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## PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
"TERRA AUSTRALIS TO AUSTRALIA" CONFERENCE  
CANBERRA - 21 AUGUST 1988**

The Australian Academy of Humanities is doing itself and the nation a great service in sponsoring, as the centrepiece of its Bicentennial activities, this conference "Terra Australis to Australia".

It is a pleasure for me as Prime Minister to open the Canberra week of the conference which is to be devoted to analysing multicultural Australia.

Because if it is to have real significance, our Bicentenary celebrations must be marked not only by times of great rejoicing - not only by magnificent sights such as Sydney Harbor on Australia Day - but also by the serious process of assessment of our national identity.

In studying multicultural Australia, this conference will indeed be probing close to the heart of our national identity.

In our Bicentenary year it is most appropriate that we note the truth that Australia is a land of immigrants. Immigration to Australia has extended over the full two hundred years of our European history.

The foundations of our free society were built upon the labour of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish pioneers, many of them sent to this land in chains. In the nineteenth century they were joined by farmers from Germany, goldminers from China, and plantation labourers from the Pacific Islands.

Through the massive post-war influx of people from Greece, Italy, The Netherlands, Eastern Europe and elsewhere, through the subsequent arrival of settlers from Lebanon and Turkey, in the trauma of the aftermath of the Vietnam War, successive waves of immigrants have sought to build a new life in this land.

We should not fool ourselves into thinking that life for the new arrivals was easy - that they were always welcomed with open arms - that there was no hostility directed at them by existing residents of this land.

But where in the past, Australians frequently reacted with fear, and selected immigrants on the basis of race, colour or nationality; and where in the past we somewhat vainly hoped to assimilate immigrants so that they looked, ate, dressed and played just like 'an Australian', more recently we have had a bolder and a fairer vision.

Successive post-war governments - Labor and conservative - have moved to a principle of non-discrimination in selecting immigrants, and to the policy of multiculturalism in integrating them within a diverse but cohesive Australian society.

As a nation we have come to accept that all Australians - whether Aboriginal Australians, descendants of the First Fleeters, or new arrivals - have a right, within the law, to develop their cultures and to contribute them to the wider Australian society.

It is regrettable, but broadly true, that each group of new arrivals in Australia has been greeted by predictions that they will never be successfully integrated into the Australian community.

But the reality of the Australian experience is that each group of new arrivals has successfully defied those predictions.

Their success is an essentially Australian one.

The blending of cultures, and their development within the Australian environment, has been a constant feature of the last 200 years and it is one of the special characteristics that makes us distinctively Australian.

One of the great attributes of Australian society is its capacity to offer all newcomers a fair go. One of the enduring aspects of the Australian identity is its diversity.

This is not to say that Australia has no central values. The reverse is true. Our democratic institutions, our belief in the freedom of the individual, our commitment to the rule of law, our recognition of the creative worth of entrepreneurial initiative and of the beneficial role of the state in assisting those who need assistance, our shared language - all these are fixed elements of the Australian community; values which we will not diminish.

Within this diversity, as I declared on Australia Day this year, the one test of Australian identity is commitment to the future of our nation. It is that commitment - not colour, or ethnic origin, or religion, or cultural background - that makes one 'an Australian'.

3.

I am proud to be the Prime Minister of a nation which, with bipartisan political support, has followed this enlightened and decent path into the future. Under my leadership I give my pledge, I give my Government's pledge, that there will be no turning back.

Now, for many years it would have been unnecessary for a political leader of either party to spell out such basic facts about the community.

Because for as long as most of us can remember, the major political parties have been at one on the central issues of immigration and ethnic affairs.

There has been a bipartisan recognition that discrimination should play no part in our selection of potential immigrants or our treatment of new settlers. For many years, official Australian attitudes towards migrants have been characterised by decency and tolerance. And, in part as a consequence, these attitudes have permeated through most of the community.

In these circumstances I would be avoiding my responsibilities as Prime Minister of this country if in addressing you tonight I did not take head-on the issues of this debate.

The current debate about immigration has seen the collapse of that bipartisanship. It has seen a dramatic and tragic erosion of the web of consensus that united the political parties on this issue. And it has been accompanied by a marked increase in the explicitly racist tempo and temperature of comment in some parts of the community.

The Opposition leader has explicitly called for a slow down in the rate of Asian immigration.

He refused to associate himself with the Bicentennial Multicultural Foundation because of the word "multicultural".

He patronised ethnic communities and effectively encouraged the creation of ethnic enclaves by allowing as he put it "the right of people of say, Greek descent to preserve Greek customs and Greek language within their own family." I emphasise "within their own family" - as though to speak a language other than English on the streets, to dance something more exotic than the quick step, was unacceptable.

The National Party leader has said explicitly: "Asian immigration has to be slowed," because there are "too many Asians coming into Australia."

The Nationals' Senate leader has called euphemistically for bringing the immigration stream "back into better balance" - which means reducing the "excessively high proportion of immigrants from Asia".

These comments are unprecedented in contemporary Australian politics in their discriminatory references to race. They are as ugly as they are blatant. And yet they stand unretracted by those who uttered them.

Mr Howard is currently campaigning on what he deceptively calls a "one Australia" policy.

If by the notion of "one Australia" we mean a cohesive society, free of conflict, in which all Australians have a fair go, and in which all are committed to our nation, then that is squarely within my concept of multiculturalism.

If "one Australia" means that we respect the institutional structure of our society - the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, English as our national language - then that is central to multiculturalism.

And significantly, these concepts are precisely central to the concept of multiculturalism articulated and given effect to by Mr Howard's predecessor Malcolm Fraser.

To this extent, then, Mr Howard is not articulating a new truth about Australia because commitment to Australia and to its institutions has always been an essential element of multiculturalism. Cohesion within Australia has always been the partner of our cultural diversity.

But Mr Howard's "one Australia" concept is not just about those things. It is based upon the belief that all Australians have to conform to one set of unchanging attitudes; it doubts the commitment of immigrants to this country; and it implies that certain Australians, by reason of race or ethnic origin, are less able to integrate into Australian society.

In a recent speech, Mr Howard extended his "one Australia" slogan to cover other issues - issues of industrial relations, equality of opportunity and Aboriginal Affairs.

In short, "one Australia" is a Trojan horse, a slogan for a broad ideology of reaction which Mr Howard is trying to develop, to bolster his leadership, now that he has no credibility on central issues of economic policy making.

In the field of immigration and ethnic affairs, the "one Australia" ideology seems to connote a return to the dark days of narrow-minded intolerance, fear of difference and pressure to assimilate.

It is less about uniting Australians than dividing them.

Mr Howard himself may not share these views of that minority in our community which is explicitly intolerant and racist. But he is playing with fire since that minority sees Mr Howard's current position as lending support to their ugly beliefs.

5.

It is not insignificant that the "one Australia" slogan is shared with an extremist right-wing organisation which is currently pushing a particularly distasteful brand of anti-Asian politics.

The papers presented at this conference reveal that such extreme views have often been espoused in the past. But there is no place for them in the present. And they must not be allowed to determine or detract from our future.

The truth has to be understood clearly.

It is not good enough for Mr Howard to talk of "one Australia" on the one hand while standing by his discriminatory and inflammatory comments about Asians.

I want to make it clear that the breach of bipartisanship on immigration and ethnic affairs issues has been a unilateral one from within the conservative side of politics.

I deliberately say "from within" the conservative side of politics. For you will have noticed that in my earliest public statements following the Howard/Sinclair/Stone utterances I have said that there are decent people on the other side for whom these positions would be as repugnant as they are to me. My judgement has proved correct and I pay tribute to those who are seeking to restore decency and sanity to the conservative position.

It is therefore not impossible to restore bipartisanship on a non-discriminatory immigration policy and on multiculturalism.

Indeed it is in all our interests, and in the interests of future generations of Australians, that bipartisanship be restored.

But it can only be done if Mr Howard retracts those distasteful comments he has made and silences those in the coalition parties who have echoed him.

And it can only be done if the policy making forums of the Opposition reject any proposal that race or ethnic origin become a criterion in the selection of new migrants.

The alternative Government of Australia must not persist with its policy by codeword that basically suggests people of particular races or ethnic origins threaten the social cohesion of the nation.

On the other hand, if the Opposition insists on injecting discrimination back into the Australian immigration debate, then my response is clear.

I hope that it will never be necessary to fight an election on this issue, but I have said that if it is necessary I will fight on it. Because of my belief in the innate decency of the Australian electorate, I believe we would win such an election.

But I would rather lose an election than allow this country to descend by default into the abyss of discrimination. To allow that descent would be both morally repugnant and economically insane.

There will be no discrimination by this Government. There will be no return to the White Australia policy. We will not run the risk that official administrative discrimination against Asians today will tomorrow expand to other races, other ethnic communities, other religious groups.

Let us talk facts.

We are a very different society from the colonial outpost of 1888. We are a very different society from the Australia of 1938 whose ties of trade, defence and immigration were so closely aligned to Britain.

We are, in fact, a multicultural country. Today some 40% of Australians were born overseas or have parents born overseas. Half of them are from non-English speaking backgrounds. We cannot turn back the clock. We have no desire to.

As the Premier of New South Wales, Mr Greiner, put it recently: "I don't think the debate is, should we have multiculturalism or not? I think that's a non-debate. I think the question is how do you make multiculturalism - which is the society we've got - how do you make it work?"

Clearly, one way to make it work is through bringing some of the one million or so people who are Australian residents but not Australian citizens under the umbrella of citizenship.

In July, in my electorate of Wills, I had the moving experience of presenting citizenship certificates to Australians who had come to this country from 25 countries. It was obvious that those there saw citizenship as a symbol of commitment to Australia. So too does my Government. It is for that reason that we have made 1988/89 a year to promote citizenship. This will build upon the pride in our national identity which has emerged in this Bicentennial year.

No-one will be pushed or dragged into becoming a citizen. If citizenship is to symbolise commitment for those Australians who have chosen this nation as their home, it is important to keep citizenship a voluntary act.

An open and democratic society must seek to persuade people of the advantages of citizenship - not force or compel them. Indeed compulsion would be almost a contradiction of such an open and democratic society.

The Government's aim in the coming year will be to publicise the importance of citizenship, and to make all Australians aware - including those born here - of their rights and responsibilities as full participants in our society.

7.

Finally, let us not ignore the international perspective of this debate.

It has become a truism over recent decades to assert that Australia's future is inextricably tied with that of Asia.

This presents us with the great challenge, and the great opportunity, of participating in and contributing to the prosperity of the most dynamic region of the world - the economies of the Pacific Rim.

Australia cannot pretend to exploit those opportunities, to compete in those markets, while hiding behind the protectionist barriers of tariffs and quotas. We are striking down those barriers.

Nor in exactly the same way can we pretend to be part of Asia while hiding behind a 1980s version of the discredited White Australia policy.

We have struck down that policy - and we will not countenance its revival.

Our future prosperity depends on it.

As the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, was reported recently as saying, Australia risks becoming the "very poor relations" of Asia if we fail to link up with our region.

It is with Australia's future in mind, that I return to the auspicious occasion which has brought us all here.

This international conference has been mounted by the combined work of many Australian institutions, sponsors and organisers. And I thank Esso Australia for its generous sponsorship of the conference.

For the conference is not only an academic exercise; it has great value for the whole Australian community. I am pleased to note that its proceedings will be published as Stories of Australian Migration and will also be broadcast on radio. In this way I hope that some of the great variety of visions of Australia past, present, and future, will become better known and understood by Australians.

It gives me great pleasure to declare open the second session of the 'Terra Australis to Australia' conference and to wish you all well in your deliberations.

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