

WE CAN ALL BELONG

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IACKNOWLEDGE THE traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered today and their continuing struggle for equity of health, education and employment access and our responsibility.

I had the great pleasure of speaking at the Melbourne pre-Parliament event in February. What is now a worldwide interfaith event has a remarkable history dating back to the first Parliament in 1893, when Swami Vivekananda's speech was considered by many to have introduced Hinduism to the scholars and thinkers of the developed world. I was impressed with this historic material. At that stage transportation led major challenges, there was no Wikipedia, and the work had been very limited written material outside the holy text themselves.

Australia's first brush with interfaith dialogue dates back to the early Macassan fishermen who according to Aboriginal oral history, interacted with the local communities and practised their Islamic prayers and traditions during their annual visits to Australia's mainland.

Today I'd like to speak to you about how the government is building a sense of belonging in a culturally diverse, multicultural Australia. I'd also like to spend some time talking about who I mean when I speak of Australians.

Australia as a Multicultural Success Story

Given that many of you are visiting Australia from overseas, what you might know of us may be based on what is portrayed in the media. Many portrayals depict a tall person of Anglo-

Celtic descent; their skin tanned from working outdoors, with an easy-going manner. Despite the fact that we are the most urbanised nation on Earth, the portrayals would also probably feature cattle and stockmen.

This doesn't illustrate the amazing breadth of Australia's cultural diversity.

Australian society is a multicultural, multilingual and multi-faith society. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), today there are approximately 22 million Australians, speaking almost 400 languages, including Indigenous languages, identifying with more than 270 ancestries and observing a wide variety of cultural and religious traditions.

Some 14 million Australians identify with a faith out of a population of around 22 million. For some 13 million people, this is Christianity, but there are many other faith communities, including those that follow Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism and Baha'i. There were also more than 3.7 million Australians who did not identify with a faith. We are a diverse society. While many of us are migrants, or descended from recent migrants, many families have been here for longer—in the case of our Indigenous people, hundreds of generations. In fact, Australia's Indigenous peoples are custodians of some of the oldest cultural and religious traditions in the world.

One of our great Australian success stories is that our multicultural society compares well with other countries in terms of low levels of discrimination, social tension or disharmony. I understand that Australia's approach—of acknowledging and utilising the diversity of our cultures as a strength of our society—

was influential in the decision of the Council of the Parliament of the World's Religions to hold this event in Melbourne.

Of course, Melbourne in particular is also a scene of much innovation in addressing these issues, such as through the Scanlon Foundation's work which I shall discuss shortly, and with past luminaries such as Frank Galbally, whose 1977 report to the Australian Government was a watershed in the harmonious settlement of migrants in this country.

Put simply, we can all belong as part of our multicultural society, here in Australia.

A survey this week by the Scanlon Foundation, a well known private philanthropic organisation in Australia, shows that the overwhelming majority of Australians—95 per cent—express a strong sense of belonging. The survey also found that 93 per cent of Australians also believe that maintaining our way of life and culture is important and 82 per cent agree that Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life.

It was encouraging to see that the 2009 survey also indicated an *increased level of trust and confidence* in the Australian Government and its policies, particularly its pursuit of social justice and equity, compared with the 2007 survey.

Nationally, the survey found that there is a relatively strong level of support for immigration and a high proportion of Australians welcome the economic benefits of immigration and the new ideas and cultures that immigrants bring. However, it is of some concern that it also showed that continued vigilance is needed. Only 28 per cent of long-time Australians in high migration areas felt safe walking alone at night compared with 62 per cent at the national level.

Likewise, levels of intolerance are also higher in areas of high migrant concentration (17 per cent among long-term Australians, 12 per cent among Australia-born and 9 per cent from non-English speaking backgrounds, compared with the national average



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across all people of 9 per cent).

Discrimination on the basis of skin colour and national origin is about 50 per cent higher in areas of high migrant concentration, compared with the national average.

The Government's Role in Promoting a Multicultural Australia

This resilience of our society overall is no accident. Australia's social cohesion has benefited from a deliberate approach by the Australian Government and its predecessors over the years.

We realise that social cohesion and acceptance of diversity are key enablers of social and economic participation. We have invested in settlement policies and programs that help migrants start participating in all facets of Australian life. These policies are recognised as world's leading practice. During a visit to Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre in Sydney, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres said that, 'Australia has one of the best refugee resettlement programs in the world'. He told us to be more vocal in international *fora* to promote our model.

I am proud to accept this commendation on behalf of the Australian Government, and the many organisations and individuals who have contributed to this success.

These settlement services begin for those with the greatest need even before they set foot on Australian soil and might continue for some years. Our suite of settlement services delivered by the Department of Immigration and

Citizenship (DIAC) includes our five-day off-shore Australian Cultural Orientation Program (AUSCO), the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS), the Settlement Grants Program (SGP), Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), Complex Case Support (CCS) and interpreting services.

In addition, we have programs that focus on all Australians that support communities under pressure. The DAP provides grants for communities to help deal with social tensions that can lead to some people feeling marginalised. The National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security (NAP) promotes, among other things, understanding and harmony between our Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

Key to the success of such programs is our partnership approach with state and territory governments, the local government sector, non-government organisations and community groups.

Our knowledge and understanding of communities' needs is further enhanced through national bodies such as the Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council, the Refugee Council, the Settlement Council and the Australian Multicultural Advisory Council.

Underpinning these initiatives is the government's community liaison officer network also within my portfolio of responsibilities, which can engage with some 6000 ethnic organisations and individuals to maintain a two-way flow of information on relevant issues. Furthermore, organisations such as the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia (FECCA) and other bodies provide voices for our diverse communities.

The Australian Government has also been working to build greater responsiveness and coordination of its programs under the social inclusion agenda. As many of you know, achieving access and equity of service delivery for a culturally diverse community requires strong leadership and focus from government.

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Do We Need More and Why?

While Australia is a successful multicultural society, there is no room for complacency.

An Australian study shows that a person's name alone alters the probability of being selected for an employment interview. For those with Anglo-Saxon names, 35 per cent were invited for an interview compared with 32 per cent for Italian names, 22 per cent for Middle Eastern names and 21 per cent for Chinese names. Put another way, a Chinese Australian would need to submit five résumés to get an interview, compared with three for a person with an Anglo-Celtic Australian name and exactly the same qualifications and skills.

Similarly, another second recent study found that around 70 per cent of school students in Australia experienced some kind of admittedly undefined racist incident at some stage.

These instances reinforce that investing in Australia's social cohesion is a prudent strategy. To not make this investment would leave the actions of a misguided few as a stain on the good work of the many.

The Government's Forward Priorities

Our desire to keep improving our approach to a multicultural Australia means that we remain keen to continuously improve our existing processes and develop new policies and programs that better enable all Australians to have opportunities to participate in Australian society.

New Directions in Settlement Policy

I have been committed to Australia's refugee program throughout my parliamentary career. I see it is a program that expresses Australia's humanity and compassion; what we call 'a fair go'. I also have a long-standing commitment to the settlement sector. These people have worked tirelessly to make Australia a world leader in settlement services, as I mentioned earlier.

Australia's non-discriminatory refugee program is responsive to changing global resettlement needs to ensure that those most in need of resettlement are offered a new life in Australia. Most recently, the program has focussed on assisting refugees from protracted situations, many of whom have been languishing in camps for years—such as Bhutanese in Nepal and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Australia takes in many refugees, including children who may not have known any other life. Many refugees have no or low literacy in their own language and no English skills. Often they are illiterate in their own tongue. Older refugees have had limited opportunities for employment experience. To respond to these trends, the government undertook national consultations in the lead up to determining future providers for our core suite of settlement services.

National Settlement Consultations

We held 17 community and government consultations and 11 focus groups with refugees. These consultations were held in capital cities across June and August 2009, as well as some regional areas where many refugees live. I attended almost every consultation and the feedback that we received was very positive about our services.

However, there were also some gaps and issues around isolation, lack of youth engagement, problems accessing housing, problems accessing employment and training and some weaknesses in cultural orientation.

This helped clarify how the government can help our new arrivals make the mental and emotional re-alignment that is part of successfully settling in Australia.

Changes to Core Services

The Minister and I are looking to set out a new settlement framework—to provide a continuum of support from pre- to post-arrival for our refugee settlers, to deliver long-term sus-

tainable settlement outcomes. This continuum covers the broad range of settlement services I mentioned earlier.

We must ensure these programs work cooperatively to support our clients on their pathway to independence. We need to provide entrants with greater hands-on support and guidance to navigate Australian systems, to understand Australian culture and to give them every chance to make it in Australia.

We will look at working more directly with clients using a flexible client-focussed approach to allow us to tap into and build on their strengths, and to develop their capacity in other areas.

Along with English proficiency, and participation in community life, we will also seek to work with clients to identify their path to meaningful and appropriate employment. This is in recognition that employment is a key settlement marker.

Part of a client-centred approach lies also in our capacity to be flexible in the intensity of support provided, such as:

- assisting people through improved pre- and post-arrival orientation information that helps them to better contextualise and absorb Australian social and cultural norms, law and order, finance and budgeting, tenancy training, health literacy and much more
- ensuring a stronger focus on youth—with greater consideration of the individual needs of our young refugees. This is important given that almost 70 per cent of the current intake is under 30 years of age (and this trend is likely to continue)
- providing entrants with more effective links to other settlement and community programs and stronger connections with community supports such as ethnic organisations, and recreation and social groups.

The feedback that I've received on our new directions has been immensely positive.

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***Better Ways for Local Communities
to Resolve Local Issues***

Earlier, I spoke of the need to do more to promote a sense of belonging for all Australians. The program that provided support to communities to help build community relations, called *Living in Harmony*, had been operating for ten years.

The government felt that it was timely to review this program. Consequently, I launched the new Diverse Australia Program (DAP) in January, with the theme *Everyone Belongs*. It has an increased focus on addressing issues of intolerance, with more funding directed to areas of need. It empowers local groups and organisations to develop tailored solutions to local issues.

For the first time in 2008 we piloted small grants. I am pleased to say that communities have subsequently shown an increased interest in the program, leading to more than doubling of the number of projects funded in 2009. In doing so, we also assist smaller community organisations to become more experienced in seeking government funding. We were concerned that too much was going to large organisations who could pay \$5000 for university students to write 5000 submissions.

The new program retains *Harmony Day*—

celebrated on 21 March each year, this day is the government's way of encouraging school children across Australia, among others, to celebrate Australia's cultural diversity and to raise awareness against racism and prejudice. For *Harmony Day* in 2009, I am pleased to say that 4401 organisations, including 2509 schools, participated.

There is also funding for emerging issues, problems that we did not see coming but will demand action.

Developing a New Cultural Diversity Policy

I would also briefly refer to the Adult Migrant English Program and the Migrant English sector. We have targeted approach for 15 to 17 year olds who have dropped out of school, increased the number of counsellors, given a stronger focus to employment outcomes and a greater assistance to individual pathways.

All Australians should be encouraged to participate in all aspects of community life and feel that they belong.

I believe that the keys to belonging are mutual respect, fairness and opportunity, leading to active citizenship.

Thank you for allowing me to be part of a very important event.

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Economically advanced nations are now heightening and expanding their borders in the face of international terrorism and undocumented migration. As a consequence, respect for human rights has been stretched beyond breaking point. Migration and border security issues have become high on the public, political and media agendas. But the UN's Global Commission on International Migration warns, 'Irregular migration is a particularly emotive issue, and one that tends to polarize opinion. In discussions of this issue, those who are concerned by border control and national security are often opposed by those whose main concern is the human rights of the migrants concerned. States and other stakeholders should move away from these contradictory perspectives and engage in an objective debate on the causes and consequences of irregular migration and the ways in which it might be most effectively addressed' (Global Commission on International Migration (2005), Chapter 3, para. 15.)

—Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference), *Graced by Migration*, May 2007.