



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP 20th ANNIVERSARY OF THE RACIAL DISCRIMINATION ACT MELBOURNE, 9 JUNE 1995

Thank you very much for inviting me to this celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Racial Discrimination Act.

This was a very brave piece of legislation. It came at a time of great change in Australia - at a time when a lot of the old attitudes were beginning to show signs of crumbling away, and some inevitably were resisting fiercely.

New ways of thinking about Australia and about social and economic issues, and what sort of country we could establish here were beginning to get a foothold.

Quite a few of those ideas have stood the test of time. In their legislated form they are now enshrined in our democracy - and they go some way to defining our civilisation here.

They stand as a bulwark against the old prejudices.

It is worth recalling the context in which this Act came into being.

It was less than a decade since the referendum which put Aboriginal Australians on the census. It was only a few years since the practice of taking Aboriginal children from their families had ended. The attitudes from which those things flowed were still very common.

Australia was a multicultural society in 1975, but we had not yet begun to lay the framework of programs which have made cultural diversity a considerable and distinct national strength.

Much of the progress we have made since then has been underpinned by the Racial Discrimination Act.

That is not to say that anyone was ever under the illusion that we could legislate to abolish prejudice. And opponents of the Racial Hatred Bill really should not pretend that we are under such an illusion.

Legislation like this does not spring from any utopian vision of society or human nature. It springs from recognition of the less than perfect reality.

And it doesn't spring from a wish to punish the perpetrators of racism, but from a desire to protect its victims.

I think that this is the essential point: we come to understand the necessity for this kind of legislation when we put ourselves in the position of the victims of racial discrimination or vilification - or worse.

Perhaps we understand even better when we ask ourselves how we would feel if our children were made victims.

A Racial Hatred Bill is directed at more than the purveyors of racial hatred. It aims to limit the hatred generally. If by warning people, or by sending them a signal that it is not acceptable in Australian society, we reduce the incidence of racism, we make for a society less divided and more at peace.

Legislation like this serves to remind the victims of racial prejudice that their country will protect them.

It is a reminder to minorities that a democratically elected parliament has decided that discrimination or vilification is unacceptable; that it is hostile to the values of the majority of Australians, outside the boundaries of what Australia is and what Australia stands for, that they are inside and the racists are outside, that they are of the great majority and the racists are of an extreme minority.

I think opponents of this kind of legislation miss the mark.

When they say - as they did in 1975 and as the same voices are saying about the Racial Hatred Bill today - that such legislation is "draconian" they are thinking, it seems to me, in a context which is much too narrow and legalistic.

The Racial Discrimination Act followed the wording of the International Convention for the Elimination of All Racial Discrimination and made it unlawful for anyone to make distinctions or to afford preferences, on the grounds of race, colour, descent or national ethnic origin.

Inevitably, Voltaire was trotted out. And, on the face of it, it does seem to contradict the great liberal precept: "I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it".

I wouldn't presume to know what Voltaire would have made of this legislation; but I do know that the notorious history of the 20th century makes very clear that tolerating racial prejudice is extremely dangerous to all liberal societies.

And I also know that as a Government we have a responsibility to protect our citizens against words which are for them blows - which inflict pain of a kind that, if it were physical, would bring charges of assault.

In 1975 we might have been inclined to think, living such a long way from the rest of the world, that somehow our responsibility in this was diminished.

But of course it was not.

We had among us then, as we have now, many Australians who are here because of racial persecution in other countries.

And we have Australians among us who have been here for much longer - 50,000 years or so longer - and whose culture and lives have been all but destroyed by racial prejudice.

We also have - and we had in 1975 - a society comprised of people from all the countries of the world. And we had to make that society a peaceful and harmonious one.

Remember, in 1975 we were only a few years clear of that policy which embodied Australian racial prejudice - the White Australia Policy.

Twenty years later, we can honestly say that our cultural pluralism is one of our great national successes. That is not an exaggeration.

Those of us old enough to remember Australia in the fifties and sixties remember some very pleasant things: it was, at least until the Vietnam War, in some many respects a quiet, simple, seemingly innocent place.

But it also had the malaise of xenophobia. This was apparent not just in the White Australia Policy but in much else in our thinking about the world. It was also apparent in the attitudes which were most offensively manifested in Aboriginal policy.

For those of us old enough to remember, the distance we have travelled as a society since then is simply extraordinary.

I don't suggest for a moment either that we have made this progress because of the Racial Discrimination Act, or that we can now sit back and congratulate ourselves on creating one of the world's most tolerant multicultural societies.

This society is not free of prejudice, and we cannot not even say that the trend is ineluctably towards tolerance.

None of us can ever justify complacency on this. All of us have to engage ourselves in the difficult questions of how we make sure that Australia continues to be a tolerant society and becomes one which is more tolerant.

The role of the Racial Discrimination Act - and for that matter the Sex Discrimination Act and the Racial Hatred Bill - is not to punish every act of prejudice, but to make clear that tolerance and justice are things we live by and goals to which we aspire.

These Acts - and Acts and institutions like the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, the Native Title Act and, say, Medicare - in some ways constitute our Bill of Rights.

It is a more pragmatic, less rhetorical, legislative approach - but after 20 years, I am a bit inclined to think that it works at least as well.

As I said, legislation alone is not enough. Education will take us a lot further.

Probably the best thing we can do to eliminate prejudice is to eliminate the poverty traps; create opportunity; keep in place a safety net - while encouraging people to maintain their cultural difference, and give them every reason to have faith in this country.

And seeing the advantages which flow from living without prejudice or envy or hatred will take us further still. These things are building blocks - their success encourages more success.

That is why we encourage the notion of an inclusive society. It is why we talk about bringing people in from the margins and not leaving anyone on the edges or anyone behind.

It is also why, might I say, I think it is so important that before the end of the century we decide to elect one of our own as Head of State - why we should become a republican Commonwealth of Australia.

It is because by doing this we have a unique chance to symbolically define contemporary Australia - and in doing so enshrine those attitudes and ambitions and those social realities which now distinguish us.

By making an Australian our Head of State at the turn of the century, we can say to the world and to our children - this is a country which believes in its contemporary self.

And the reality of that contemporary self is, among many other things, a belief in the value of tolerance and the evil of prejudice.

Not a belief in our capacity to abolish prejudice or make tolerance the universal condition of humanity in Australia, but a belief that these are things which must be fought for.

And which Australia should number among its ambitions.

Which say that racism is wrong, that racial vilification and incitement to racial violence is wrong.

And because it harms our fellow citizens and the peace, cohesion and harmony of our society, it is also illegal.

This is why the Racial Discrimination Act is a landmark Act - and one we should celebrate.

There are many people who deserve to be acknowledged today.

I can name only a handful.

I could begin with Eddie Mabo, or with a large number of Aboriginal leaders I have come to know and immensely respect in the last few years.

I think it is appropriate, as we are acknowledging an Act which is now 20 years old, to pay tribute to those who have made contributions along the way.

There are too many to mention, including a great many leaders from the ethnic communities.

I don't think any of us should forget that Malcolm Fraser was a founder of multicultural Australia and a consistent supporter of the principals which underlied it.

But the ultimate thanks must go to the people who engineered the Racial Discrimination Act - I mean the late Lionel Murphy and Kep Enderby, Al Grassby and of course the leader of the epoch, Gough Whitlam.

The Racial Discrimination Act got through against great opposition. Almost by definition, ground-breaking legislation nearly always faces bitter opponents.

But it was good legislation and it has done Australia good.

And I don't think anyone here doubts that it will be here in another 20 years time - and I sincerely hope in another hundred.

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