

SUNSHINE AND SHADE

*Address to the New South Wales Australia Day Function at the
New South Wales Conservatorium of Music on 19 January 2010*

GENERAL PETER COSGROVE (RETD)

GOOD AFTERNOON ladies and gentlemen. I was very honoured to be asked to address you on the occasion of this annual Australia Day oration. I see from a list of the luminaries who have preceded me that the oration has become a very important part of New South Wales' observance of our national day and that has made me very aware of my obligation to speak as well as I might on a theme of significance to all of us, as Australians, as some of our overseas guests and to those not of this country who follow what we say on these seminal occasions. Just in the last several weeks, the largest country in the world, India has been watching what we've been doing in Australia very keenly and analysing most carefully things we say. I might say, that is as it should be, even if we would all wish for the reasons for such scrutiny to be different.

I have entitled what I will say to you this evening as 'Sunshine and Shade: the triumphs and tribulations of Australia in our time: things which make us great and which occasionally diminish us in our own eyes and those of the world community.' I was asked some time ago to settle on a title and a theme so you will understand that this is not some immediate reaction to recent events but there is a synchronicity which I will not fail to underscore today.

This great continent is a land of sunshine and shade: Sunshine—sometimes harsh but life-giving to the wide brown land and all who live in her; Shade—sometimes blessed in the relief that it provides from the harsh sunlight but also the repository for some of the dark moments of our existence.

Last year I was asked to deliver the Boyer lectures on ABC radio. This was another great honour and certainly one which made me put

my thinking cap on! Like all of you here over the many years of my adult life I have had a wealth of opinions on things large and small which are significant to me about our Australian way of life. In accepting to do the Boyer lectures I had to crystallise many of those opinions in the words of the lectures: a sort of 'put up or shut up' opportunity! So, like a test cricketer with a good long innings behind him, I come to you in good nick—even if I might have offered the odd catch behind during my recent stay at the crease!

Time for some sunshine! One of the most illuminating and warming aspects of our national character is our sense of compassion, generosity, selflessness and equity when we encounter the suffering and need of our neighbours in the region (and often enough, much further afield). After the first Bali bombing, many of the victims rescued and given first aid and later much more sophisticated medical treatment were ministered to by Australians. Our Disaster Victims Identification teams asked not the nationality nor ethnicity of the victims—all were treated with identical dignity and professionalism and energy. In the great grief that swept over this nation, part of that grieving was for all the innocents killed, injured or bereaved by the atrocity, not just those Australians who were victims.

When the greatest natural disaster of our lifetime, the Asian tsunami rolled ashore around the Indian Ocean on the 26th of December 2004, in a couple of short breaths well over 200,000 people were killed, the vast majority of them Indonesians and Thais and Sri Lankans. In the aftermath of this terrible tragedy, it was yet a moment to be very proud of our nation. Our men and women in uniform

and many other volunteers besides, rushed to the disaster areas with such urgency that in some cases they were the first foreigners on the ground. They encountered human and material devastation on a scale few of us can imagine and yet with a toughness and compassion that we would all envy, they got about the job of bringing hope to the hopeless and help to the helpless. Back here in Australia individuals, corporations and governments all dug deep and raised and sent staggering amounts of money for the relief operations for our hard hit neighbours. There was no stinting, no hesitation, no ambivalence, no dredging up of old sensitivities or quibbling about our own present needs—just the unqualified act of giving by the fortunate to the unfortunate. When I finally shuffle off this mortal coil, it may be this is the moment in our modern history which makes me proudest when I report in at my next destination, saying ‘Australian here!’

There was also ‘Sunshine’ for us all in 1999 when Australia played a central role in East Timor’s rocky road to independence. A profound feeling of unease felt by many people in Australia erupted into alarm and concern across the board when we saw broadcast images of violence, murder and arson leading up to the referendum and then in the aftermath. I had a front row seat in watching the force known as INTERFET, the men and women of 22 nations, bring urgent relief and safety to the people of the tiny island. Pivotal in that work were the men and women of the Australian Defence Force and many policemen and women from the AFP and State police services. Unsung but there in abundance were (I was going to say ‘ordinary’ but they were actually all extraordinary people) Australians with aid agencies, the UN and some of our other government departments, every last one of doing all in their power to help the East Timorese. Most of you will have seen much of it playing out in the media—much praise for those in the media too for the hazards they embraced in bringing the stories to you. You



General Peter Cosgrove was appointed in 1999 commander of the International Forces East Timor INTERFET). He was appointed chief of army in 2000, and was Australian of the Year in 2001. He retired from the army in 2005.

rightfully admired them, hundreds indeed thousands of them; so did I—the front row seat that I enjoyed was a rare privilege and another of those ‘Sunshine moments’.

Less well known because of all the uproar at the time in the Middle East but still very close to home, there was a lot of bright sunshine about the way in which Australians brought assistance to the Solomon Islands in 2003. The men and women who went there in their hundreds were by and large just the boys and girls typical of suburbs and towns all over Australia, yet their sensitivity and effectiveness in dealing constructively and sympathetically with the Solomon Islanders, traumatised and riven by inter-communal strife for years before the intervention, was a revelation to all who saw it.

There is a view that the events of 11th of September 2001 were so profound as to divide certain attitudes and levels of antagonism into pre-and post-9/11. Maybe so and also maybe that’s stretching it a bit but let’s bring that theory back to those periods of daylight I’ve just finished describing. Plainly Timor took place in a different time, before 9/11. Yet Bali, the Solomon Islands and the Asian tsunami all post dated 9/11. In all the cases I have described Australians behaved wholeheartedly and equitably, kindly and compassionately—in fact to a degree remarkable to many observers. Observing those Australians dealing with the people they set out to help and indeed their fellow Australians and non-Australian co-workers, would that darkest of labels, ‘racist’ have seemed justified? No, and again no!

But have past events and some commentators on those events, ‘belled the cat’? Time to pass from broad daylight into some shade. Is there a strand of racism or perhaps pockets of racism here in Australia—undoubtedly. No multifaceted society can exist without some level of intolerance but there should be no consequent complacency on our part.

I don’t think there’s much to be gained by examining smaller, individual incidents which all of us will have heard about or experienced at some stage, where it is likely that there was some racist ‘tinge’. One would have to live in a cocoon to avoid those casual moments which have offended our sense of equity. They occur in every society with any ethnic plurality about it. Let us instead today remember and reflect on some quite high profile, recent moments in our Australian experience. It was only about four years ago when there was significant public disorder in the Cronulla shire, violent, alcohol-fuelled and shocking. We will all remember that seemed to be an outcome of rising tension between locals and their supporters purporting to represent the amorphous majority, and an ethnic minority. Because it was so unusual and unexpected, it reverberated around the world—it was unexpected because Australia’s reputation was that of an egalitarian and multi-ethnic society, tolerant, cheerful and relaxed. These perceptions can rarely be totally accurate but we flattered ourselves that they were mostly so about us! December 2005 gave us pause for thought. Yet in the aftermath, people were arrested and charged and brought before the courts for their behaviour over that period. The public thought that some of the harsh penalties handed down were appropriate and responsible authorities got busy with the vital work of bridge-building between the wider community and the group seen to be on the ‘outer’. Not perhaps a perfect, enduring and ‘root cause’ solution but significant and well intended.

Moving further into the shade, we should consider for a moment an issue which has been brewing in this country and between Australia

and India for some time but which has erupted over the last several weeks to become a major problem.

I lived for a year in India in 1994. I love the place and the people and have been back to visit. It has its own vibrant collection of ‘isms’: caste-ism, nepotism and cronyism and great religious tensions and hatreds to boot. But if you are inclined therefore to think in relation to recent events about ‘stones and glass houses’, don’t. This issue must be about us, not the messenger.

I sense in relation to the spate of attacks on largely Indian people in Melbourne and elsewhere, Australians are very concerned and disinclined to downplay, much less dismiss the potential ‘racist’ elements in what is becoming a litany of criminality. As usual, the poor old police are stuck in the middle, working hard, looking to be objective and reluctant to jump to conclusions and therefore copping it from all sides. The problem for us is that the criminal incidents are cowardly and sly and it is easy to conclude that they are racially-targeted. We are all dismayed that there might be some kind of warped campaign in progress. The vast majority of Australians, totally rejecting any such despicable behaviour will welcome the apprehension of those who are preying on these visitors and their rigorous prosecution. Only that outcome will satisfy our determination to be and to be known as, a just and equitable society.

In 1947 when I was born the population of Australia was 7.5 million. I grew up in Paddington in Sydney had seemed to me then that every second adult male in the suburb was a returned servicemen. Although bombed and scared and scarred by the war, the Australia in which many of us grew up, in that period seemed a cheerful place where there was optimism and perhaps relief that threats of the nature of World War II appeared to have receded for the time being. One scholar has observed that Australia in that period was in a kind of ‘convalescence’. It is interesting to reflect on that—if he meant some kind of self-

focused and therapeutic period of recovery, I think he was right. If he meant that there were still traces of a malaise, then I missed seeing it!

Certainly what it was, was one of the great modern immigration periods. It is that factor that fills my memory of the time. In my suburb of Paddington and in my primary school, St Francis Xavier's, the family names increasingly were a roll-call of southern and central Europe as much as they were of British and Irish counties! Paddo was a bit rough and tumble in those days and not even the kids were unaware of the various soubriquets Aussies had and frequently used to refer to particular parts of the community. Nino Culotta that famous but fictional character reported on it!

How things have changed: if a younger Australian was transported back to those days and could listen to the casual language used by ordinary people about and sometimes to some of our recent migrants, they would faint in shock! By the standards of today, it just wouldn't do—today all that would be termed racism and there would be hell to pay! Looking back, it may have been confronting and even offensive for those new Australians who found themselves typecast with patronising verbal tags. But if racism it was, then it seemed to me at the time that it was pretty superficial. Because in the shadow of the war, it was very obvious that all of these migrants had come from a poor and damaged place to this shining new place, Australia looking to work hard, to pitch in and to make a go of it. They had made the most profound social commitment, they had volunteered to become Australians where the rest of us had had no say in the matter! Put simply, it was obvious to all of us that they had devoted themselves to assimilating into Australian society, values and culture even while cherishing and displaying their own. The heavy accents and broken English of those mums and dads are only faint echoes in the dry and arid tones of their kids and grandkids who are now indistinguishably part of our social fabric.

I wonder why what seemed so easy and unremarkable back then, the assimilation of hundreds of thousands of people for whom English was either a second language or an unknown one, is now so fraught, so front of mind. For most of my lifetime attitudes towards ethnic minorities have been irreverent but have seemed to be without malice. I can recall on taking over a platoon of infantry soldiers in the jungle in Vietnam, the sergeant giving me a run through of the soldiers' names as we walked around meeting them. He introduced one young man as 'Wheels' which is what I called him for weeks until one day back in the base I happened to glance at the roll book and saw his real name, quite a mouthful with an eastern European origin; I challenged the sergeant as to why he called him 'Wheels' and he said plaintively 'Because I can't pronounce his real name!' 'Wheels' apparently was short for *wheelbarrow*, an infamous old Army substitute for an unpronounceable handle.

A moment or two ago I mentioned the term 'assimilation'. It's an interesting word and in an immigration context it is meant to imply the absorption of individuals and family groups into mainstream Australian society. There is an implicit understanding that this process of absorption will entail the assumption of a broad range of Australian obligations, loyalties, values and characteristics. There is nothing inherently flawed or evil in that understanding as far as it goes. For example, whether a migrant came here in 1947 or in 2009, whether the migrant stepped off a passenger liner or a sinking fishing boat near Christmas Island, all must be prepared to obey the laws of their new home. All should predispose themselves to a loyalty for and liking of our home. But that is about as far as you can go. Loyalty in its fullest sense must be earned. Our values and characteristics are not proprietary: no section of society, no generation past or present owns or dictates those values and characteristics. Even though pundits and would-be pundits like me occasionally attempt to list our values and our

national characteristics, Australian society is really best at defining them in the negative: by that I mean we all intuitively understand when some action has deeply offended our values or when some person has displayed an 'un-Australian' characteristic. Generally and uselessly we tend to think of our values and our characteristics as 'all that is good'. Occasionally some stirrer will hand us a characteristic he or she reckons we have that is straight-out bad and of course we all reject that out of hand!

In reflecting back to that great wave of immigration in the '50s, '60s and '70s, I think assimilation was not as useful a word as 'merge'. For sure, most of those immigrants were absorbed seamlessly into our society within one or at most two generations. But I think that it was more of a merger than perhaps we give credit for: just as so many of those immigrants now so obviously love this place as their home, respect the flag as their own and regard the old country as being just that, how much have we absorbed from them. Because it crept up on us, I think to a great degree we haven't noticed how extensively we have been enriched by their cultures and previous lifestyles.

The '50s also saw the final dismantling of the White Australia policy and an opening of Australia's doors to neighbours from Asia and Africa. With the vast majority of new immigrants thus enabled coming from Asia, a great new potpourri of cultural influences entered our broader society. Apart from a relatively few casual affronts from a white society still coming to terms with a new social pluralism, this new wave of immigration particularly from the 70s until the present day has gone very well with some exceptions. Leaping into the present day, I'll bet a great number of you are uneasy about a seam of friction between some of our ethnic minorities and elements of what I referred to earlier as the amorphous majority.

Not to beat about the bush, I refer to an ongoing estrangement between broader soci-

ety and elements of our Muslim community. Our extended history way back to early colonial days shows that from time to time there have been episodes of bad blood between sections of the community based on ethnicity or very occasionally, on religion. Yet they have almost invariably been quite limited in scope and duration. Over a very long period, Muslim families have been migrating to this country. By and large they have merged into society as seamlessly as any other grouping. Mosques have been respected places of worship around Australia for many years. It is easy to point to an estrangement between parts of the global Islamic community and all non-Muslims but especially Christians over the last 20 years or so, and obviously since the Al Qaeda attacks on 11th September 2001. I think in hindsight it could be claimed that these events and the reactions to them were simply catalysts of our further failure. By that I mean that some of our Islamic community already felt alienated and isolated from the mainstream in Australia. It is a volatile mix when especially younger people are told that they are surrounded by corrupt and impious behaviour at every hand. It is unsurprising that some of them then perform in ways which stigmatises the whole Islamic community.

All of this is exacerbated by the ongoing wider confrontation between jihadists and their range of perceived enemies around the world. In the elevated temperature and polarised views which characterise this problem, it is hard to have a neat and persuasive prescription on how we move past this. However a few observations: first, we must not be panicked into somehow changing or restricting our immigration patterns because of these sorts of issues. Secondly, we should be very careful before assigning major blame for the problem to our broad Australian way of life, as if the estrangement was all somehow our fault and we should change accordingly. The Australian people know that that is not true and wouldn't wear it anyway! Thirdly, we should continue the many and various ways we en-

gage with the broader Islamic community and especially those who have turned away from us, to bring them back. Lastly we should remember that even over our short history we have dealt with and survived and moved on from some pretty big problems and remained as a society intact and remarkably unified.

Let me close this address in the shadow of Australia Day with some remarks about indigenous Australians. Unsurprisingly my sentiments will echo some eminent predecessors such as Peter Garrett, Lowitja O'Donoghue and Tim Flannery. I won't therefore attempt to canvass every issue but rather to summarise what I believe is at the core of my views. We all note in the context of 26th January, that every part of this land was once trodden only by indigenous Australians, without our contemporary rules and presence. We cannot 'disinvent' ourselves, the things we have, the life we live or the overarching rules governing that life—that's the reality. It is also a reality that indigenous Australians have been hugely disadvantaged in seeking to retain the integrity and dignity of their ancient culture. They may continue to feel as colonised as many other ancient societies did in centuries past. Yet the obverse of this colonisation is unattainable. We, the non-indigenous have nowhere to go because this is now as it has been for centuries our only home too. I believe what our indigenous people fervently desire from the rest of us is respect and the opportunity for their culture to live on; to have both the practical support and the breathing space to enable their

social conditions to dramatically improve, especially in the communities; and to have this wherever possible with the least intervention and paternalism. Having said all that it is hard to see how Australians could have faced themselves in the mirror without reacting vigorously to the reports which prompted the recent interventions.

Every well-intentioned, strong initiative to try to do the right thing faces the problem of the humiliation of intrusiveness versus the effectiveness of the intent. There are no easy solutions and certainly no perfect answers. We should not see the prospect of 'arriving at a satisfactory conclusion'. Our obligation to this foundation element of the great Australian community is endless.

Well, it is almost Australia Day! How shall we be, how shall we feel about the nation and ourselves as we emerged into the sunshine and attend one of the great public observances of the day or take the kids to the beach or fire up the barbecue. Shall we feel joyous and hopeful or remaining in the shade, shall we instead be uncertain and anxious, borne down by our imperfections and shortcomings.

I think the former—it's in our nature to be optimists, not so much because we are shallow or lazy (living the 'she'll be right' dream) but because we are a highly moral, inclusive and stable society with the precious gifts of democracy, affluence and security. Our challenges are not beyond us.

Australia is a nation of good fortune and a good future and that's a cause for celebration!

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