

Twenty fifth anniversary of the Good Neighbour Council of South Australia

**Speech by the Prime Minister,
Mr E.G. Whitlam, QC, MP**

The official opening of the 25th anniversary celebrations of the Good Neighbour Council of South Australia

Adelaide Town Hall,
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Twenty-five years ago, under an earlier Labor government, the Good Neighbour Movement in Australia was inaugurated. The South Australian Council was the first to come into full operation and was followed in close succession by councils in other states. The Movement's inauguration came at a time of profound importance in Australia's history. We had not long embarked on the greatest movement of people into our country that we have ever seen. At the same time, we were just creating the first Australian citizens. For it is a fact often overlooked that there were no Australian citizens until 1949. The act which established Australian citizenship for the first time was introduced on 30 September 1948 into the House of Representatives by the first Minister for Immigration, Mr. Arthur Calwell. It became operative in 1949 and the first man in history to be an Australian citizen by law was the then prime minister, Mr. Ben Chifley, who received Australian Citizenship Certificate No. 1.

The combination of these two developments - the creation of Australian Citizenship and the post-war migration program - make the late 1940s a major watershed in our history. They even involved a certain irony. The first development involved a formal recognition that we had achieved a sense of our own identity. The second development committed us to a course that would profoundly influence and, in

many ways, change that identity. In one of his rare public appearances, Patrick White earlier this year praised the historian professor Manning Clark, for showing Australians that "what we were is what we are".. I would suggest that post-war migration has meant that what we are as a nation is increasingly being determined by where we Australians have come from in a quite literal sense.

Since the foundation of the Good Neighbour Movement, we have indeed become a different nation and a different people. The influx of more than 3 million people in the post-war period has meant that 20 per cent of our present population was born overseas, twenty-five per cent of the 6 million children born here since World War II belong to families in which one or both parents were overseas-born. The former Minister for Immigration, Mr. Al Grassby, has gone so far as to suggest that one-third of Australia's total population is linked either directly by birth or less directly by family or marriage to the history, language, culture and traditions of an overseas country.

The effect of migration on Australia's economic development has been particularly dramatic. The 1971 census figures, the latest available, show that 26 per cent of our total work force was born overseas. In many key industries and occupations the migrant role has been crucial. The building and construction industries - where migrants have provided one-third of the work force - and the building materials industries - for some of which they have provided up to half the work force - are good examples. Their importance has extended into the most skilled and professional areas. The 1971 census showed, for example, that 30.5 per cent of medical practitioners and dentists in Australia and 36.1 per cent of chemists, physicists, geologists and other physical scientists were overseas-born.

Not that the contribution of newcomers has been limited to their labour. One has only to look around at the changing face of Australia to see the immense difference they have made culturally, socially and politically.

It is, however, an unpleasant truth that many "old" Australians, while reaping the benefits of the new diversity of our society, have tended to look on migrants primarily as a source of labour, as a means of economic expansion. The use of the term "cannon fodder for our factories" has too often been appropriate. It is not true of course to suggest that Australian attitudes have been dominated by unrelieved rapacity. The Good Neighbour Movement alone has symbolised a different, healthier attitude.

Your own Council in South Australia has, I am told, through its 2,000 or more voluntary contact workers reached with a personal welcome 90 per cent of all migrants taking up initial residence in this state. With the active affiliation of some 130 community organisations it has helped many people to settle in their new environment.

Nevertheless, it remains true that there have been significant failures in our handling of the problems and needs of our new settlers. Take their educational needs, for example. A survey of sixty-three schools of high migrant density in Melbourne late in 1972 revealed serious inadequacies in both accommodation and supply of teachers. The report showed that only one-third of migrant children in the sixty-three schools surveyed who were having difficulty with English were actually receiving assistance and, of this one-third, 42 per cent were not receiving sufficient specialised tuition. The effect of these shortcomings will be to severely limit the educational and other opportunities available to these children. A similar pattern of disadvantage emerges if we look at another area, health insurance. A survey released in January by the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed that only 53.3 per cent of people born outside Australia were covered by hospital and medical expenditure assistance schemes, compared with 87.6 per cent of those born in Australia. Of

people who arrived in Australia between January 1971 and August 1972, when the survey was conducted, only 68 per cent were covered. More than 53,000 Greek migrants - or 37.5 per cent - were unprotected; about 52,000 Italian migrants - or 19.1 per cent - were without coverage.

This kind of underprivilege can be found in many other areas of Australian life.

It is no wonder then that so many migrants have left Australia. In 1972, for example, Australia received 112,468 settlers but in the same year 33,172 former settlers left the country. This sort of wastage clearly indicates that something has been drastically wrong with both our recruitment of migrants and our treatment of them once they are here.

The Australian Government last year introduced a new system of overcoming the recruitment problems, we have assumed that the people most likely to settle happily and permanently in Australia are those who already have friends or relatives here or who have jobs awaiting them, for this reason we now give our first priority to the reuniting of families - to spouses, dependent children, aged or otherwise dependent parents and fiancées, sponsored by Australian residents. Our other priorities have been for the admission of close non-dependent blood relatives; more distant relatives and friends; and people with occupations required to meet specific national needs.

At the same time in the last 19 months we have introduced a number of measures to meet the needs and aspirations of people who have already settled in Australia. We have introduced portability of pension rights to enable anyone to receive aged, invalid, widows' or wives' pensions in any country in which they choose to live. We are establishing a telephone interpreter service in our capital cities to deal with requests for help and guidance from migrants. We are opening migrant education centres in our capital cities. We have appointed 48 migrant welfare officers to work in the community and in schools. We have introduced the home tutor scheme which is aimed at reaching migrant women at home.

Using voluntary language tutors in 1973/74 we allocated \$8.2 million for special instruction for migrant children in state and independent schools, compared with \$5 million in the previous financial year. We have introduced legislation to enable anyone to gain Australian citizenship after three years residence, irrespective of national origins. We have banned the deportation or the cancellation of citizenship of any Australian citizen. We have established task forces in all state capitals to identify the most urgent settlement problems confronting migrants. We have received a report from a community relations committee of the Migration Advisory Council which we set up to inquire into discrimination against migrants, exploitation of migrants and their use of community services. These and other measures have been part of the pattern of seeking to ensure that migrants enjoy full and equal opportunities.

Much remains to be done if we are to meet our objectives. We also need to ensure that as a government our organisational structure is the most appropriate one. To ensure just that we have in fact moved in the last month to make some important administrative changes in relation to migrants and migration. On 11 June, I announced the creation of the Department of Labour and Immigration. I announced that certain functions would be transferred from the former Department of Immigration to other departments, such as Education, Social Security and Foreign Affairs.

I know that there have been a number of criticisms of this decision. My good friend, Mr Evasio Costanzo, wrote in *La Fiamma* that Labor had "killed immigration" with this action. The Executive Committee of the Good Neighbour Council of South Australia has also written to me to oppose the move. So I would like to explain our reasons for making the change and to tell you why I believe it will help migrants.

The criticisms that have been made involve a number of points. One is that there is a need for a central department to meet the special

needs of migrants. It is argued that any fragmentation of functions will lead to inefficiency and dehumanisation. The need for migrants to have a single point of contact has been stressed. Fears have been expressed about the loss of expertise and morale among migration officers that might flow from the decision. There have been statements of concern for the future of community involvement in activities related to migrants.

Some of the 8 Migrant Welfare Officers appointed last year have written to me to say that they do not believe that they will be able to carry out their functions adequately as a result of the reorganisation. An argument has been advanced that, by merging a large part of the old Department of Immigration with the Department of Labour, we have indicated that we see migration merely as a matter of manpower. That we are guilty of a kind of updated version of the old "industrial cannon fodder" attitude. Finally, running through all of these criticisms is an assumption that we have ceased to recognise the special needs and problems of our migrant community.

I can assert that all of these fears are unfounded. More than that, I assert that migrants will benefit from the changes and that the Australian Government will be better equipped to meet their needs.

Let me deal with the first group of criticisms that have been levelled against the reorganisation. Contrary to the argument that we needed to retain the old Department of Immigration as a centralised body, I would suggest that its continued existence in its previous form was resulting in over-centralisation.

Mr Grassby pointed out in a report tabled in the House of Representatives on 11 October last year that the Department of Immigration had a total staff of just over two thousand to deal with the problems of migrants as well as having the responsibility for the control of some 2.2 million arrivals in and departures from Australia annually. That is two thousand people out of a

total of 257,990 Commonwealth public servants. It was becoming impossible for such a relatively small number of men and women to deal with such diverse matters. It also necessarily lacked the power to perform many of these functions adequately; social security benefits for migrants, benefits for migrants or the in-school education of migrant children were essentially functions of other departments. Yet migrants were encouraged to see the department as the dispenser of government benefits.

At the same time, although they had at least some of the responsibility, other departments did not pay sufficient attention to developing programs for migrants. It was too easy to fob off migrant questions as matters for the immigration department. This applied to both state and federal departments.

This confusion of roles became even more inappropriate with the advent of the present Government. One of the great changes to which we have been committed since coming to office 19 months ago has been to involve the Australian Government in new areas of governmental activity in Australia.

Previously the Australian Government had adopted a very limited role in such areas as education and urban affairs. In the field of social security, it acted largely as a means of giving pensions and other welfare benefits. In all of these areas its role has now changed radically. In education we are seeking to eliminate areas of disadvantage, to provide equal opportunities for all Australian children, not just to hand out arbitrary per capita payments. In social security, through the Social Welfare Commission and the Australian Assistance Plan, we are trying to establish community welfare facilities for all Australians, in short we have moved into the role of an initiator, an activist in these fields in a way in which no previous Australian Government had done.

It is only logical that, in line with this expanded role, that migrant affairs should be accepted as coming within the purview of the relevant Australian Government departments. If the

Department of Education is to tackle genuinely the problems of the disadvantaged in our schools it cannot ignore migrant education. If the Department of Social Security and the Social Welfare Commission are to restructure our welfare system effectively they cannot ignore the welfare needs of migrants. The sooner we see migrant needs as part of the overall needs of the whole community, the sooner those needs will be met by the bodies with the appropriate staff, facilities, finances and responsibilities.

This is not fragmentation. It is specialisation. This is not inefficiency. This is the most efficient way in which to deal with the problems.

The expertise of immigration officials will not be lost to the public service or, for that matter, to migrants. There will remain a significant immigration unit within the Department of Labour and Immigration. This will still serve as an established centre of contact for migrants. Thus if a migrant is unsure of which department to approach with a problem he will still be able to use the Department of Labour and Immigration as a first point of contact. If his problem is a specialised one, the officers of the Department will be able to ensure that he is referred to the right person in the right specialist department.

A number of officers of the old Department of Immigration will of course be transferred to other departments. The Migrant Welfare Officers, for example, will go to the Department of Social Security. This certainly does not mean that they will be submerged and lost within a bureaucratic monolith. Rather they will be able to draw on the expertise and more comprehensive resources of the Social Security Department. Indeed the Minister for Social Security, Mr. Bill Hayden, has already said that migrant welfare services will be greatly enlarged and improved as a result of the reorganisation.

We will ensure that the special needs of migrants will not be lost sight of in the specialist departments. As an earnest of our intentions, I can announce tonight one result of discussions I

have held with the Minister for Social Security. He has agreed that a person involved in migrant welfare will be appointed to the Social Welfare Commission. The appointee will provide a vital influence on policies and activities of the Commission. In keeping with this announcement, I can assure you that there will be no lessening of community involvement in the Government's activities in the field of migration. If we are to succeed in our objective of enabling people to settle happily and permanently in Australia we must have the support of community organisations. We could not continue such enterprises as the Home Tutor Scheme without the aid of volunteer workers drawn from the community.

I turn now to the criticism that we have "killed immigration" or that we now see it merely as a matter of manpower. Our critics are wrong on both counts. If this were not so we would have abandoned our new system of family reunion at the time of reorganisation. We have not abandoned it. Australia will continue to welcome migrants who satisfy the humane criteria which we laid down last year. We believe, however, that it is pointless, indeed damaging, to bring large numbers of people to Australia unless there are jobs for them.

The new Department of Labour and Immigration will have the expertise to ensure that migrants can gain employment. The days of "cannon fodder" are past.

Migrants will also benefit from the Department of Labour and Immigration's new National Employment and Training System. N.E.A.T. - as Mr Cameron has called it - will ensure that migrants, along with other Australians, who lose their jobs through technological change, economic circumstances or other factors can be retrained for other satisfying jobs.

Finally I want to assure you of the Government's continuing commitment to two vital goals: the abolition of all forms of discrimination on the basis of race, colour or creed in Australia and the program to enable the Australian community to benefit from the rich

cultural and linguistic heritage we have. The man who brought those commitments to life was Mr Al Grassby. Last Sunday I announced a new appointment for him so that he could continue to pursue those goals. As a special consultant to the government on community relations Mr Grassby will continue to be keenly involved in the needs and aspirations of migrants. His involvement will be further enhanced if the Government can succeed with legislation to eliminate discrimination. He would be appointed as Commissioner for Community Relations under that legislation.

His role in helping to preserve the cultural and linguistic heritage of all Australian citizens will be particularly important. We do not want migrants to feel that they have to erase their own characteristics and imitate and adopt completely the behaviour of existing Australian society. We want to see that society enriched by the cross-fertilisation that will result from migrants retaining their own heritage. The old approach of individual assimilation is no longer Government policy. We are concerned with the integration of ethnic communities into the broader Australian society. By strengthening those communities we strengthen the whole society.

I hope that my remarks tonight will lay to rest fears which have been aroused by our recent administrative changes. Indeed I hope that migrants and other Australians will see the advantages that will flow from the reorganisation. In the fields of education, social welfare, health services, housing and all other areas of Australian life, we are firmly committed to the principles of justice and equality for migrants. We see this as a job not just for one department but for the whole Government and, in fact, the whole community.