



## PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP  
SPEECH AT THE LAUNCH OF ANDREW THEOPHANOUS' BOOK  
"UNDERSTANDING MULTICULTURALISM AND AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY",  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA, 1 DECEMBER 1995**

### **E&OE PROOF COPY**

Well, thank you, very much indeed, William [Albon]. Could I also acknowledge the High Commissioner of Great Britain, other distinguished members of the diplomatic corps, Mr Rebikoff, Lois O'Donoghue and, of course, my Parliamentary colleagues, other distinguished guests, Andrew, and ladies and gentlemen.

Well about this time every year, Andrew has a new book and it has become at least once in my itinerary/agenda for the course of the year. I always say that within the year we had better put a day in, for Andrew will have another book and I am very happy to be here this morning to launch this one.

It reminds me, I think, of two points. One is that there are people in the Labor Party ... the Labor Party is full of people who have all sorts of views about all sorts of things, are in the business of politics out of conviction not convenience and you can see this just in this work, alone, that Andrew has done, how thoughtful he has been and how he thinks about Australia, thinks about the way in which it is changing and tries to write down and record - and perhaps lead - in the way in which Australian thought has changed and is changing.

So it is a very interesting polemic he has written and the prodigious energy which he displays with these publications is, of course, quite profound. He is talking about, of course, the perhaps singular most defining feature of Australian society today and that is the impact of the post-war migration program on the cultural identity of the country and it is, we believe, a great success story. We don't presume it is a model for the rest of the world. But I think we are an example of a culturally pluralist society that works pretty well and in this text he is, I think, trying to tell the reader why he thinks it works well and to say that our whole process is informed by democratic commonsense.

His main theme, I think, is that multiculturalism is successful because of the strength of the nation's oldest values. That is egalitarianism, principally, the belief that everyone deserves a fair chance or a fair go and our deep-rooted sense of democracy and our basic tolerance, which comes from it, is the thing which has given people the psychological space to let multiculturalism work in a way that we have been able to draw strength from it.

He says that rather than diluting Australia's culture, it has replenished it. Replenished it around the theme that the place is, essentially, deeply democratic and tolerant and egalitarian and that the influences of multiculturalism have, in fact, highlighted, sharpened, and replenished those instincts. And that people have brought colour and ambition to Australia and that has generally supported the tendency we have all had to these democratic ideals and democratic traditions.

And I think people coming - particularly in the early phases - from Europe, who have in the first instance, changed the nature of the culture of Australia have found when they have come here, particularly rent by two World Wars, that the opportunities for freedom in Australia where these values are bound and, also, in the sun because it is always easier, I think, to feel happy and free in a temperate climate, than one does rugged up under a grey sky. But the whole notion of .... you know, you share in the bounty of the country whether you are wealthy or not, when you share in the pleasure of its environment. And, I think, all of that has produced a great view that amongst migrants and in the community that the multiculturalism that has arisen from it has truly replenished that which we have had here.

Of course no policy of the Government, or no document, could make multiculturalism work. That has to come from the community itself. But a strong Government commitment to multiculturalism is necessary and it is that commitment which, I think, Andrew rejoices in in the Labor Party and I think that we enjoy as a Party with people in the community.

Could I also say that in saying that I don't believe that multiculturalism must ever be allowed to become an ideological position, a sort of repository of political correctness, or something beyond criticism. But certain things are beyond the pale, like a racial basis in discrimination of our immigration system, or discrimination against migrants in the workplace etc.

But, I think, the theme that the Government has been perhaps touching in the last couple of years is our general embrace of multiculturalism, but making clear that everybody's first loyalty has to be to Australia. That is, within the bounds of Australian democracy and egalitarianism, the things which Andrew argues is actually feeding and replenishing our culture, the inspiration of it has to be always that which the democracy is about. And that is the first loyalty to the society we have created here and our first loyalty to Australia and, of course, that is most obviously expressed in the allegiance which the Government strongly encourages and that is, of course, taking Australian citizenship, which we are seeing, I think, as a growing tendency amongst people who have had permanent resident status.

Andrew's book sets out a narrative on the Government's recent advances - the National Agenda for Multiculturalism, first released in 1989. The National Multicultural Advisory Council has reviewed the National Agenda for us and the Government will soon formally respond to their report. The Racial Hatred Legislation, commitment to access and equity principles, the platform on which multiculturalism has built itself which is social justice, he refers to this and he says that the very essence of social justice are the things that hold the egalitarian notions together. Hence, the underpinnings of multiculturalism and he goes through some of the elements of it - Medicare, education and training, superannuation for everybody, and in the broader, of course, the Native Title Legislation which brings into the social justice equation more obviously, of course, the first Australians.

Now, these are all things which, I think, that we see as a matrix, as threads of a fabric. That is, it is not just about the Migration Program. It is not just about a separate cultural identification with the countries of origin of people. But it is about a bigger thing that they can identify these historic interests with the new-found, in the case of those who arrived as migrants, freedom and democracy here which is itself fed by a long egalitarian tradition, which is itself supported by social justice and social justice policies.

And so while these things might seem to be in the realm of social policy, they are in fact part of community policy. These are points we often make of our opponents, wearily, about things such as Medicare, education and training because education is the great boundary jumper. It is the place where people skip through the stratum and when only three children in ten completed secondary school ten years ago, you can bet that most of the seven of the ten, of course, represented preponderantly those of lower incomes and disadvantaged groups.

Now, of course, this year that is eight in ten completing secondary school and we have had now a 60 per cent addition to tertiary places and an enormous revolution in vocational education. So that where once only 40 per cent of people were trained after secondary school - 60 per cent cascading into, essentially, a labour market within which they were not equipped with skills - will have now the great bulk of the community, 90 per cent odd, coming into a training situation - post-secondary training.

And that is not a statement about education, it is a statement about your society, it is a statement about mobility, it is a statement about the brightest people being chosen on their abilities from within the education system rather than their parents income or their parents social position. All of this has, of course, made it likely that the children of migrants take a greater role in the society.

So, giving people universal protection against sickness which is not a market matter - your well being should not be a matter for the market place - education, training, the right to a decent income in retirement so that the Commonwealth's tax concessions are equitably drawn down, all of these things we think in the Labor Party buttress a whole notion of society and buttress the notion of multiculturalism.

Now, you know, it is rare for me these days in a public address to ever let the Coalition off and I'm not going to do it today either. I just wanted to say a couple of things about them because there is a lot to say about them even though they don't say much, there is still a lot to say about them.

We found something that goes to this subject. It is a report which Senator Short - the Shadow Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs - had commissioned by Mr Zachary Wilks of the University of Michigan. The document is entitled '*Building Australia's Future: An Evaluation of Settlement Services Prepared for the Office of Senator Jim Short, Shadow Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs*'. In his covering letter to select migrant and ethnic groups Senator Short states that this paper "is Mr Wilks' personal view and does not represent a Coalition position." However, it is a document that makes clear ... it is a research document prepared for, by and with the active co-operation of Senator Short and his office and it carries hence his imprimatur. It has been distributed officially by him at public expense. It says "The Coalition is currently reviewing several important matters in the areas of multicultural affairs and settlement services .... I would appreciate hearing from you on the topics identified".

Should the Coalition win the next election, I'm sure this officially sanctioned circulated paper would no doubt be used by a Howard government as some sort of mandate for adopting the radical changes it recommends. I'll give you a little taste of just a couple of pieces of it.

It says '... all business and skilled entrants including concessional family entrants who are in a skill assessed class should be required to have English as a precondition of entry. Without English ability their skills or business acumen are virtually worthless in and to Australia ...' Well, of course, bad luck for Peter Abeles and Frank Lowy and Frank Belgiorno-Nettis. They wouldn't have made the grade on that basis.

Then it goes on '... if they do not attend the courses or obtain English elsewhere then they should be denied access to welfare benefits. In the future their sponsors should bear their living costs ...' In other words, if they don't attend courses and are trained proficiently in English they shouldn't get welfare benefits and their sponsors should be reminded they will have to carry the costs.

It is so friendly. And it goes on to say this "... migrants without English ability including humanitarian and refugee entrants in particular should be required to undertake English language courses as a priority for settlement. They should continue to receive financial assistance while they are undertaking these courses. However, if they fail to attend class or drop out prematurely, they should not be eligible for future unemployment assistance unless they have obtained English either through the courses or elsewhere ..." It is a hard world Mr Howard has in mind for the rest of us.

I wish Margaret Thatcher had come to Canberra recently. She could have endorsed Johnny as well as Jeff. She would have endorsed this for sure.

"... if all else fails the Government may have to look at more prescriptive methods to ensure migrants obtain sufficient English skills so they can fully participate in society and are not at risk or impost to either themselves or the community. Such a proposal could involve proficiency certificates that would be awarded by accredited English programs and presented when applying for a job ..." Here is a little rub "... employers who fail to check for the certificates could be made subject to fines ..." You see, all those nasty employers out there employing people who don't speak fluent English.

Anyway, it goes on, there is pages and pages of it. I won't bore you with it. It is just typical of the Coalition's snaky approach to multiculturalism. One of the things I have said to Alexander Downer was multiculturalism is more than heading for the nearest Chinese restaurant. It is more than chasing a meatball around a plate with a pair of chop sticks which is what he did on his foray to a Chinese restaurant in my electorate.

In the Labor Party, of course, proficiency with chop sticks comes at the age of 16. In the Liberal Party it comes at about 42 or 43 years of age, but by then the capacity for dexterity is long past. So, they never quite make it, there is certainly no accreditation in their youth. But, I don't know whether these things have ever occurred to our friends in the Coalition. At any rate, they don't have a view that we have, that the thing that multiculturalism has done has been to enlarge Australia, to make it bigger and to make it better, to make it more interesting, to make it more resilient and to do, as Andrew has suggested, replenish those basic instincts of egalitarianism and democracy.

In that sense, as people live their lives here, as their children grow up here, the culture of Australia has changed to a newer identity. But one which is uniquely Australian is that which some of the rest of us might have identified 30 or 40 or 50 years ago and indeed given our place in the world, our proximity to large, old societies like Indonesia, very old societies like Papua New Guinea and our proximity also to the fastest growing markets in the world. The change to Australia is one that in our cultural diversity is not just a social strength, but a strength in approaching these markets and being part of the community and region in a way we might not have conceived before.

I have made the point and Andrew makes it well here, that you can't ever really be thinking about a society at peace with itself, comfortable with the changing nature of its culture and its identity without, of course, understanding that the people who must feel comfortable in this are our Indigenes. It is going to take a long time before the Australian indigenes feel comfortable with Australia, the way it is now, but I think we have made as strong a renewal of our efforts to that as perhaps any government has, certainly in recent years and we are going to keep that commitment up. But, you can't say that the place is open and fair and democratic if one important and key section is excluded from opportunity or where the barriers to participation are too great.

So, that is why that happy mix of social policy runs with the whole current of our society and it is why too, with a republic that in renouncing a European monarch as our head of state, we would have made that affirmation of the way in which we have changed and to say to all the people who have joined us that they are more likely to be and more welcome in being an integral part of society which they volunteered to belong to.

I think we in the Party owe Andrew a debt for getting this down because debates come and go and the plasma of the debates exist at the time but then they disappear and you try to remember what debates were like 10 years ago or 20 years ago and you can remember the highlights, but you don't remember the flux and I think what this text does is put that down. It puts all of the issues down, it gives us the threads of the debate and records this quite distinctive, defining change in our history. For that we thank Andrew and it is therefore with great pleasure that I officially launch his text.

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