

Commonwealth Parliamentary Debate – Kim Beazley

From: Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, Official Hansard for 30 October 1996.

Racial Tolerance

Opposition Leader's response to the Prime Minister's motion on this matter

Mr Beazley
(Brand - Leader of the Opposition) (3.26 p.m.)

The opposition supports this motion. It has been negotiated, as the Prime Minister (Mr Howard) indicates, between the Leader of the House (Mr Reith) and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition (Mr Gareth Evans) for some time now. It followed the withdrawal of a motion I put down several weeks ago in this chamber dealing with a similar matter. Naturally, as a motion which has been arrived at on the basis of an agreement between the two sides of this House, not all that either side might have liked - and that applies to us - is contained within the motion. Nevertheless, what is there is very good indeed. What is there is an absolutely essential statement by this parliament at this point in our history and at this point in the debate on the matters to which the Prime Minister referred. Therefore, it deserves the optimal possible support from both sides of the House when a vote is ultimately taken on it.

The motion is very significant because if it is carried it means the national parliament will insist that an absolutely essential ingredient take its place in the current community discussion about racism and multiculturalism in this society. This ingredient is leadership by us at the national level. Without it, the discussion will go down ugly and destructive paths. Without national leadership, given the discussion on these issues by governments from both sides of

the political divide for the last 30 years, we would never have grown into the tolerant, fair, decent and fundamentally democratic society that we are today.

We always have been a democratic society. Even at points when we had very different views about immigration to those which we hold now and when a very different standard of treatment was applied to the Aboriginal population than that which is applied now, Australia has had a proud democratic tradition. There is still a version of ballot which is described around the world as the 'Australian ballot'. It is the process by which most countries which are democratic undertake their elections.

At the time of our Federation we were seen as an experimental nation; indeed, we were seen as so experimental that Lenin felt it necessary to devote a pamphlet to attacking the Australian Labor Party, so attractive was its example in international socialist affairs in Europe, and largely coming off the sorts of propositions that were put here.

I make those points to make this point clear: for well over 100 years, freedom of speech has never been an issue in this country. I do not know what political correctness is supposed to mean. I think it means the prevailing majority of opinion at any time. I suspect that that is what political correctness means, if it means anything at all. I think the problem with juxtaposing two propositions - freedom of speech versus political correctness - has had the unfortunate impact on this debate of causing a number of people in our community to take the view that what was always unacceptable under free speech is now acceptable and, therefore, can be expressed. There are a large number of people who have become victims of that in this country as a result of that perception.

Since World War II, we have received a massive influx of new citizens bringing with them a wide range of cultures. Over this period, we have progressed from what used to be an inward looking society. Each new intake of people brought with it a new culture that enriched and sustained our community. We have now become a society in which all these different cultures are not just accommodated but celebrated. But each time each new wave of migrants came in - whether they were from southern Europe, eastern Europe, the Middle East and now more recently from Asia - there has been a requirement on the political leadership in this country to point out the advantage; to mould, insofar as we can, and without arrogance, community opinion that makes it acceptable and ensures that the community sustains its tolerant and decent traditions. There has been that requirement constantly upon us for leadership.

Over this same period, our attitudes have changed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It cannot be said that we have completely in this parliament successfully discharged the responsibility given to the government by the 1967 referendum. But much has been achieved to give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people their honoured place in the development of Australia as a decent nation.

It is 30 years since the coalition parties and we ourselves, then in opposition, wiped our platforms clean of the phrase 'White Australia'. It is more than 20 years now since the concept of White Australia was finally abolished in any implication from official government policy. It is 20 years since the Fraser government enacted the Northern Territory land rights legislation, based on propositions originally moved in the time when Gough Whitlam was in government. I might say that it is now something like 45 years since my father moved land rights onto the Labor Party platform. It is more than 20 years since the Whitlam government embraced the concept of a multicultural Australia.

In these periods of time we have, I do believe, much to be very proud of. But it has to be said

that these are new initiatives and new things because treatment and attitudes were different before then. In the discussion of our history these must be completely understood by all people in our society. If every person in this society is going to be entitled to their culture, they are also going to be entitled to their history.

I think we need to comprehend in the fullness the nature of that history and what its true character is. Some of that will require us in this generation to pass judgment, whether we like it or not, on what was and was not acceptable about policy in the past. Probably in no area is that more necessary than in relations with the Aboriginal community - and this is a central part of the reconciliation process.

I have my own disagreements with some of the current teaching in relation to past racial relations and Aboriginal questions that now form part of the school curriculum, and I do not intend to bore the parliament with those at this time. But I do think that if you look realistically at Aboriginal people you have to qualify the notion of settlement, you have to include the question of invasion, and they are entitled to the dignity of resistance. I am delighted to see that in the recent *Oxford Companion to Australian Military History* there is now an excellent section dealing with Aboriginal resistance. I hope that those issues come into the curriculums and are thoroughly understood. It is an interesting part of our history and it is a part of our history that we do need to understand.

We have made some very substantial changes. I mention those changes with pride as an Australian. They have been critical to our developing a decent society and they are critical for our future. They are also critical for our relationship with the region around us. This has happened really just in time. We were really shut out of our traditional markets in the 1960s, or our entry to them was made very difficult indeed. Successive governments have struck out of the embrace of those traditional markets and the lock-step relationship that we had with

them to build a very substantial trading posture for this nation. But it is being built in the region around us. Over the last 13 years we have had a much more significant proportion of our GDP in exports. In gaining that situation, virtually all of that increase has been a product of our successful penetration of markets in the region around us.

Along the way we have been able to present to those societies the notion that we are a decent, hospitable society with an honoured place in the global community. Through such policies that we have been talking about here today and others, which include support for the elimination of apartheid in South Africa, we on this side of the House were quick to recognise the role played in this by former Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser. That position was confirmed and continued by the Hawke and Keating governments and produced that moving and magnificent visit by Nelson Mandela here in his new position in a changed South Africa.

These changes have been critical to the solidity and strength of our relationship with the rest of the region. We have grown into the sort of society which our neighbours are proud to be associated with and with which they are happy to trade. Of course, we have to be realistic. One of the reasons we are a decent society is that we are a pluralistic society, and not everybody agrees with the path that we have taken. But when those views are as false and destructive as some of those which have been put about lately they have to be answered and dealt with in detail. However great the disagreement, we have to preserve our climate of tolerance. When people are abused in public places, it is time for government, for people in authority, to step in and beat the bounds. That is what we need now.

It is a disgrace that, because of the way in which the issues of race and multiculturalism have been argued lately, Australian citizens would be physically abused in the streets because of their perceived origins. I am especially saddened when I see reports of the headlines about all this in newspapers in countries all around us, especially when newspapers reflect - or are

supposed to reflect - official or at least authoritative opinion.

Australia has never been portrayed in this way - never. In the days when we did pursue discriminatory policies, the ambience of international relations was very different, as were our trading patterns - and that despite some changes. Indeed, the changes to immigration policy also came at a time when our trading relations with the South-East Asian region changed quite considerably simultaneously.

These reports have to be mentioned and have to be dealt with. The *Bangkok Post*, for example, talked of Australia's 'new-found freedom of speech and bigotry'. The *South China Morning Post* talked of our response as 'a stamp of approval for those individuals who hold extremist views to take the stage in Australia'. An official of the Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce thought that 'The debate would make many local people think twice about travelling to Australia'. 'It would not take much in Hong Kong', he said, 'to revive memories of the dark days of the White Australia Policy'.

A prominent scholar in the School of Commerce at Keio University in Japan also thought that the debate that was developing evoked memories of White Australia. As we have seen this week, this view continues among commentators in our region. The *Bangkok Post*, for example, has commented on the prolonged silence on the issues being debated. The *Nation* newspaper of Thailand has warned of potential economic retaliation against Australia.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser has had to point out:

The discussion has now got to the point where it is extraordinarily dangerous for the future of Australia.

These changes that we have seen over the last 20 or 30 years have made Australia a good and decent place to live. They were successful because they have received consistent bipartisan support. They have been sustained because they

were supported by the national leadership of the day.

It is always appropriate to debate matters around these issues. Obviously, from time to time we are going to have disagreements about what exactly the content of some particular policy should be in Aboriginal affairs or immigration. But our messages must always be clear-cut, and not subliminal. Our messages to the people of this nation must always contain what we actually believe. There must never be any suspicion in the public mind that when we say one thing we mean another and that we hope to gain from encouraging the other to be expressed more fully. We must never do that in the opinions that we express because that debate gets out of control very quickly. It has consequences that we do not intend.

This is a nation which has become a clever nation, an effective nation. I am proud to boast when I go overseas, for example, that there are more Japanese speakers per capita in Australia than in any other country outside Japan. We go through a whole series of Asian languages which we teach in our schools. We go through a whole re-orientation of Australian business to present itself effectively in the region around us. We have presented as a nation with a great brand name, not simply as a nation of primary products but as a nation of sophisticated value added product as well, important though both of those are. We have been substantially changing ourselves in the way in which we have presented ourselves in the region as a modern sophisticated society - and therein lies our economic survival.

These are issues of economics and they are also issues of morals and politics. These points need to be conveyed. There are no prospects of a decent employment future without an effective posture in the region around us - none. There is no prospect of an opportunity for young people in this country without that relationship with the region around us - none. We cannot survive as a nation with a market based on a population of 18 million people. It is not possible. Therefore, the policies that we pursue are not

just about the nature and character of our society, vital though those are; they are also utterly critical about the nature of the future survival of this country.

We have got these policies right by and large over the last 30 years. It is absolutely critical that they stay right. It is very important that this motion, when it is passed, goes out as a signal to the region around us that Australia is still in business as a decent society, as a society that is interested in doing the right thing in the way we relate to the region around us and a society that does not talk up its sleeve about the nature of the racial, cultural or whatever background of the people with whom we do business or about any of our citizens.