

A WORLD OF AUSTRALIANS

Comments by Senator the Hon Gareth Evans QC, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, at the launch of the book A World of Australians, Melbourne, 15 February 1993.

The book we are here to launch this afternoon is a powerful one: powerful because it has various layers of significance. At one level, it is a marvellous collection of both beautiful and technically excellent photos - not surprising, given Michael Coyne as their progenitor and Kodak's involvement in their production. We have already heard from Kodak, but I would like to say that we have come to expect no less than such high quality from Michael whose extremely adventurous wanderings in many of the world's trouble spots have obviously given him a keen insight into human experience and aspirations in their myriad manifestations.

In terms of the current work, it might be appropriate to recall that Michael himself was not born in Australia, but is certainly an Australian now and one who, because of this background, is particularly well qualified to give us an insight into our own heterogeneous culture. And that is precisely what this book does: the photos in themselves have various subtle messages - the different layers of significance I mentioned a moment ago - but together, as reflected in the book's very apposite title, they show us a microcosm of Australia and its future.

I say microcosm because although the book contains some seventy photos, Michael would in effect have had to double the size of the book if he were to show representatives of all of the more than 140 communities actually present in Australia.

Multicultural Australia is one of the great social engineering achievements of all time - with all the connotations of being a conscious, active program initiated by a previous Labor Government and pursued by successive Labor Governments. Under the umbrella of an overall commitment to the nation and its uniting democratic values and institutions, a society of great richness, variety and remarkable harmony has evolved here - as the pictures in this book show so dramatically and evocatively.

In a world very often afflicted by ethnic and cultural tension, bitterness and bloodshed, Australia stands among those few countries which actually relish their diversity - where difference flourishes but the barriers between Australians stay down. There are times when this is acutely necessary, when, for instance, wars overseas impact directly on Australian ethnic groups - most recently in the Gulf and in the tragedy now occurring in the former Yugoslavia. On page 54 of the book, there is a photo of a fireman from

Northern Ireland who fortunately only has to deal with 'ordinary' blazes here and not the fires of sectarian violence all too sadly common in his homeland. To him and to others from ethnic groups in similar circumstances, I can only say that we as a Government and nation greatly admire and respect the restraint they have shown in Australia in reacting to one another.

Our special identity and strength as a nation comes very much from the fact that we are derivative of no single heritage. Yet there are some, including the Leader of the Opposition, who have said publicly that this cultural diversity is an inherent weakness in Australia; indeed, that our multicultural policies are "the politics of division". In saying these things, he is manifestly wrong. Just as the photos in this book are no less powerful for the many elements in them competing for our attention - or for that matter, for the complex and sensitive chemistry that has gone into producing a unique and pleasing whole - our national identity is no less strong for being made up of diverse cultural and historical experiences, blended through the alchemy of fundamental democratic and practical values, including self-esteem and tolerance.

A major source of this tolerance has been immigration, which has not only been a central fact of this country's history, but a major source of our energy and initiative. It has also made Australia more outward-looking. These are exceedingly important factors as we seek together to make the most of this unique country in what has become a very dynamic - and to Australia, very important - part of the world.

There are three distinct phases discernible in Australia's post-War response to its migrants. The first phase was characterised by an expectation that migrants would fit into the dominant Anglo-Australian culture. The second phase coincided with what I regard as a real watershed in Australian history: the end of the shameful White Australia policy in the first days of the Whitlam Government and the comprehensive rout of those in the Opposition parties who tried to play the racist card in the 1988 immigration debate. This second phase has been characterised by the encouragement of tolerance and respect for diversity, and the effort to ensure access and equity regardless of ethnic origin, and this effort will certainly continue if the Government is returned to office.

But we now have the beginnings of a third phase which emphasises the positive gains - including economic ones - that Australia can make precisely from our cultural diversity. In many of my speeches over the last couple of years I have stressed the need for Australian business to develop what my colleague Senator Button calls an export culture. I have also sought to emphasise that Australia's economic future lies to our north because this is precisely where our largest export markets lie. While Australian exporters are already responding well to the wide range of reforms and incentives the Government has put in place to encourage greater exports, particularly to the Asia Pacific region, clearly more can and should be done.

I have also spoken a lot recently about the complementarities that have been identified between the Australian and dynamic Asian economies. Traditionally, this took the form of Australian farm and mine products fuelling Asian industrialisation. But now we are increasingly complementing this by projecting Australia as a source of sophisticated technologies and services still in short supply in Asia. Part of our strategy to sell services such as education is based on the fact that we provide them in the English language - the international language of business.

But we are by no means blind to the assets that our ethnic communities can bring to this national export drive. We see no reason - and indeed would regard it as self-defeating - to try to separate social policies from our economic ones. The fact is that so many Australians know intimately the languages, consumer preferences, business practices and markets opportunities of the countries from which they or their forebears came. Many already maintain business links abroad, either individually or through ethnic-based chambers of commerce. Many others have the skills to produce goods or services which the world wants but which Australia has not traditionally produced. It would do us all well to remember that although these markets - new and old - are different to Australia to a greater or lesser degree, they are not necessarily 'foreign' to all Australians. There is quite clear evidence, for example, that the small businesses of Asian Australians have been succeeding to an unparalleled degree during the last few years precisely because of their ability to operate effectively in Asian markets. We should not as a nation be slow to make the most of the opportunities such connections present. Given that Australia has similar reserves of language and local knowledge of many other areas of the world, there seems to be no reason why we cannot enjoy more success in, say, Middle Eastern and European - especially Central and Eastern European - markets.

I have tended to stress the economic benefits of multiculturalism, but of course it goes much wider and deeper than that. In many ways our national identity and sense of nationhood can only flourish if rooted in a fertile sense of community shared by all Australians. And I would not be exaggerating if I said that our future as a nation depends on this. I'm not just talking about community participation in government structures - or as Dr Hewson puts it, the elevation of "a few professional ethnics" - but a projection by government of both cultural and multicultural policies into the mainstream of national development. This is apparent, for example,

- in Aboriginal affairs, where we are attempting to make this the decade of breakthrough so that we may all feel more pride and confidence as Australians;
- in various aspects of social policy, in industrial relations, in policies for Australian women, and in education where we have increased participation rates, encouraged the broadening of course content to include, for instance,

more teaching of Asian languages, and set up a National Training Authority to provide for all our young people;

- and not least in economic policy where, as I have said, our efforts are aimed at a truly national effort involving all Australians in recovery and growth.

In a nutshell, in fact, this is the idea of One Nation.

And this, for all the diverse backgrounds it depicts, is the one nation of A World of Australians: a nation where, like the Chilean piper on the front cover, people from all backgrounds can still find a little of their homeland. But perhaps more importantly, a nation which may be epitomised by 'Michael' Kurosawa on page 84 - not the Kurosawa of Japanese film epics - but an imaginative Australian who in his own, individual way, by successfully selling sushi and tempura beside their distant cousins - fish and chips - has clearly demonstrated that multiculturalism is alive and doing very well indeed.

I congratulate Michael Coyne and all the others involved in the production of this book, both for its insights into aspects of our own society with which we might not have been familiar, as well as for the powerful and clear message it sends to the rest of the world that a society such as ours, guided by policies of tolerance and equity, can and does succeed.

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