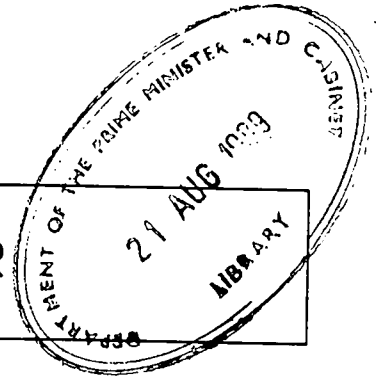




PRIME MINISTER



CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
LAUNCH OF THE NATIONAL AGENDA FOR A MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA
SYDNEY - 26 JULY 1989**

Sir James Gobbo,
Members of the Advisory Council
on Multicultural Affairs,
Sir William Keys,
Fellow Australians,

Rarely could it be more appropriate that we greet each other, as we do today, with those words, 'Fellow Australians'.

For looking around this room I see the faces of Australia.

They are the faces of almost every continent, race, religion, culture, language and society in our world. Yet they are also - every single one of them - the faces of Australia.

Here today are:

- . Australians whose ancestors peopled this continent 2,000 generations ago;
- . Australians whose forebears arrived here two centuries ago;
- . Australians whose grandparents and great grandparents came here before the last war;
- . Australians whose parents sought a new life here after the war;
- . Australians who joined us from overseas only in recent years;
- . And the children of those newcomers who were born here among us.

In all this diversity, one unifying theme is clear.

For all the differences in our places of birth, our styles of clothes, our languages, our creeds, our colours, our races, there is one fundamental characteristic, one utterly vital value we share.

That is our commitment to Australia.

Our past may lie with a multitude of the nations of the earth - but our future lies unreservedly and proudly with one nation, with Australia.

And it is our shared commitment to the institutions and values of a democratic Australia and to the freedom of the individual within the rule of law, our shared determination to build a great future for our children in this nation, that makes it so fitting that today we use those words, 'Fellow Australians'.

On this day of the launch of the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, I want to make two essential points that follow from this recognition of our shared commitment to Australia.

First, it follows that all Australians are equally entitled to enjoy the rights and carry the responsibilities of life in this nation. We are all equally entitled to a fair go, equally entitled to dignity and self-respect, entitled to equal access to the services of Government.

Those goals are greatly advanced with the National Agenda we launch today.

The second point that follows is that, within our shared commitment to this nation, we must never be ashamed of our diversity.

We should recognise diversity for what it is - a great source of new talents and ideas, a catalyst for social dynamism, a true source of wealth in both its cultural and economic senses.

Some people see diversity as a threat to our social cohesion. Some indeed would seek to use diversity as a means of setting Australian against Australian, and of denying some Australians a fair go simply on the basis of the colour of their skin or the country of their birth.

Let it be repeated and understood at the outset: for this Government, for this Prime Minister, such views are simply unacceptable.

Because it is not diversity that creates weakness or discord. It is prejudice and intolerance that sow the seeds of divisiveness.

And under this Government, the days of sanctioned prejudice and official discrimination are over.

The days of the White Australia policy are behind us.

The policies of enforced conformity and assimilation will live only in the history books where they belong.

Multiculturalism embodies this irrevocable transformation.

And let me say what a tragic loss it is that the bipartisanship on this issue that had so positively and constructively characterised Australian politics for so many years no longer exists at the Federal level.

It remains a great source of sadness to me that the Federal Opposition is still unwilling to commit itself openly, honestly and unashamedly to a multicultural Australia, with multicultural policies.

Today's Australia is a multicultural Australia. That is a demographic fact. It requires a positive policy response from all sides of politics.

For a very large part of our two hundred year history many Australians thought of themselves as living in a transplanted British society.

Our relationship with Britain defined our identity, our loyalties and our place in the world.

And let us always remember with pride that the British tradition gave us many of the enduring institutions and values of our society - our parliamentary democracy, our legal system, our concepts of rights and freedoms, our national language.

Even as late as 1947, some 90 per cent of the Australian population was of Anglo-Celtic origin. This vast preponderance translated easily into cultural and social conformism. Our experience and tolerance of difference was limited - and we had practised a restrictive immigration policy to keep it so, a policy that had presented Australians to the world as an insulated, introverted people, unwilling to play a proper part in the affairs of the region or of the world.

Now we see Australia has changed. We have undergone a great transformation. We opened up our windows and doors to the world and we have been refreshed and immeasurably strengthened by the inflow of new skills and new ideas, by the millions of people who in the post-war years have built a new life in this land.

The demographic measure of our multicultural identity is that now less than half of the Australian population is of pure Anglo-Celtic descent, and a quarter of the population has no such ancestry. Australians today are drawn from some 140 countries around the world.

Among the new arrivals in Australia of course was the family of the Premier of New South Wales. I pay tribute to him for his stand on the issue of multiculturalism. On many issues we are far apart - but on our commitment to multiculturalism we are as one.

What is important in the debate about multiculturalism today is how we manage our cultural diversity - how we ensure that the next generation of Australians will inherit an Australia that is confident in its individuality, enriched by its diversity and proud of its accomplishments.

It was to develop the strategies and initiatives leading to that long-term objective that more than 2 years ago, in April 1987, I asked the Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs to assist the Government in preparing a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia.

The Council went about its work with vigour, sensitivity and imagination, and was valuably assisted by the Office of Multicultural Affairs in my Department.

The Agenda that we launch today is the product of their work. It comprises three elements.

First it clearly defines the policy of multiculturalism and articulates the long-term goals and objectives that underpin that policy.

Second it sets in train a series of enduring structural and institutional changes.

And third, it includes a significant package of program initiatives involving immediate commitments of some \$50 million over three years, and more than \$70 million in total.

Multiculturalism of course is only partly about enjoying and enhancing our diverse cultural heritage. It is also about social justice - about ensuring equality of treatment and of opportunity for all Australians. And it is about economic efficiency - about harnessing the skills and talents of all Australians.

So it follows that this Agenda, not least its spending initiatives, represents an investment from which all Australians, whatever their background, stand to benefit.

One of the principal achievements of the Agenda is that it begins to remedy a grievous injustice that has been done to many of the people who have come to Australia as migrants.

For a nation desperately seeking the new skills that migrants can provide, we have been tragically wasteful in squandering many of those skills, because of our failure to recognise many legitimate and valuable qualifications gained by migrants before they came to Australia.

Some estimates put the annual cost to Australia of this failure adequately to tap our human resources at more than \$250 million.

That of course does not count the personal costs suffered by those who arrived with skills, as tradespeople or as professionals, yet who were unable to find the satisfaction of suitable employment.

This Agenda establishes a National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition and initiates other reforms to ensure the resources of our people are better used.

The Agenda also includes a package of measures to improve Australia's language skills. Lack of English substantially impairs our productivity in the workplace. The vital process of award restructuring is diminished if lack of English precludes workers from participating in new retraining and career opportunities. Many injuries and delays in the workplace can be attributed to the inability of some to speak English.

We will be increasing and improving English language teaching for adults and children, at a total cost of some \$30 million over the next three years.

We will also give a firm commitment to continued support for second language learning in our schools - with no artificial distinctions between community and economic languages. And let me take this opportunity to say how important is the complementary role of ethnic schools in our communities. I am pleased to announce, that on the basis of current enrolments, the Government will make a 10% increase in existing per capita funding.

The Government has been very conscious, within broader budgetary constraints, of the need to make an overdue investment in our human capital. This is very much an economic agenda. Indeed more than half of the costs associated with the Agenda are directed towards these two initiatives - the recognition of overseas qualifications, and the improvement of English language tuition.

In addition to these economic considerations, we have also been conscious of the social justice dimension of multiculturalism.

In the past many Australians have been denied their fair entitlement to Government services because of barriers of culture, language and race. It was in order to improve access and ensure greater equity that my Government adopted its access and equity strategy.

The National Agenda takes that process much further today, by dramatically strengthening and reinforcing the requirement for Commonwealth agencies to design their policies and deliver their services in a way that reflects the cultural diversity of contemporary Australia.

To that end there are specific measures directed towards the aged, the young, women, Aborigines, and people living in rural and provincial areas, and concrete initiatives in the areas of community services and health, consumer education and the arts.

In framing the Agenda we have also been conscious of the importance of retaining and enhancing harmonious community relations.

A major Agenda initiative is a 3-year community relations campaign, the most ambitious such campaign ever mounted in Australia, that will tackle personal prejudice and intolerant behaviour. It will commence next year, after the Human Rights Commission has reported on its current inquiry into racist violence.

The Special Broadcasting Service - SBS - also has a critical role to play in reshaping and modernizing Australia's image of itself. SBS television is a medium for all Australians, reflecting and conveying the many faces and many ways of being Australian.

Therefore, as part of the National Agenda, we have decided to guarantee the security and integrity of SBS by giving it its own legislation and by extending it to the Northern Territory and non-metropolitan regions of Queensland, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

Finally, the Government will consider the merits of introducing a Multiculturalism Act, partly in order to define both the ambit and limits of the policy. Such legislation could also be used to reinforce the Government's access and equity strategy, to establish a statutory body on multicultural issues, to give formal recognition to English as the national language, and to deal at the Commonwealth level with the problem of racial vilification.

Any decision to proceed with such an Act will depend on the outcome of community consultation about its desirability and possible content. I would urge everyone here to contribute to that process.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me say again how much the Government appreciates the efforts of the Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs under the able leadership of Sir James Gobbo and Mr George Wojak.

The Council has made an absolutely critical contribution to the shape and content of the Agenda and of the initiatives I have announced this morning.

In the light of this splendid work, I have this week decided to extend the term of the current Advisory Council by a further 12 months. I will be inviting all members of the Council who so wish, to remain on the Council and to help in the deliberations about the merits of a Multiculturalism Act.

I take particular pleasure in announcing a new member of the Advisory Council today, a great Australian, and, as we have heard today, one passionately committed to a multicultural future. I speak of course of Sir William Keys.

I have also asked Sir William to chair the new National Advisory Committee on Overseas Skills Recognition.

There can be no doubt that a man of Sir William's experience in business, in public life and in community service, and who is held in such high regard throughout Australian society, will perform these crucial tasks with diligence and distinction.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are living through a period of major social and economic change.

These changes are profound and they bring with them stresses and tensions.

The monocultural Australia imagined by our parents' generation has passed forever. It has been, and remains, the challenge of our generation to achieve the transition to a new, multicultural Australia. We are part way through that process. We are all, in our way, contributing to it. The National Agenda aims to see it to a conclusion.

Let me close by quoting the first of the goals proposed by the Advisory Council in its definition of multiculturalism.

It could not be simpler or clearer: "All Australians should have a commitment to Australia and share responsibility for furthering our national interests."

If we hold fast to that principle, then our children and grandchildren, the next generations, will have much for which to thank us. They will inherit an Australia that is more tolerant, more fair and more prosperous than any we have known.
