

Commonwealth Parliamentary Debate – Gareth Evans

From: Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, [Official Hansard](#) for 30 October 1996.

Racial Tolerance

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

Mr Gareth Evans
(Holt - Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (3.49 p.m.)

Let me begin by putting this in rather personal terms. I do not think there is any resolution with which I have been associated in my 18 years in the parliament which I have regarded as more important than this one. That is essentially because there is no issue about which I have cared more deeply throughout my adult life than the issue of racial tolerance - as a student campaigning against the White Australia policy and for Aboriginal rights in the 1960s, as a lawyer working in the 1970s on drafting racial discrimination legislation and helping to found Aboriginal legal services around the country, and then as a parliamentarian and as a minister, in the 1980s and 1990s, very passionately committed to the evolution of Australia as a genuinely multicultural society with a wholly new kind of relationship with our regional neighbourhood.

Nothing hitherto in parliament, I think, has made me prouder than the role I helped to play in piloting the Mabo legislation through our parliament. Nothing made me prouder as Australia's Foreign Minister over eight or so years than my sense that over the last decade Australia really had come of age. It had come of age as a tolerant, outwardly looking, genuinely multicultural society, revelling in the fact of our

diversity, with people among us born in over 140 different countries - in the case of my own electorate, about 120 different countries; as a country genuinely committed for the first time to reconciliation with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and as a country which was genuinely embarking on redressing a great historical injustice by recognising, for the first time, land rights.

I was very proud, as Foreign Minister, as a member of the previous government and this parliament, of the way in which Australia was rapidly becoming fully integrated into our own Asia-Pacific region, and especially East Asian region; not any longer as a kind of nervous outsider, the Anglo-Saxon outpost, feeling alone and threatened in an alien sea; not as the urchin outside the tart shop wanting to get in and be part of the glittering economic action but being excluded essentially from it, not least because of a sense of distance and alienation from what was going on; rather, as a player, as a participant, as a partner in that region, respected and appreciated for our commitment and our contribution to it.

I was proud, too, of the way in which this country was becoming so evidently to have, as part of our community, a growing number of Australians of Asian origin and a huge presence here of students, tourists and business visitors from throughout the region.

Against that background, nothing has made me more troubled in recent weeks than the sense that all of this was slipping away, in the new and very ugly atmosphere generated, let us state it frankly, by the member for Oxley (Ms Hanson), by her immediate supporters, by those who have given encouragement, active or tacit, to her, and by those - let us face it again - failing to exercise leadership in speaking out against her.

Because of that support and because of that failure of leadership, a great deal of damage has already been done. Many individuals have been hurt, many have been humiliated, many have been distressed and, in some cases, some have even been assaulted as a result of the atmosphere that has been generated.

Australia's hard won reputation in the region has been put at dramatic risk, and the editorials and the articles that have proliferated around the region in recent days are abundant proof of that. There is a fear abroad, if you want to look at it economically, in the business community about the future of tourism, about discretionary tenders, about discretionary investment and about the future of education exports if this spirit and atmosphere continues.

But, worst of all in many ways, there has been a resurgence - in the name of 'free speech', in the name of 'the end of political correctness' - of what can only be described as indecency and incivility in public discourse in this country. We have old stereotypes, old idiocies, old insults abounding - about the place 'being swamped by Asians'; about the country being 'mongrelised' - I never thought I would hear again in public discourse that word that we heard the other day from the Mayor of Port Lincoln; about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people not being disadvantaged so much as being especially 'privileged' members of our community, for god's sake.

Malcolm Fraser, whom I have always much admired for his position on these issues, said recently of the member for Oxley quite specifically, in words which should have been heard long before today:

She is just plain wrong, and wrong in ways that can lead to great evil.

Because of all this, there has been a desperate need for a circuit-breaker. A desperate need in this country for political leadership to reassert itself, for markers to be laid down, for guidance to be given by this parliament about what is decent and civil, not indecent and uncivil in the

public discourse of this country, and the basic principles that must be observed if we are to avoid hurt, distress and humiliation to individuals in our midst, if we are to preserve the social fabric and harmony of our community and if we are to avoid harm to Australia's international interests and standing.

It is not a matter of prohibiting the expression of any views on any of these issues. But it is certainly not a matter of encouraging and giving comfort to those views and expressions that are wrong in fact, deeply hurtful to individuals, deeply harmful to the community's harmony as a whole and deeply hurtful to our international reputation.

This motion provides that circuit-breaker and it is not before time. It covers all the key issues that need to be addressed, the principles that need to be laid down. It does so in a way that is concise but, I hope, is unmistakably clear. It should be said that the language is not necessarily that which we ideally would have preferred. Drafting involves a process of give and take and I acknowledge the very constructive spirit in which the Leader of the House (Mr Reith) played the role of embarking on this exercise with me in recent days.

There are some concepts as a result of that process that are less clearly developed than I would have liked - the concept of 'reconciliation', which has many more dimensions to it than that which are implied perhaps by the terms of this motion; the language of 'economic and social disadvantage' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and I would have liked to have seen specific reference to the 'spiritual and cultural needs', in the context particularly of land rights.

I would certainly have liked - as would I think all of us on this side of the chamber and perhaps many on your side as well - to have seen a specific reference to a 'multicultural' Australia - with the coalition not being afraid and shirking specific reference to the 'M' word, a word after all which appears in all the policy documents of the coalition before the last

election and in the title of the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (Mr Ruddock) sitting here in this chamber. But, that said, the points are made. The language is there of commitment to cultural diversity and the message is unmistakably clear.

The motion also avoids saying some things that perhaps should have been said, in particular about Australian history. About our 200 year history of sad mistreatment and neglect, and often worse than that, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And our shameful 70-year history, this century since we federated, of the White Australia policy - a history for which my party bears much of the responsibility, we being racists long before we were socialists, as I have had occasion to say at party forums from time to time - to the great disgust of many of my colleagues, but it is true.

The Prime Minister said we should reject the 'black armband' theory of Australian history. I put it this way: it is not a matter of demanding that people accept guilt now for what happened in all those years gone by. Guilt perhaps is an inappropriate thing to demand of people who were not personally responsible. But it is a matter, and we can distinguish it, of acknowledging the shame of what went so badly wrong for so long. It is a matter of shame and we should acknowledge that, learn from it and construct appropriate and new policy responses accordingly.

The Prime Minister has been on record - he did not say it today, but he has said it often enough before - that 'Australia should not have to choose between its history and its geography'. The point is however, I have to say, that in our national interest, especially our relationships with our own region, we do have to choose, because our history for the first seven decades of this century - the White Australia policy history - is an appalling liability. It would be a real sign of coming of age, of maturity, to recognise that liability. Not, as I say, as a matter of guilt for individuals not directly responsible but certainly as a matter of shame for all of us.

With all those reservations, this is a motion which says a great deal about the kind of society we have become and should aspire to continue to be - diverse, tolerant, open and inclusive. I for one have not been very proud to be an Australian these last few weeks. But I am proud today to be part of a parliament which is prepared to commit itself to the values and principles set out in this motion. And if this motion has the impact which we all - or the overwhelming majority at least of us in this parliament - hope that it will, I will be, like most others in this chamber, a very proud Australian once again.