australians to enjoy equal rights and be treated with equal respect regardless of race, colour, creed or origin;
3. Reaffirms its commitment to maintaining an immigration policy wholly non discriminatory on grounds of race, colour, creed or origin;
4. Reaffirms its commitment to the process of reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in the context of redressing their profound social and economic disadvantage;
5. Reaffirms its commitment to maintaining Australia as a culturally diverse, tolerant and open society, united by an overriding commitment to our nation, and its democratic institutions and values; and
6. Denounces racial intolerance in any form as incompatible with the kind of society we are and want to be.

Fifty years ago this week, Australia became an early signatory to one of the world's most profound declarations on human rights -- the United Nations' International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. It is a treaty that goes directly to a basic principle of our respect for each other as fellow human beings - respect for each other regardless of race, colour or ethnicity.

I am proud that it was the government of my Liberal predecessor, Harold Holt, that signed that treaty in New York on October 13, 1966. And I'm equally proud that, only six months earlier, the Holt Government had made historic changes to our migration laws: dismantling all laws and regulations allowing discrimination against migrants on the grounds of colour or race. And it was in August of the previous year, 1965, that the Labor Party formally removed the "maintenance of a White Australia" from its platform.

And on 27 May 1967, Australians voted overwhelmingly to amend the Constitution to enable the Commonwealth to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. A process that began under Sir Robert Menzies, and was completed under the leadership of Harold Holt. Ultimately, those momentous decisions by the Menzies and Holt Liberal

Governments signalled the death of the White Australia Policy -- and opened up for this country all the new and exciting opportunities awaiting a multicultural Australia.

They sought to end discrimination, and ensure our First Australians were not treated like visitors in their own country - a wrong which we, as a nation, are still reconciling. Accordingly, we rise in this Parliament today - as John Howard and Kim Beazley did 20 years ago - to speak on this very motion - a twenty year old unity ticket perhaps - celebrating and reaffirming the Australian values of fair go and mutual respect for all regardless of how they look, how they worship or where they come from.

Today, I rise to reaffirm my commitment to these common values and to the kind of Australian society that I believe in, and have always believed in.

First and foremost, I see one of the great defining characteristics of the nation that is Australia — that we are the most successful multicultural society in the world. We are as old as our First Australians, the oldest continuing human culture on earth, who have cared for this country for more than 40,000 years. And we are as young as the baby in the arms of her migrant mother who could have come from any nation, any faith, any race in the world.

In just the last week we welcomed 1,667 people as new Australians in 47 citizenship ceremonies around Australia. Australian citizenship represents commitment to Australia and its people, the values we share and our common future. It symbolises our unity as a nation. It represents our sense of belonging to the country where we have been born or where we have decided to make our home.

These new citizens have come from 88 different countries. Many have joined our regional communities such as Port Lincoln and Coober Pedy in South Australia; Derwent and Moora in Western Australia; Dubbo, Bega and Maitland in NSW; La Trobe and Casey in Victoria; Ipswich and Cook in northern Queensland as well as in the larger metropolitan centres.

As I speak, a ceremony is being held on Thursday Island - a remote community in the Torres Strait.

Australia is an immigration nation. Today almost half of us have a parent born overseas and more than a quarter of Australians were born overseas themselves. We are much more diverse than the United States, only one of whose fifty US states - California - has a comparable overseas-born population. Since 1945 more than 7.5 million people have come from all corners of the earth to make their life here. In joining our fold, they have added their own identity to the extraordinary project that is modern Australia.

Migrants from every continent, from the grandest city to the smallest village, from our nearest neighbour to the most far flung corner of the globe, have made Australia their home. Our newest Australians have arrived under a broad range of visas - as skilled migrants nominated by employers, as refugees and humanitarian entrants, as partners, carers, business owners, regional skilled migrants, people of distinguished talent, and as parents. Each one brings a rich personal history that we welcome into our Australian community at the time they formalise their commitment to our country, our values and our rule of law.

They are drawn here by the promise of security, prosperity and freedom. Everyone sitting in this chamber and every Australian is a beneficiary of the diversity that is at the heart of our nation.

At the UN last month I told the story of one of those people. Twenty-two year old Sudanese-Australian Aliir Aliir grew up in a refugee camp in Kenya after his family fled the bloody civil war in Sudan. For Aliir and 150,000 other men, women and children, Kakuma refugee camp was their home. The camp provided the bare necessities of meals and shelter, and not much else. Aliir and his friends would improvise with a balloon wrapped with strips of old clothing to use as a football.

He was seven when he and his family came to Australia. Tall, fast and agile, Aliir was a natural for Australian Rules Football and earlier this year, I was delighted when Aliir debuted for the AFL team I support, the Sydney Swans. Aliir is one of the first Sudanese immigrants to play AFL and as such he has become a role model in our multicultural nation. There are thousands of migrant stories like Aliir's.

Their stories are our stories, their successes are our successes. Our achievement in creating a harmonious nation is not an accident. It has been carefully crafted, and it must be nurtured. And a necessary precondition for harmony is security.

Understanding why Australia has been successful will help ensure that we continue to be so: strong borders, vigilant security agencies governed by the rule of law, and a steadfast commitment to the shared values of freedom and mutual respect. Harmony and security are not mutually exclusive; they are mutually reinforcing.

Why is it that people of different races, cultures and religions live alongside each other in harmony here, while similarly diverse societies elsewhere are marked by conflict, division and distrust? Australians do not define themselves by reference to race, religion or ethnic

background. Instead, our identity is defined by shared political values and an overriding commitment to our nation and its democratic institutions and values.

We are bound together by shared political values of democracy, the rule of law and equality of opportunity - a “fair go”.

The glue that holds us together is mutual respect – a deep recognition that each of us is entitled to the same respect, the same dignity, the same opportunities. Our natural inclination is to welcome newcomers, to be curious about their cultures, to enjoy learning about their beliefs and experience. We are open and tolerant because we are confident in our culture, our institutions and our laws. In turn, when our newest Australians take the pledge of citizenship, they promise “loyalty to Australia and its people, whose democratic beliefs I share, whose rights and liberties I respect, and whose laws I will uphold and obey.”

This is the precious compact that binds those of us already here with those who wish to join us. It offers rights but it also confers responsibility. And it works because both sides uphold their end of the bargain.

Central to our democracy is the rule of law. At the same time as our democracy empowers the majority, the rule of law constrains it. The law of the land applies to and protects every Australian regardless of race, creed, colour, gender or status. And just as the law applies to every citizen and corporation it applies most importantly to the Government.

Australia’s proud migrant story has many chapters and is told in the waves of peoples who have come to our shores from different parts of the world. Many of these migrant communities faced tough times when they first arrived and acceptance among fellow Australians was hard won. New waves of immigrants have often been resented, sometimes feared, and we have not always been as tolerant or understanding as, in retrospect, we ought to have been.

But we have much more of which to be proud, than self-reproaching.

Compared to other nations and societies, our multicultural experience has been remarkably harmonious and peaceful. With each new addition to our immigration nation, it has become clearer that our capacity for acceptance and appreciation leads to a strength and richness of cultural diversity. Australia and the world faces the threat of terrorism perpetrated and promoted by extremists who claim to be fighting and killing for Islam.

These people blaspheme Islam and they have been condemned by Muslims and Muslim leaders around the world - most eloquently perhaps by our neighbour President Widodo of

Indonesia who reminds us that his country proves that Islam, democracy and moderation are compatible. Now the object of these terrorists is to divide Islam by driving a wedge of violence between Muslims, between Sunni and Shia and to turn Muslims against the West and the West against Muslims.

The resolution of this conflict within Islam will ultimately depend on Muslims, but in the meantime the Islamist terrorists have succeeded in raising levels of anxiety about Muslim immigration, about the role of Islam itself within Australia. We should not dismiss these concerns - they are real. As leaders our job is to explain the facts, reassure citizens and ensure that everything we do is calculated to keep Australians safe.

Mr Speaker, about half a million Muslims now call Australia home – 40 per cent of whom were born here - and those of Islamic faith make up 2.2 per cent of our population. Islam is a global religion whose adherents number about a quarter of the global population. The Muslim communities are thoroughly diverse and generalisation is more likely to mislead than enlighten. Muslim Australians are an integral part of our Australian family.

Australians of all faiths – and of none – work, live, play and learn happily alongside their Muslim neighbours, friends, colleagues and teammates.

While there are Muslim Australians, including converts, who support the terrorists and seek to do us harm, they are a tiny minority whose madness offends and appals Australian Muslims, as much as it does the wider Australian community.

Mr Speaker, the terrorists want the wider Australian community to turn against Australian Muslims. Their message to Australian Muslims is “you are not wanted here, you will never be accepted here, you cannot be Australian.”

The most effective weapon against the terrorists is an inclusive nation. An inclusive nation is a safer nation. It enables our security agencies to better protect us. It enables them to secure the support and assistance of the Muslim communities without which they cannot keep us safe.

Australia’s migrant story tells us that if we keep learning from each other, opening our doors, our hearts and our minds, harmony will win out. One of the reasons we are so accepting of newcomers is that all but our First Australians are migrants to this land. As I noted at the outset, this year marks 50 years since Harold Holt introduced the Migration Act of 1966, and the changes to rules and laws that established legal equality between British European and non-European migrants to Australia.

At the time, this approach was not universally supported. The battle to drop the White Australia policy was especially hard fought in the Labor Party. Whitlam and Dunstan led the charge for a non-discriminatory policy and were held off for years by Arthur Calwell and an older brigade. After all it was only in 1961 that the national magazine "The Bulletin" dropped its masthead slogan of "Australia for the White Man".

It was also in 1966, that Vincent Lingiari led the walk-off of Gurindji stockmen from the Wave Hill cattle station in the Northern Territory. They walked off to demand equal pay and conditions for Aboriginal stockmen but it was more than that. It was a demand for recognition of their right to the land, a demand for political representation, a demand to respect Aboriginal cultures and peoples. It was a cry for the respect, the mutual respect, upon which the success of our great Australian project is founded.

We are a multicultural nation and our multicultural character began long before Europeans set foot on this land. Before European settlement, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples spoke hundreds of languages, including more than 600 dialects, and for tens of thousands of years Indigenous cultures lived side by side with the shared purpose of caring for this country. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - language is not just a collection of words. Language is knowledge. And knowledge is what protects and maintains culture.

My Government is deeply committed to the preservation of these ancient languages and to their recognition by the wider Australian community, and ensuring Indigenous language organisations can teach them to future generations, so the stories, the knowledge and the cultures lives on. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are as diverse as the broader Australian population. There is not one archetypal Indigenous Australian. Our First Australians live and work in our biggest cities, and the smallest of remote homelands. Our First Australians are doctors, teachers, studying at Harvard and Oxford, studying at schools right across Australia, taking on work, buying homes, traveling, and supporting their families. Their hopes and aspirations are as diverse as all other Australians.

What unites our First Australians is their rich history, of protection of lands, of caring for country. But rather than seeing this as something that belongs only to Indigenous peoples, and not to all Australians - we should see the history and cultures of our First Australians as something that informs and enlightens us all. For decades, Aboriginal identity was used to control the lives of Indigenous people and diminish their value in our society. It is to the credit of our First Australians that their strength, their resilience and their determination has enabled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to continue to survive despite the injustices and the trauma.

Kevin Rudd's apology for these past injustices has gone some way to heal our nation. Our democratic institutions and the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that have steered them, mean our journey towards reconciliation has taken great leaps forward in the half a century that has passed since Wave Hill, but there is still more healing to be done, still relationships that can be built, and still many steps we must walk together on the journey of reconciliation. Which is why today, this Parliament reaffirms its commitment to the process of reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and we rededicate ourselves to redressing the profound social and economic disadvantage our nation's First Peoples face.

But more than that - we want to ensure our First Australians are not just surviving, but have the opportunity to thrive, to excel, to live the life of their choosing with meaning and purpose in a way that matters to them. Having more Indigenous voices in this Parliament enriches all of us, and I pay tribute to my Liberal colleague Ken Wyatt - the first Indigenous Member of the House of Representatives, who has now been joined by Linda Burney, who has made history as the first Indigenous woman elected to the House of Representatives. In the other chamber, we have Patrick Dodson and Malarndirri McCarthy who have joined Jacqui Lambie in the Senate. Together, they carry forward the hopes of Australians who have brought them here to Canberra.

We recognise that healing takes time. But the commitment our generation has made to improving this relationship is a vitally important one. I look forward to the day that our nation's founding document - our Constitution - recognises and respects our First Australia and thus reflects Australia as it is now, not how it was imagined over a century ago. The responsibility is ours to ensure that we continue to work to forge a common way, a shared way, with our nation's First Peoples.

Our Australia is one in which we find unity in our diversity. Australians today are truly global citizens, connected by family, culture and language to people across the globe. We are defined not by one race but by many. We are defined not by one culture but by many. We are defined not by one religion but by many. We are defined not by one way of life but by many.

What unites us is that we call ourselves Australian - a nation defined by shared political values of democracy, the rule of law, a fair go. And surely, if someone, whoever they are, ascribes to the values we hold as important in Australia, and sees themselves as Australian - with all that means in terms of freedom, rule of law, social cohesion through the acceptance of fundamental democratic principles - then they deserve our respect and our welcome.

Mr Speaker, we are citizens of a most remarkable nation. Our people are our greatest assets - a nation of immigration, multicultural, with a shared destiny.

This is our home. We have no other. Unity in diversity, harmony at home in the midst of a turbulent world - we have much of which to be proud, to cherish and defend. And that is our

duty, the 45th Parliament's duty, to stand up today for the timeless values of the motion which together we commend to the House.

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