

John Howard on Multiculturalism

Howard, John "Statement on Multiculturalism", 1996 and "Address at the Launch of 'Multicultural Australia: the Way Forward'", 1997.

Statement from Prime Minister John Howard

in response to an invitation to submit his views on multiculturalism to Making Multicultural Australia.

Canberra
3 December 1996.

The Coalition is committed to maintaining and further enhancing Australia's unique cultural diversity within the framework of national unity. I believe in a diverse society and it is clear migrant communities have contributed greatly to the enrichment of our country and our lives.

Australia is a tolerant, compassionate and cohesive society. One of the reasons is that our migration program has brought people from many cultures and backgrounds to Australia. The diversity together with an overriding commitment to Australia has given us strength. It is not a weakness.

We are a nation that has demonstrated our credentials so far as the successful settlement of people from all around the world is concerned. Our achievements entitle us to be extremely proud about our past and confident about our future.

Transcript of address by The Prime Minister The Hon John Howard MP

At the launch of the National Multicultural Advisory Council's Issues paper

Multicultural Australia: The Way Forward

Melbourne Town Hall
11 December 1997

...I'm particularly pleased to be here today and to have the opportunity of launching this discussion paper and also, through that opportunity, to say a few things about my Government's attitudes and values towards the issues which are canvassed in the paper.

First, however, can I record, on this occasion, my great respect and gratitude to my colleague, Philip Ruddock, for the extremely skillful, effective and understanding way in which he has handled his portfolio of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs since March of last year.

It is an area that requires of the Minister, whatever the political colour of the Government, to combine compassion with firmness, to combine a forward looking view of the shape and the composition of our society with also an understanding of the need to solve and respond to current problems. And I think Philip has done that in a quite outstanding way and I'm personally very grateful, and I know that I speak for all of my colleagues, in saluting the contribution he has made.

This is an opportunity for us to project forward in a very positive debate about the character of our society. I want to thank Neville (Roach) and the other members of the Council for the

contribution that they have made and the contribution which is outlined in this very important discussion paper. It's also an opportunity to reaffirm a number of things that we share in common about the character and the values of our society and our communities.

Philip was right to remind us of just how long we have been a multicultural or a diverse society. There is a tendency to see that purely in post-World War II terms or even post-1970 terms. And although there has been a great acceleration and there's been a more open embrace of the character of our society in that direction during that period of time, it is undoubtedly the case that, stretching back a very long period of time, we have been a diverse and ethnically different community.

It's an opportunity to assert on behalf, not only of the Government, but of the entire Australian community, that there is no place in the Australia that we love for any semblance of racial or ethnic intolerance. There is no place within our community for those who would traffic, for whatever purpose and whatever goal, in the business of trying to cause division based on a person's religion, a person's place of birth, the colour of the person's skin, the person's values, ethnic make-up or beliefs.

Australia has been a remarkable success story. We are sometimes, as a community, not assertive enough about how successful we have been. We sometimes think, well, maybe we can't really be so confident about how successful we have been. When you look at what has occurred elsewhere, when you look at what Australia has faced, when you look at 140 to 150 different ethnic groups and nationalities which now make up this remarkable country of ours, we have been an astonishing success story. And we should never cease to say that to ourselves and, frankly, we should never cease to say it to the world.

But as always, with issues such as this, the reality is measured in the personal experience. Philip spoke, a few moments ago, of the late John Saunders. Philip and I had the privilege of

attending his funeral service at the Chevra Kadisha in Sydney earlier this week.

John was, in every sense of the word, a metaphor for that remarkable contribution that was made to Sydney and to Australia by the Jewish people of eastern Europe who fled the most appalling manifestation of human evil that the history of the world has seen. And they came to Australia, in almost all cases, without any capacity to speak English with a generation that left their mark not only in commerce and business but, very importantly, in community charitable endeavours. And with that east Europe background they came, and John exemplified it, they became forever Australians.

And I think of the experience I had when leading a business delegation at a meeting in Shanghai - no, I'm sorry, it was in Beijing - in April of this year. And one of the members of the business delegation that was with me as I had an interview with the Vice-Premier of China, Zhu Rhongji, who will take over from Li Peng and become the number two person of power and strength in the Republic of China next year. I had, amongst my delegation, a senior partner of one of the largest accounting firms in Australia, Lewis Ting, who reminded the Vice-Premier - who was obviously interested in the obvious connection that Lewis had with the country of which he was Vice-Premier - and he reminded him that his grandmother had been born in Shanghai, where, of course, Zhu Rhongji's grandmother had also been born. In fact, Zhu Rhongji himself, like so many of the hierarchy in the Republic of China, comes from Shanghai. It's a fascinating city that, of course, had produced many prominent Australian citizens of different ethnic backgrounds.

That was a reminder to me of the diversity and, of course, the experience one has of the friendships of one's children, through their school and university, with people of vastly different ethnic and religious and national backgrounds but brought together in a very unself-conscious way as Australians.

It is a rich, personal, experience and it's very

important that we take the opportunity, on occasions such as this, to say the simple uncomplicated things. To say that we believe, not only in tolerance - tolerance is a great quality - but, in a sense, it's a passive thing. We believe in pro-active embrace of the diversity of our community. We believe in sharing the values and reaping the dividend of our diversity.

One of the things that excites me about Australia, as we move into the 21st century, is that it really does occupy a unique intersection of history, geography and cultural diversity and economic circumstances. There is no country in the world - no country in the world - which is so absolutely composed of the following things. It is very much a projection and outpost, if you like, of the best of western civilisation in this part of the world. But it also has very profound and special links, both historically and strategically, with North America. And here it is geographically, cheek by jowl, with the Asia-Pacific region. And the added value of that geographical position is that, particularly over the last 20 years, we have been enriched by the immigration to Australia of hundreds of thousands of people who have come from the nations of Asia and the nations of the Pacific. And, of course, Australia has, of all the countries in the world, taken more refugees from Indochina on a per capita basis than any other nation.

So we do occupy a unique intersection. There is no country in the world like that, that so effectively combines the European inheritance and North American association and Asian-Pacific geography enriched by the streams of people from the various parts of the world. And if we don't, in the 21st Century, use that special position and that special place and that special respect we have because of what we have achieved, to the benefit, not only of our own nation, but to the benefit of the world, then we will be a very negligent people. But I have no doubt that we will be able to do that.

One of the great things about the Australian achievement has been our special skills to take the good bits of the various elements of our

heritage and put them beside the not so good bits. Because every heritage has good bits and bad bits. We have brought - from our British and European heritage - we have brought the great building blocks of parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, free press and the respect for civil attitudes on many issues. But we have been careful, in my view, to reject the class consciousness and the stratification of society and the disdain for people, according to where they were born or their class, that was sometimes the feature of European societies.

We have been able to absorb people from all around the world because we have essentially been a group of people who have tried to deal with people on the basis of their merit and their individual qualities, and not according to preconceived notions of what a particular background produces.

Now, none of that suggests that our history has not been without a blemish. We did, as I'm sure we all recognise, generations ago, treat our Indigenous people appallingly and much remains to be done to achieve a complete reconciliation between various sections of the Australian community. And I am conscious - as an Australian of several generations back and having a British and Irish descent - I'm conscious of the fact that some years ago, newly arrived people of this country were perhaps not treated with the welcome and as tolerantly as they might have been. That was not always the case, but it was sometimes the case and there's no point in pretending otherwise. But as the years have gone by, a new maturity, a unifying maturity has emerged. And it's a maturity where, I think, we are achieving far better now a balance, a respect and affection for what some people may call the values of the old Australia, but also a respect and affection for the way in which our country has been improved through diversity, and the way in which it has matured in so many ways as a consequence of that. And those two contributions have been able to coexist and come together in a very effective way.

What this discussion paper does is to open up

some of the issues, not to call in question the commitment of Australia to multiculturalism or to diversity or to the underlying principles. They are not in dispute. We are what we are and we are a very diverse community bound together ever more tightly by some common values and common attitudes, founded on simple principles of humanity and respect for each other according to each other's worth and each other's contribution to the Australian community.

That's the reason why at this stage in our history, particularly as we approach the 100 years' celebration of the foundation of the Australian nation, it is proper that increasingly, we focus in an open and frank way on the kind of people we are. But it must be done in a positive and an optimistic way and not in any way defensively, because the Australian achievement has been of massive proportions. To have developed the special quality and character of the Australian people that all of us have been able to do in our different ways and with our different backgrounds has been an achievement that we should never lose sight of and we should never lose the opportunity to reinforce. But in doing that we should recognise that there will always be some who will endeavour, by acts or words of intolerance or bigotry, to undermine the harmony of our community. I don't think they will ever succeed because there is a basic instinct for harmony and for tolerance and for goodwill amongst the overwhelming majority of the Australian community. And what we have been able to achieve in our time on Earth as a people, what we have been able to achieve is an extraordinarily remarkable thing.

So to you, Neville and to all who have been responsible for this discussion paper, I thank you. I invite all of you to contribute to it. You contribute to it secure in the knowledge that the fundamental principle underlying the paper, and that is the absolute, unqualified embrace of a culturally diverse, harmonious and tolerant Australian community is not in question. The only thing that is in question is how that is turned into even greater advantage of the

Australian people and for all those who comprise the Australian nation.

We no longer debate issues such as the composition of our immigration programme so far as racial or ethnic background is concerned. Non-discrimination is a non-negotiable element of Australia's immigration program. We may debate, from time to time, the size of the program and we may debate the balance between this or that element of the program. What we don't debate and haven't debated in a mainstream political sense for sometime is the question of non-discrimination.

So to you, Mr Chairman and to all the members of your Council, your work over the months ahead will be conducted against the background of the assured position, not only of my Government, but I know, also, of our principal political opponents and I believe the great overwhelming majority of the Australian people. The things that all of us in this room hold very much in common about the quality of treatment, respect for cultural diversity, the embrace of the unifying values of the Australian community and what, in essence, what it really means for each of us to be an Australian, those issues are not in question. What we need to debate in a very positive way, the ways in which we can reap what some have described as the diversity dividend, that we can build even more to Australia's advantage the fact that we have these links with so many different parts of the world. There's still much to be done in that area and I'm sure that it will be done.

So to all of you, a thank you for what you have done. I wish the discussion paper well. Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukkah.