

Australian Ethnic Affairs Council - Inaugural Meeting

**Speech by
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Chairman**

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Mr Minister, Mr Bott, Mr Dempsey, Ladies and Gentlemen.

This is a most important and historic occasion and I am sure that all of you present here consider today to be a milestone in the development of Australia and tangible proof of what the Queen in her speech to the Australian parliament described as the multicultural society of Australia. I am personally deeply conscious of the historic significance of this occasion and as I appear before you I feel very humble indeed faced as I am with a task of leading the Council and through it Australia's ethnic communities. But to me this is not an empty public relations exercise. My sovereign obligation must be to speak the truth as I see it in the interest of the people of this, my adopted country, and not in the interest of any pressure group, organisation or party.

We are to serve Australia, the whole nation, all of us, whatever our native tongue. The task is stupendous for we must make up our minds, whether we are to look backwards on what used to be rightly called British in Australia or, whether we are to have a future as a multi-lingual, multi-racial, multi-cultural society

Australia has always been an immigrant society. Since there is not one Aboriginal Australian in our midst we are all immigrants or descendants from immigrants. This is, to use a farmer's term, what gives us our hybrid rigour. It has brought Australia a polyglot culture, the best of a score of older, wiser civilisations. It has given

the Australian character a humanity and flexibility and, most importantly, an open mindedness that is almost unique. The Australian welcomes new ideas, new ways; we learn quickly and absorb readily. The reason why our mixed society has been successful is, I would like to think, that newcomers find here a land in which it is easy to accept and be accepted.

As a social scientist interested in a comparative study of social institutions, I know that the obstacles of success and happiness are less formidable in Australia than in many other countries. And yet there are problem areas in so far as equality of opportunity is concerned. For example, barriers of language and non-recognition of many occupational qualifications acquired overseas represent obstacles to success and happiness.

Reports that have emerged in the last two years, and they have been distributed to members of Council, show that the situation is far from satisfactory. In the report, "A Decade of Migrant Settlement" prepared for our sister council, the Australian Population and Immigration Council, it is stated that 23% of migrants who arrived here after 1965 are living in poverty. This report also revealed that nearly a quarter of family bread-winners were holding jobs with lower levels of skill than they used in their countries of origin. The position of migrant women in industrial Melbourne has been described as "oppressed", while other studies paint a similar situation in Sydney and Wollongong.

What has to be looked at is to what extent absorption of different cultures and education of the wider society by consecutive ethnic generations has in fact meant equality of opportunities, especially occupational opportunities, for all ethnic groups. This is

essentially the problem of barriers to social mobility which are embedded in our institutional structure and in the practices labelled in the report of Mr Walter Lippmann's Committee on Community Relations as "institutional" and "attitudinal" discrimination. Hence I am arguing that sector inequality makes a mockery of the notion of cultural pluralism. To the extent that ethnic culture becomes associated with socioeconomic inferiority of particular groups we will develop a culturally as well as structurally stratified society and that would be a disaster.

Mr Minister, I know that this is not what your Government wants and I am reassured in this by your specific reference to our task in signifying ways which will help to ensure that individuals are able to contribute to society to the fullest extent of their potential and that existing policies and procedures are not mitigating against the development and usage of this potential.

The terms of reference of the Council give us specific responsibilities in this area including as they do a comprehensive statement on general welfare, settlement and educational services.

Two of our three committees will be responsible for policy formulation in these critical areas. The third committee will have to come to grips with the difficult task of communication with ethnic groups and ethnic media, the task which I would like to define in other than purely mechanical terms. To me this task goes much deeper than the mechanics and logistics of keeping in touch with a large number of groups and bodies at the Federal, State and Local Government levels. The problem is how to organise the relationships between the various groups to enable each to maintain their own life while contributing to the good of society and the broader social frame. This, in my judgement, is the most difficult task to be faced by the Council and I am determined to devote all my energies to it. The historic challenge that Australia faces today as a result of our large scale immigration of the past 30 years is that of harnessing the plurality of cultural, social, ethnic and religious groups for the common

good without losing any original values that are part of these groups' heritage. Hence it is not a commonplace to say that man's attachment to his family, to his mates, to people who speak the same language or dialect or who worship in the same church or temple, is one of those foundations of social institution which means so much to all of us.

To accomplish these tasks we must have the intellectual and moral courage to put before the public what I consider two basic issues that we must all face.

The first of these is the spirit of tolerance, initially political tolerance embodied, I trust, in the very concept of immigration and settlement as a bi-partisan issue initiated by the Labor Government under Chifley and Calwell in the early post-war period and pursued by successive Liberal/Country Party and Labor Governments since then. But tolerance also extends beyond politics to religious and inter-ethnic differences as well as differences within ethnic groups. Here we must set an example to the community representing as we do a large number of religious and ethnic backgrounds.

The second basic issue is the choice between public policies that put premium on material affluence and impoverish man's spiritual world through the levelling, conformist style of industrial society and those measures that question the present social system with such of its assumptions, as for example that Australia must be preserved for the white man in a world in which white men are rich and coloured men perpetually poor.

What then is at stake is the future of Australia, lest she be guarded against what A.D. Hope described as "the river of immense stupidity (that) floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth" and lest, in the words of Manning Clark, this generation of Australians "stripped bare of all faith (be not left) comfortless on Bondi Beach". Or, in the words of the late Ernestine Hill, "what shall it profit a man if Australia getting rich, loses her soul?"

It will be in terms of our ability to pose, and hopefully partly answer such questions, such fundamental questions, that future generations will measure the ultimate success of the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council.