

Opening Address, 1988 FECCA Congress

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Speech by Prime Minister Bob Hawke to the Congress of the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia

30 November 1988

In the early days of this year of our Bicentenary, on 26 January, I launched the nation's Australia Day celebrations with these words about the Australian identity:

"We are, and essentially we remain, a nation of immigrants - a nation drawn from 130 nationalities... In Australia there is no hierarchy of descent; there must be no privilege of origin. The commitment is all. The commitment to Australia is the only thing needful to be a true Australian."

Today, as we approach the end of this year of Bicentennial celebrations, you have given me the pleasure of addressing this conference which has adopted as its theme my words on Australia Day.

Multiculturalism is indeed all about commitment to Australia.

So I congratulate today not only the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia for devoting your efforts at this conference to analysing the nature of that commitment; I congratulate also the efforts, over many years, by your constituent councils throughout Australia to help those millions of Australians they represent to realise that commitment.

Above all else, our Bicentenary has been a celebration of our identity as a nation of diverse

ethnic origins - Aboriginal, immigrant and Australian-born - sharing a common commitment to Australia.

Australia's national identity has been shaped by our convict and colonial origins, by the often tragic relationship over the last two hundred years between the Aboriginal people and the European newcomers, by successive waves of immigrants from all over the world, and by the hard work of generations of Australian-born men and women.

Over two hundred years, and through extraordinary effort and commitment, we have together built a wealthy and prosperous nation; young, strong, dynamic and vibrant; a nation capable of addressing those economic and social challenges that confront us and willing to protect and enhance our democratic freedoms and our individual liberties.

Within this Australia, four out of ten Australians are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Half of them are from non-English speaking backgrounds. Two million Australians speak a language other than English at home. Less than half the population is of pure Anglo-Celtic ancestry. Almost one in four Australians has no such ancestry.

So let us proclaim from this Congress the demographic fact that we are a multicultural nation. But let us proclaim too that we are multicultural not only in character but in outlook; multicultural not only by fact of demography but by virtue of philosophical choice.

It is to express that choice that this Government implements, across a broad range of areas, its policies of multiculturalism. These policies celebrate our cultural diversity and harness it in the interest of individuals and of the broader

community - they are policies to ensure that our diversity is accompanied by social cohesion, a fair go and a fair share for all. In other words, they are multicultural policies for all Australians.

Over the post-war years, support for Government policies on the selection and settlement of new migrants in Australia has been proudly and consistently bipartisan.

More recently, bipartisan support for a completely non-discriminatory immigration policy has been one of the great achievements of modern Australian political leadership; a triumph of principle over populism, reason over fear, statesmanship over politics.

That achievement has been accompanied, also on a bipartisan basis, by the development and articulation of a rich and unique multicultural ethos. Diversity has increasingly been seen as a national resource, offering substantial cultural, social and economic benefits for all Australians.

But if there is one regret that I will take from this Bicentennial year, it is the collapse - I hope it will be only a temporary collapse - of bipartisan support for the principles of multiculturalism and of a truly non-discriminatory immigration policy. These two great features of our contemporary nationhood have, most regrettably, been undermined, in a year and at a time when they deserved our greatest affirmation.

The web of consensus that protected and fostered these principles for so long, has been tragically and dramatically ruptured by some members of the Opposition parties who should have had the wisdom to avoid that rupture. The Opposition parties have allowed the extreme views of a minority to fuel the same groundless fears and prejudices that spawned the White Australia policy so many decades ago.

In doing so they have, directly or indirectly, fuelled the latent racism of a hostile minority in the community. There has been, during the period of this debate, a disturbing increase in the occurrence of racist incidents: abuse, graffiti,

broken windows, slashed tyres. I know of these ugly incidents, and you know of them even more directly than I do - because some of you have been on the receiving end of the hatred of this abhorrent minority.

We may regret these developments but we will not be intimidated by them. On the contrary, they have steeled our determination to continue a non-discriminatory immigration program. They have made more absolute our commitment to multicultural policies. I pledge to you that there will be no return to the past.

At the commencement of the current Parliamentary session I moved a resolution in the House of Representatives in which, among other points, the House gave "its unambiguous and unqualified commitment to the principle that, whatever criteria are applied by Australian Governments in exercising their sovereign right to determine the composition of the immigration intake, race or ethnic origin shall never, explicitly or implicitly, be among them."

I have noticed recently that the Opposition Leader, Mr Howard, has attempted to deny the racist overtones of his intervention in the immigration debate. He was reported recently as regretting that - to use his words - his political, media and other enemies had linked him with some kind of discriminatory attack on Australians of Asian descent.

Of course I have never believed that Mr Howard was personally motivated by any calculation darker than a grab for votes.

But at its most charitable, it appears Mr Howard has suffered a major memory loss.

Back in August, he was explicit. Asked about the rate of Asian immigration, he said: "I wouldn't like to see it greater... I do believe that in the eyes of some in the community, it's too great, it would be in our immediate term interest and supportive of social cohesion if it were slowed down a little, so that the capacity of the community to absorb was greater."

Following those comments the Opposition changed its policy on immigration. And John Stone, when he was asked whether that new policy would mean fewer Asians entering Australia, said:

"If we've gone through this four or five weeks of absolute turmoil in order to have nothing changed, what a lot of goats we'd look, wouldn't we."

Interviewer: "So you think that the bottom line is, fewer Asians?"

Stone: "That is so."

But despite all this, if Mr Howard now genuinely seeks to reassure the Australian community that his policy in immigration is non-discriminatory, I would welcome such a statement as a major step towards the restoration of bipartisanship on this crucial area.

In particular I would welcome his support, belated though it would be, for the August Parliamentary resolution. I note in passing that it is clear from what Malcolm Fraser said again on this issue on the radio this morning that, were he still leading the Liberal Party, he would have given that support whole-heartedly.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My Government will continue our development of multicultural policies. These policies have three essential components: social justice, economic efficiency and cultural expression.

The social justice dimension of multiculturalism seeks to ensure that the structures and practices of Australian society reflect and respond to the diversity of the population, that they serve all Australians and provide equally for all, regardless of background. We do not demand conformity as the price for equity or equality.

I do not, nor I believe do you, ask any unfair advantage for immigrants. We do not seek special preference for ethnic groups. Rather multicultural policies seek equal opportunity for all.

The economic dimension of multiculturalism seeks to ensure that the skills and talents of all Australians are utilised and harnessed in the interests of all of us - that our human resources are not wasted by barriers of language, indifference or prejudice.

The cultural dimension of the policy asserts and seeks to ensure that all Australians are free to develop, adapt and share their individual cultural heritage.

Let me emphasise that such a commitment is not a recipe for division or discord. The Government has said quite explicitly that there are limits to cultural autonomy. In view of some recent regrettable incidents involving the expression in Australia of ethnic tensions that characterise some of the countries from which Australian migrants have come, let me spell these limits out again.

First, all Australians must accept the basic structures of Australian society - our rule of law, Parliamentary democracy, and English as our national language.

Second, multiculturalism entails both rights and responsibilities. The right to maintain and develop one's culture, language and religion - and, just as importantly, the responsibility to accept the rights of others to do the same - lies at the very heart of multicultural philosophy. Multiculturalism offers each of us the opportunity to have our traditions accepted, and our viewpoints heard: it asks each of us to accept that others have equal rights.

Third, all Australians are expected to have an overriding commitment to the future of our nation. We will not allow, because we cannot allow, the bitter conflicts of the old world to tarnish the lustre of multiculturalism in the new world. It is this understanding upon which the title of your Congress is premised.

Within these clear limits multiculturalism - Australian multiculturalism - can provide a model of tolerance and social harmony to the rest of the world. It allows all Australians,

whether Aboriginal, immigrant or Australian-born, to take pride in their history and traditions. It asks all Australians to contribute their culture to our unique and developing national identity.

In this context, I must mention the report of the Committee the Government established last year to advise on Australia's immigration policy. As the CAAIP Report is still being considered by Cabinet, I am constrained in what I should say today - although at this stage I anticipate that Senator Ray will be announcing the results of our deliberations shortly. Although the CAAIP Committee made a sterling attempt to address a very complex issue, it did not come to grips with some of the hard, central questions about immigration, such as the points test and overseas qualifications.

So let me simply say this: there have always been two great, and sometimes overlapping, streams in Australian immigration, both pre-war and post-war. There have been immigrants who came here because we needed them, such as skilled workers with vital expertise and experience, and those who came here because they needed us, such as refugees fleeing oppression in their home countries.

Our skilled migrants have brought their families, and those family members themselves have frequently brought new skills. The popular dichotomy between skilled and family immigration is often exaggerated and short-sighted - for example, economic immigrants are less likely to be attracted to Australia if it means separation from their families.

That is not to say that we should not shape the immigration intake to our national interest - to do otherwise would be irresponsible, to all concerned. What I do say is that our program will remain balanced. We live in difficult economic times - requiring compromise and restraint on all sides - and our immigration policy must reflect Australia's need to deepen its skills base.

But I give this commitment. We will continue

to give proper weight within our overall immigration program to family reunions.

Let me add, too, that under our national policy on languages, we are equally concerned with maintaining and promoting second language learning - not just for the ethnic communities but for all Australians.

I want to make it clear that second language learning will remain a balanced program as long as this Government is in office. There will be no artificial distinction made between economic and community languages, or between Asian and non-Asian languages. The fact is, as delegates to this Congress know well, that many community languages - such as Italian, Spanish, Chinese, German and Arabic - are also vital for our economic future.

Finally, let me make some brief comments about the Special Broadcasting Service - SBS.

Australia is unique in the world in having two national broadcasters, the ABC and SBS. Amalgamation is off the agenda, but that is not the end of the question.

We have recently guaranteed SBS's real level of funding for the next three years. And in the public discussion paper issued a few months ago, we proposed a possible package which, if adopted, would guarantee and secure the future of SBS in the long-term - beyond the life of this and the next Government.

That package includes, for the first time, a legislative base for SBS, a defined charter, administrative streamlining, and more flexible funding arrangements. I emphasise that it is a total package, not a menu of alternatives. It is still subject to community views and to final consideration by Cabinet.

I would urge you, however, to look at the package seriously, responsibly and dispassionately, lest a great opportunity to secure the future of SBS is lost. In this very real sense the future of SBS is in your hands - in how you respond to the option that has been put before

you.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In all the relevant policy areas - from job creation to employment training, from education to income support, from language policy to communications policy - our specific policies of assistance and our broader economic and social justice policies have served all members of our culturally diverse community. We have a record of which to be proud.

But what of the future? Let me take this opportunity to foreshadow my Government's plans and intentions as they directly affect those Australians whose interests you represent.

First, we will press on with the access and equity strategy. We will ensure that it secures a firm place in the priorities and planning of all Government departments and agencies. I have asked the Office of Multicultural Affairs to work closely with these bodies, and with community organisations, to ensure that adequate consultation can take place.

Second, we will ensure that Australians of non-English speaking background, and in particular women who face a double disadvantage, gain equitably from the broad range of social justice initiatives that will continue to distinguish my Government.

Third, with your support we will do everything within our power to secure the integrity, financial viability, and long-term security and independence of the SBS - with an unequivocal commitment to its distinctive multicultural, multilingual character.

Fourth, we will work to ensure that all Australians get the chance to learn English to a level at which they can contribute their education and skills to our economic advancement.

Fifth, we will continue to fund and promote a balanced program of second language learning - languages that we need for our economic future,

for the efficient delivery of social welfare, and for the celebration of our cultural diversity.

Sixth, we will soon announce the blueprint for our immigration policies to the year 2000 and beyond - it will be a balanced strategy, reflecting the needs of both the individual family and the broader economic imperative.

We will continue to resist those who would contaminate the program, and impugn Australia, with their appeals to prejudice and fear. We will not turn back.

Seventh, we will tackle head on the inequities and inefficiencies that have previously plagued the recognition of overseas qualifications. I am pleased to announce today, for the first time, that the issue of overseas qualifications has recently been added to the Structural Adjustment Committee's agenda for micro-economic reform.

Eighth, we will actively promote citizenship. We will encourage non-citizens to make that final commitment to our nation voluntarily, and promote a better understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship amongst all Australians. We reject, absolutely, the idea of forcing people to take up citizenship. We reject, equally, the idea that we should make those who wish to become Australian citizens wait longer to do so.

And, finally, perhaps most important of all, in 1989 we will complete preparation of the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia.

These eight goals offer the promise of Australia becoming an even richer and more dynamic multicultural society in the decade ahead.

On behalf of my Government I have already accepted those eight goals. I welcome the support that has come from the states and territories - but tragically, the Federal Opposition has not yet responded to the proposed goals. Its leader continues to reject commitment to a multicultural Australia - the very word offends him, and has been expunged

from his vocabulary.

No matter. The National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia will establish the Government's policy directions to the year 2000 and beyond. It will become a major part of the broader agenda for our next term in office.

The National Agenda has the potential to communicate multiculturalism to the broader Australian community. If multiculturalism is a policy for all Australians - as it indeed is - then any image or perception that it is an ethnic monopoly must be resisted.

That is why the National Agenda consultations have deliberately reached out to the broader Australian community. It is also why we must continually stress the social justice and particularly the economic dimensions of multicultural policies - that they reflect mainstream Australian philosophies and that they seek to harness the skills and talents of all Australians in pursuit of the national interest.

Let me, therefore, in declaring this conference open, congratulate the Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia, and wish you well in your second congress. Together we have achieved much in recent years. Much still remains to be done. With your support we can.