

Commonwealth Parliamentary Debate — John Howard

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

Racial Tolerance

Motion by the Prime Minister on this matter

Mr Howard:
(Bennelong - Prime Minister) (3.06 p.m.)

By leave - I move:

That this House -

- (1) reaffirms its commitment to the right of all Australians to enjoy equal rights and be treated with equal respect regardless of race, colour, creed or origin;
- (2) reaffirms its commitment to maintaining an immigration policy wholly non-discriminatory on grounds of race, colour, creed or origin;
- (3) reaffirms its commitment to the process of reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in the context of redressing their profound social and economic disadvantage;
- (4) reaffirms its commitment to maintaining Australia as a culturally diverse, tolerant and open society, united by an overriding commitment to our nation, and its democratic institutions and values; and
- (5) denounces racial intolerance in any form as incompatible with the kind of society we are and want to be.

As indicated in question time, the terms of this motion have been agreed in discussions between

the Leader of the House (Mr Reith) and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition (Mr Gareth Evans). I want to say at the outset that, so far as the government is concerned and I am sure the same applies for the opposition, this motion is not an attempt to pretend some phoney level of bipartisanship; rather, it is an embodiment of certain attitudes and values that both sides of the House in the national parliament have in common.

It embodies a number of notions which have been enunciated by me repeatedly over a long period of time. It contains commitments to the kind of Australian society that I believe in and have always believed in. It contains a commitment to some common Australian values which are held by Australians, irrespective of whether they were born in this country and irrespective of whether their ancestors came from the British Isles, Europe, the Middle East or Asia. It embodies a number of principles which are a proper underpinning for vigorous and robust debate that ought properly to take place in the Australian community on all issues.

Whatever the rights and wrongs and the contribution of different people and different attitudes in the Australian community, it comes at a time when it is appropriate and in the national interest to send a clear and unambiguous signal, particularly to the nations of our region but not only to the nations of our region, of the kind of society we are. It is put forward to this parliament by the government and I trust also by the opposition not in any sense of apology, not in any self-conscious sense and not in any self-deprecatory sense, but as a simple, direct and unambiguous statement of certain common values and principles.

There are few nations in the world that can boast such a record of democracy, such a record of fair treatment and such a record of

harmonious blending together of people of different racial backgrounds than Australia. Australia remains one of the very few nations of the world that has been continuously democratic for the whole of this century. It pioneered many liberal reforms in many areas. Its record of achievement in integrating into a very harmonious and united nation people from all parts of the world is something of which all of us can be immensely proud and something to which all of us have made a special contribution.

There was a time when this nation was overwhelmingly made up of people, apart from our indigenous people, whose ancestors came from England, Scotland, Ireland or Wales. Successive waves of immigration, particularly after World War II, began to alter that pattern; although we continued to have a significant number of immigrants from the British Isles and from Ireland. Subsequently, and certainly in the last 20 years, there has been a significant flow of immigration from the areas of our region, from the Middle East, from South America and also small numbers from the African continent.

There are certain landmarks along that path of development. The abolition of the White Australia Policy in 1966 under the Liberal prime ministership of Harold Holt represented a very significant cultural and attitudinal change on the part of the Australian people. I accept that it was supported at the time by people across the political spectrum. I also accept that it was not at that time greeted with universal acclaim but I believe it gradually won very strong acceptance.

I remain very proud of the fact that I was a member of the coalition government led by Malcolm Fraser which, in the late 1970s, chose to admit to this country tens of thousands of people from war-torn Indochina; so much so that Australia on a per capita basis took more Indochinese refugees than any nation in the world. It is worth repeating that: Australia took more Indochinese refugees on a per capita basis than any other nation in the world. I repeated that because on occasions I hear voices saying

that we have a past which in these areas is totally bigoted and prejudiced. The reality is that, on that occasion, we demonstrated a passion and a willingness to accept and absorb, which was an example to the rest of the world and something of which all Australians should feel particularly proud.

Inevitably, the character of Australia has changed as a result of this migration. Much of that change has been profoundly beneficial. I think this country owes an enormous debt to people that have chosen this as their home - people who have come from the four corners of the world. When I returned to the leadership of the Liberal Party on 31 January 1995, one of the things I said was that the policies that we would put together would be guided, in certain respects, by a belief that Australia was composed of people drawn from all parts of the world but united behind a common commitment to the values, beliefs and institutions of the Australian community.

We can within our ranks have legitimate debate about the size of our immigration program. There is a different attitude towards immigration now than there was in the 1950s and 1960s. All of us, whatever our political views, should take account of that. You cannot isolate the sense of insecurity and anxiety that people at a time of relatively high unemployment feel from considerations of levels of immigration. There is a legitimate debate to be had as to whether or not we should have more or less immigration. I think that debate should go on in a calm, rational and intelligent fashion.

It is natural that people, particularly those who feel themselves at the sharp end of challenge and anxiety in industries that have seen extensive job losses, should feel some sense of anxiety about immigration levels. It is the obligation of all of us to understand that. It is our obligation to point out, where it is appropriate, the error in their understanding of the causation between immigration and job security. But it is also our responsibility to involve them in the debate. It is never appropriate for us, as I think on both

sides of the House in the past we have tended to do, to take the attitude towards the Australian community: after all, this is really a little bit too hard for you to understand; leave it to us; we will make the decision on your behalf.

Some of the difficulties and some of the resentments that we have seen in recent times are as a direct result of many Australians feeling that there is in some sense a political elite in this community - and that political elite has been composed of people from both sides - that has denied to the people of the Australian community a right to participate. This motion is about saying to the Australian people and to the nations of the region that we are a tolerant society; we are a compassionate society; we are a society that has demonstrated our credentials so far as the absorption of people from all around the world is concerned, in a fashion that entitles us to feel extremely proud about our past.

It is also a statement of some fundamental beliefs about the nature of our existence as human beings in Australia: the very strong belief that people should always be judged on their individual worth and merit, on their character and behaviour, and on what they do for their fellow man and not on the basis of their ethnic origin, the colour of their skin, their religious beliefs or their lack of religious beliefs, or where they may happen to have been born. Any notion that anybody in this country entertains that it is in the moral, political or economic interests - and I put them deliberately in that order - of Australia to return to anything approaching the White Australia policy I think is profoundly wrong. That is a view that my government enunciated when it came to power; it is a view I enunciated when I became the Leader of the Opposition in January last year and I believe that, soberly explained and properly understood and put in the context of some of the things that I have said earlier in this speech, it is something that on reflection the great majority of the Australian people will accept. It is an obligation on all of us to put that view calmly and in an understanding fashion.

This motion also says something about our attitude towards the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia, the original Australians and first inhabitants of this continent of ours, however one would wish to describe it. There will continue to be debate and there will continue to be sharp differences of opinion between the government and the Australian Labor Party about the appropriate policies to respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Mr Campbell :

No, there won't.

Mr Howard:

There will be - and that is as it should be. But I think we can agree on one or two things. We can agree that as an identifiable group the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the most profoundly disadvantaged within our midst. That is something I have said not just for the first time and it will not be the last time I say it; it is a view I have expressed before. I do believe, as I know the opposition believes, in a process of reconciliation. We will have our different views as to what reconciliation represents. To me, the most effective way to achieve reconciliation is to address current disadvantage in areas such as health, housing and education. I do not believe, and I have always strongly rejected, notions of intergenerational guilt. I regret as an Australian the appalling way in which members of the indigenous community have been treated in the past and I believe the truth about what occurred in our history should be taught in an unvarnished fashion.

But could I also say that I profoundly reject with the same vigour what others have described, and I have adopted the description, as the black armband view of Australian history. I believe the balance sheet of Australian history is a very generous and benign one. I believe that, like any other nation, we have black marks upon our history but amongst the nations of the world we have a remarkably positive history.

I think there is a yearning in the Australian community right across the political divide for its leaders to enunciate more pride and sense of achievement in what has gone before us. I think we have been too apologetic about our history in the past. I think we have been far too self-conscious about what this country has achieved and I believe it is tremendously important that we understand, particularly as we approach the centenary of the Federation of Australia, that the Australian achievement has been a heroic one, a courageous one and a humanitarian one. Any attempts to denigrate that achievement I believe will derive the justifiable ire and criticism of the Australian community, however people may lie in the political spectrum.

There has been some talk in recent weeks about the way in which political debate should be conducted in this country. I have said before, and I am happy to repeat it, that I do believe that in recent times there has been a tendency towards excessive political correctness in political debate in this country. There will be those opposite who will disagree with that. I naturally accept their perfect right to express that disagreement and put their point of view.

I think the way some people in the Australian community have reacted to the debate of recent weeks, and the way advice has been given to me and to others as to the precise way in which I should respond to particular comments, has demonstrated an absolute obsession with the form rather than the substance of the debate.

I think there has been a wholly disproportionate reaction by too many people in too many areas of Australian society to one particular speech. I find it rather interesting that I pick up the newspapers, I watch the television, I listen to the radio and I hear constant talk about the deeply divisive debate on immigration which is going on within the Australian community. Yet I learn on the morning after the Lindsay by-election that Australians Against Further Immigration received a little over six per cent of the primary vote in the electorate of Lindsay. If ever AAFI were to have a hope of scoring a high result, it was in the Lindsay by-election. Yet the result

was that the party polled a derisory share of the popular vote.

I think it does say something about the maturity of the Australian people. It demonstrates the ill wisdom of any attempts by any of us to deny the Australian people the courtesy of accepting that they can debate and understand things in a mature and open fashion. Every time we treat them in that patronising fashion, they will demonstrate their great maturity and their great understanding.

Two other things that I want to say, I want to say very directly to Australians of Asian descent: so far as the government of this country is concerned, those Australians of Asian descent are as honoured citizens as any other section of the Australian community. People of the Asian communities have contributed very greatly to the enrichment of our life. They have brought their values of the extended family, they have brought their values of hard work, they have brought their values of commitment to small business and entrepreneurial flair and their infectious vigour in so many other areas to our shores, and particularly, but not only, of course, in my own home city of Sydney they have made a very significant mark on the life and the activities of that city.

They number amongst their ranks like any other section of the Australian community - people whose views we may or may not share. But it is important that we remember that relations between people have a deeply personal character. Insensitive remarks, hurts, insults and intemperately made generalisations can inflict enormous personal hurt and damage on individuals. A few weeks ago I made a speech to the Queensland division of the Liberal Party, which subsequently attracted some attention. I do not recant, retract or take away one syllable of what I said during that speech. I might be permitted to say something to the House about that speech. I remind the House that, having said that I believed we had entered an era of clear and more open debate in the Australian community, I supported the right of Australians to participate in a vigorous fashion in open

political debate. I then went on to say:

...that freedom of speech carries with it a responsibility on all of those who exercise that freedom to do so in a tolerant and moderate fashion and to not convert the new-found freedom, if I may put it that way, into a vehicle for using needlessly insensitive and intolerant language.

It is a caveat and an injunction that I think all members of this House should follow and observe. I hope that this motion attracts the support of everyone in this chamber, because it does reflect, despite our profound political differences, including on some of the issues I have canvassed in my speech, the common assent of the members of the national parliament of Australia to some very important and fundamental human values.