



PRIME MINISTER

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP - OPENING OF THE GLOBAL CULTURAL DIVERSITY CONFERENCE, SYDNEY CONVENTION AND EXHIBITION CENTRE, WEDNESDAY, 26 APRIL 1995

Your excellency, Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, distinguished speakers, ladies and gentlemen.

It is my pleasure to welcome you to Australia, to Sydney and the 1995 Global Cultural Diversity Conference.

On behalf of Bob Carr, the Premier of New South Wales, and Sir James Gobbo, Chairman of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, who are co-hosting this conference with the Australian Government we welcome your participation in discussions of great importance and we hope, in time, of great consequence.

We are very privileged to have with us so many eminent speakers from all over the world. I thank you most sincerely for coming.

Mr Secretary General, it is a particular pleasure and an honour to welcome you on your first visit to Australia, especially in this year in which we are commemorating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. 1995 has also been designated as the International Year for Tolerance and the first Decade for the World's Indigenous People.

We are also pleased to welcome Dr Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO, which celebrates its 50th anniversary in 1995 as well, and the Deputy President of South Africa, Mr Thabo Mbeki.

The conference has brought together knowledgeable and concerned individuals to consider the ways by which we might make cultural diversity less of an impediment to human progress and more of a means to it. Less of a source of conflict, and more of a means by which the benefits of tolerance can be learned or re-learned. Less of a violent and destructive force, less of a vehicle for xenophobia and prejudice, and more of a means to creating a more peaceful, creative and secure post-Cold War World.

In short we see it as a contribution to the effort to make the 21st century a better one than this.

This conference was conceived as a means of marking all these milestones.

And, I might say, Australia is an appropriate place to mark them.

We are a country looking forward to the next century. We believe we have a constructive role to play in those issues which concern the United Nations. We have always believed that - we were present and active at its inception in San Francisco - but we have never believed it more than now.

And we are nothing if not culturally diverse: more than 220 nationalities are represented in our population. Forty two per cent of our people were born overseas or have one parent born overseas.

Australian society is rich in linguistic, racial, religious and cultural diversity. We have consciously devised policies to encourage and preserve this diversity and gain in return benefits to the nation and community.

We count the creation of this rich, pluralistic and peaceful society - we think one of the most successful multicultural societies in the world - as one of our great national achievements.

That is why I say that Sydney is an appropriate environment for this Global Cultural Diversity Conference.

Not because we presume to think that Australia can be a model for the rest of the world - the world is itself too diverse for that. But we have learned some useful things about living together, we have a deep interest in these questions and we think we can make a contribution in a world which desperately needs answers to them.

Fifty years ago in San Francisco, a group of delegates, including Dr H V Evatt from Australia, met to design the United Nations. They hoped that the institution they were creating would ensure that the wars which had already ravaged the world twice in just thirty years would never be repeated.

They wanted to construct a framework for a world in which international stability was based on common values of justice, development and peace.

But in 1945 the lessons of the failed League of Nations were still fresh in everyone's minds and the consequences of that failure appallingly real. So there was a strong streak of realism as well as idealism in the blueprint the delegates drew up in San Francisco.

They knew the United Nations needed to take into account the realities of global power. And they understood the importance of the nation-state.

The role of the nation-state was already cemented at the centre of international affairs, and its importance was to grow even larger as the great process of decolonisation got under way.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the framework the architects of the United Nations developed had at its core the need to settle, or at least contain, conflicts between nation-states.

In the event, as we know, the post-war reality fell short of the high hopes of San Francisco. The emergence of the Cold War and a bipolar international system imposed a very different dynamic on United Nations operations.

Still, despite the complications and set-backs of the following half century, the United Nations managed to notch up substantial achievements. Not enough of them, no doubt, but many more than some of its critics allow.

But fifty years on, the Cold War is over and there has never been a better time to ask ourselves if the United Nations we now have is what we now need. And what we will need in the 21st century.

Given the scale of change in the world since the organisation was formed, it would be astonishing if the answer was yes.

Many distinguished figures, not least yourself, Secretary-General, have been engaged in just this task of renewal.

Australia, through Gareth Evans especially, has been playing a role in this debate, as we did in San Francisco half a century ago.

I do not want to explore these important structural questions this morning. There are many other forums at which that will be done.

But I do want to draw the link between what we are talking about at this conference and these wider United Nations issues.

Because cultural diversity, which we in Australia value as a source of strength and pride, has an external dimension, too.

And the manifestations of cultural diversity we see on the television news more often seem to take the form of tragic and intractable conflicts.

We have been reminded horribly of this by the suffering we have seen just this week in Rwanda.

I want to pay tribute here to the role of the Australian peacekeepers in UNAMIR, who were instrumental in providing medical assistance to the victims of the terrible massacre at Kibeho.

They have shown the finest traditions of the Australian Defence Force, and richly deserve the Anzac Peace Prize they have been awarded.

Ironically, the end of the Cold War - which was otherwise so welcome - made possible many of these new outbreaks of conflict around the world by releasing the political iron bonds which had contained them.

So, in the former Yugoslavia, in the former Soviet Union, in Burundi, in Somalia, we see tragedies unfold - large-scale horror and appalling inhumanity, stemming from ingrained, small-scale hatreds.

And these conflicts are shaping the international system, and challenging the United Nations, just as profoundly as traditional disputes between states have done.

They are the reflection of a world in which very often the nation and the state are no longer the same thing.

The nation-state, as it existed when the United Nations was founded, is going through a period of profound transition, and the international community has to respond.

We see this most obviously in the economic area, where the global market place is already a reality.

The engagement of the developing world in the international economy is one of the most far-reaching and beneficial developments of our age but, as Australians know, it is part of a process which challenges our former ideas of economic sovereignty.

Similarly, responses to the degradation of the environment cannot possibly come from one country alone, because both the causes and the effects are transnational.

And the information revolution poses huge problems for laws of national copyright, and makes the national regulation of what our citizens see and hear almost impossible.

In short, one of the mantras of modern international relations - non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries - these days has a greatly modified and much reduced meaning.

In this very different world, how should the international community respond to the ethnic and communal conflicts which so mar international peace, and properly disturb our consciences?

I do not mean by this - how should we go about the important tasks of peacekeeping and peacemaking, or the immediate human responses of

providing food, shelter and medicine to those who are suffering? Those, again, are issues which require separate consideration.

Instead, at a different level, I think that responses lie in some cases in redefining our idea of the state. In other cases, we need to rethink our view of the nation.

Sometimes, the best response to intractable tensions may be the old fashioned remedy of redefining the borders of the state.

That is what happened, peacefully, when the Czech Republic and Slovakia split, and it is the answer that many of the component parts of the former Soviet Union found.

Part of the answer may lie in a radical redefinition of what constitutes a state.

In Europe, the very homeland of the nation-state, and the source of much of the national conflict which has so scarred our century, the European Union is dramatically changing our ideas about what a state is, and how sovereignty is distributed.

And after 1997, when Hong Kong reverts to China's control, China will comprise one state but with two distinct economic systems.

A third response, and one I think that is important, is to build up the role of regional institutions and identities.

Because the gap between individual states and multilateral organisations like the United Nations can sometimes be too great for quick and effective responses to humanitarian or security problems.

And the cultural and historical background necessary to resolve problems will often lie more readily in the local region.

In addition, an important factor in democracies like Australia is that our people will often more readily support commitments in our own region - Cambodia, for example - than outside it, because they can understand more easily how events there can affect them.

When the government of Papua New Guinea was searching for a solution to the problems it faced on the island of Bougainville, for example, it found the idea of a regional peacekeeping force useful.

Similarly, the United Nations operation in Haiti had a large regional element.

And I think the problem of conflicting claims in the South China Sea - a key security question in Asia - is probably more amenable to a regional than an international settlement.

The greatest contribution of regional organisations, however, has so far been seen in economic frameworks like the European Union, NAFTA and - in this part of the world - APEC.

APEC brings together eighteen very different economies and cultures united in the common purpose of sustaining prosperity and growth in the Asia Pacific. It is a practical example of what used to be called North-South cooperation.

And I have no doubt that here, as in Europe, the act of working together on practical economic issues will have beneficial political and security consequences as well.

So regionalism is central to the broader United Nations efforts to promote peace and prosperity - not an alternative, but an addition.

Finally, however, the answer to what we can do about troubling humanitarian and security problems may lie not so much in rethinking the state, as in redefining the nation.

The challenge in many cases is how we can create societies rich in cultural, racial and religious diversity but do so in ways which encourage rather than compromise a sense of national identity.

It is too glib to say that the answer lies simply in better understanding. The problems in the Balkans or in central Africa do not stem from a lack of familiarity with the culture of the antagonists.

This means that the redefinition of the nation is a complex task. It involves economic and social development, justice, human rights, good governance, inclusive institution building, tolerance, respect for difference, the strengthening of civil society.

So it is not an easy job or a quick one. And I do not pretend that the Australian experience is readily transferable to other parts of the world.

But, as I said, I am certain that some of what we have done here can lead not only to the development of a culturally rich, diverse, and peaceful Australian society, but may suggest to others ways of improving harmony within and between states.

This would be a fitting contribution to the current debate about the future of the United Nations and its operations, and to the International Year of Tolerance.

It is true that we count what we have done here as a great success. Nowhere is that truer than in our changing relationship with Asia.

Just a generation ago, the White Australia Policy was still a reality in all but the technical detail.

Australia came perilously close to marginalising itself in our region and in the world.

Now, half of all our immigrants come from Asia.

They are adding immeasurably to the richness of our society, to our arts, to our commerce, to the way we live our daily lives.

And their values, like the values of all those who have come here before, will help shape our culture.

This is a much more tolerant society than that which existed just a generation ago. Today, no Australian political party can hope to succeed with an immigration policy which excludes people on racial or ethnic grounds. Tolerance itself has become one of those words to which we attach a primary democratic value.

Yet it is important, at this stage of our history, to put our multicultural successes in perspective.

For instance, I think it would be a mistake for this generation of Australians to persuade themselves either that the transformation is complete and completely satisfactory, or, indeed, that all the achievements have occurred since we first took on the idea - the word and the policies - of multiculturalism.

Under a different banner - that of assimilation - migrants from Europe and the Middle East were welcomed in the decades immediately after World War II and made a profound contribution to our national life and development. There are regions of Australia where in the 19th century people from Germany and Italy were more numerous and their cultures more pervasive than any from the British Isles.

Today when we talk of the enrichment of our culture by people from all the countries of the world we sometimes forget that people have been coming from all over the world to this place for 200 years; that our landscape was interpreted by painters, scientists and explorers from Germany, Switzerland, Poland and France - as well as Britain - and that this artistic and intellectual tradition was consolidated in the 20th century.

It seems to me we should remember that tolerance of cultural difference is ultimately a necessary condition for a successful new world country; and that those traditions of egalitarian democracy which emerged in the last half of the 19th century had the seeds of multiculturalism in them. If it is true that earlier generations of Australians traditionally took the view that where and to what rank people were born should be no measure of their character,

and that in Australia everyone should begin without these handicaps, then we can see ourselves as building on a tradition.

And we can learn the lesson that the best traditions of a country, and the best instincts of a people, can be the basis of radical change. I think that is what we have learnt in Australia in the past couple of decades - that societies can be changed, that an inward looking culture can be made outward looking, that what seems alien can be revealed as friendly, that where threats always seemed to lie there are now rewards and opportunities.

And I think we must also always bear in mind that the dominant cultures of our history - those of the British Isles and Ireland - far from being hostile to the growth of a culturally diverse society, provided in democratic institutions and ideas its essential precondition.

I make these points because it does not hurt to be reminded that our efforts are part of a much longer story: a story in which progress has been uneven. We do not know all the answers, and the story is far from over - and we should not assume that the rapid strides we have made in the past two decades are a guarantee of success in the future.

There is no more profound example of the distance we still have to travel in Australia than the position of Aboriginal people in our society and their relationship with non-Aboriginal Australians.

Nor, of course, is there any better example of the fact that since 1788 this continent has played host to a multicultural society.

This conference is not the place to offer a short history of the dispossession, brutality and neglect, which accompanied European settlement and which has continued in this century. Until we succeed in our ambition to affect a permanent reconciliation with indigenous Australians, our claims to have achieved a successful multicultural society will always be compromised.

But we are at last determined on reconciliation - a new partnership built on mutual respect, justice and equity - and we have in the last two years put in place some long overdue foundations.

We have given legislative expression to a decision of the High Court of Australia that the idea of terra nullius - the fanciful notion that no one owned Australia prior to British settlement - was indeed a lie. The High Court established that there was a Native Title to land, rooted in traditional law and custom itself, within the common law of Australia.

The legislation giving effect to this decision has survived criticism and a legal challenge. It was confirmed in the High Court just last month. And I might say what has also been confirmed is that Australians are prepared to

support such a dramatic change in the law - that they want to see the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians put right.

The establishment of a Native Title will not of itself redress the consequences of dispossession. In truth, of course, nothing will. But over the next ten years the Government will allocate some \$1.5 billion to a permanent fund so that dispossessed indigenous communities will have the means to buy land - and in so doing regain the potential for spiritual and cultural regeneration, as well as an economic base to improve their material well-being.

The final step will be the implementation of social justice measures. We now have before us two major reports which draw on extensive consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and in due course we will announce the measures calculated to be most likely to redress the wrongs and raise the living standards and life opportunities of indigenous Australians.

There is no doubt that we will succeed best in this wherever we are able to give Aboriginal people the means of solving their own problems. It is equally true that we will make improvements in the quality of their lives, including their health, and raise morale and self esteem wherever we can deliver the means of their retaining contact with traditional culture and customs. That, after all, is the most fundamental principle of multiculturalism.

For us, the process of reconciliation is a basic test of our modern nationhood - on it depends our relationship with both our past and our future. On it also depends a favourable measure of our achievements in the realm of cultural diversity.

But to put Australia's progress towards a successful multicultural society in perspective, to make reference to ambitions not yet fulfilled, is certainly not to discount the scale of our achievements or the pride we take in them.

The Australia I knew as a child and the Australia of today are radically different places. When we were growing up we did not and could not imagine the Sydney of 1995. And even if we had been able to visualise the city as it now is, we could not have conceived of the means by which it has been brought about. We could not have conceived of the necessary policy changes. Perhaps most importantly, we could not have conceived of the necessary changes in ourselves.

That is at the heart of multiculturalism. It describes a response to the diversity that exists in Australian society. It is a policy for managing the consequences of that diversity in the interests of all.

This means a policy which guarantees rights and imposes responsibilities.

The rights include those of cultural identity - the right to express and share individual cultural heritage, including language and religion. The right to social justice - the right of every Australian to equality of treatment and opportunity, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, language, gender or place of birth.

The responsibilities might be summarised as follows: that the first loyalty of all Australians must be to Australia, to its interests and its future; that all Australians must accept the basic principles of Australian society, including the Constitution and the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language, equality of the sexes and the right of every Australian to express his or her views and values.

That is the essential balance in the multicultural equation: the promotion of individual and collective cultural rights and expression, on the one hand; and on the other, the promotion of common national interests and values. And success depends on demonstrating that each side of the equation serves the other.

In practical terms one side can be seen in Government programs to provide people who have just arrived in Australia with assistance to locate and use the various welfare services, including health, housing and income support.

Or in, for instance, the Translating and Interpreting Service which, by phone or in person, assists migrants to break down the language barrier they face until they become fluent in English.

Or in the Special Broadcasting Service, whose daily television and radio broadcasts in 67 languages help to maintain the threads which link so many Australians to their native culture.

These are eminently practical measures calculated to minimise the trauma which migration has always entailed and make the transition to a new life in a new culture that much easier. They do not demand or enforce an attachment to this country, they encourage it.

We take the same view on citizenship. We do not oblige new settlers to take out citizenship but we actively encourage them to, and when they do we ask them to swear an oath which expressly acknowledges the principle of tolerance on which multiculturalism depends.

The dividend of cultural diversity is largely paid in the form of a society which is both more rich and interesting and more harmonious and peaceful.

In more recent times we have discovered a new dividend - a productivity dividend.

We have learned that cultural difference means different ways of looking at the world. In an economic environment which demands of enterprises that

they use every possible advantage to be innovative and flexible this is likely to be a tangible asset.

We have learned that being among the very few countries whose people understand all but a few of the world's languages and cultures is a very considerable competitive advantage.

In addition, we are discovering that our policies have provided us with the most valuable links to countries where we can do business: personal links and personal understanding between Australian enterprises and the markets they wish to enter.

We are taking steps to capitalise on these connections and the great cultural diversity of the Australian workforce through a Productive Diversity Agenda.

This is perhaps the most concrete example we could adduce to show that the encouragement of cultural diversity is much more than an act of benevolence - it is an act of national self interest.

I am sure it is the hope of everyone here that over the next three days persuasive arguments will be put to show that the global interest can be served by the affirmation of cultural diversity.

We certainly do not say that what has occurred in Australia should be a blueprint for the world. Cultural diversity, let alone human diversity, makes the idea of a single template absurd. Nor do we expect this conference to be a celebration of our achievements.

However, we do feel able to say that this very democratic, very open and very forward looking country has learned a good deal about the benefits and the management of cultural diversity. We are a country emerging, I think, into a great 21st century future. We will not be a nation state in the old sense of that term: we will be a more purposefully independent country than before, yet we will be more integrated with the world and with the Asia-Pacific region in particular than the Australians of 50 years ago, when the United Nations was created, could ever have imagined.

We like to think that we might have in our modern nationhood at least some of the elements of a 21st century model - diversity, tolerance, openness and worldliness within the boundaries of national purpose and cohesion. And perhaps as we pursue those goals we can help the world pursue them.

I have very great pleasure in opening this conference and inviting the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, to deliver the keynote address.

Sydney
26 April 1995