

RERUM NOVARUM LECTURE
Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace
By Mr Malcolm Fraser - 17th July 2001

I would like to thank the Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace for the invitation to deliver the 2001 Annual Rerum Novarum Lecture. I particularly welcome this opportunity because of the active role taken by the Commission in exploring ways to improve social justice and our instruments of government. The Commission's work is of particular value because it is based on first-hand, direct knowledge of imperfections in our society.

I am speaking today principally on Multiculturalism but on two other issues which are closely related to it, our relationship with the indigenous population and our treatment of refugees.

We began as a white settlement in a land inhabited by indigenous people. As white settlers pressed outwards, the clash at the frontier between the old and the new was terrible, hateful and all too enduring in its consequences. The settlers and their colonial government were not prepared to contemplate a just accommodation with Aborigines, even though such a course was urged upon them by British authorities. We had also witnessed a bitter course of relations between Europeans, the Chinese and South Sea Islanders.

Most significantly, we experienced the importation into Australia, a new nation, of old conflicts between the English and the Irish, Protestant and Catholic. With the preponderance of migrants from Britain or from Ireland, it was perhaps inevitable that these problems found their way into Australian life. This occurred because people in those years found it difficult to leave aside old prejudices and hatreds. It was also significantly promoted by the actions of government. Prime Minister Billy Hughes deliberately turned the conscription debates during the First World War into an attack on the Catholic Church and the Irish.

We could so easily have foundered on those differences in the early twenties, before the settlement of 1922 between Britain and Ireland. The scars were not removed from our society until nearly half a century had passed.

In the years before the Second World War, we were a dominant Anglo Celtic society. To be a good Australian, one would have to belong to that narrow mould. Religious discrimination was rife. Catholicism was actively discouraged in many professions. The religious divide carried through into political life.

The more we look at past attitudes and policy in Australia, the more we understand about the reality of indigenous policy, and the attempts to "breed out" Aborigines, the more we realise how far we have come over the last fifty years.

During the World War, Australia was so nearly invaded and, if invaded, almost certainly occupied.

At the end of the War, political leaders from all parties had shared many common experiences, the World Depression, trade embargoes and sanctions, which deepened

that recession, the Holocaust, the war itself. In so many places, including Australia, people knew that they had to do better. A return to the old ways would at some point be a return to another war, so how to build a better, a more enduring society?

For Australia's part, there was a shared belief amongst the political leadership that we had to "populate or perish".

In some respects it is fortunate that Australia had a Labor government in the immediate post-war years. Only a government with close links with the Union movement would have been able to persuade that movement to accept a large-scale migration programme.

The Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, advised Parliament in 1946 "the Government's immigration policy is based on the principle that migrants from the United Kingdom shall be given every encouragement and assistance. It is my hope that for every foreign migrant, there will be ten people from the United Kingdom ... Aliens are, and will continue to be admitted, only in such numbers or classes that they can be readily assimilated."

Such a statement was essential in achieving acceptance of the new immigration programme. Consensus in that programme was also made clear when the next Minister for Immigration, Harold Holt, from the other side of the House in 1950 said: "This is a British community and we want to keep it a British community ...".

A great effort was made to try and achieve the twin goals of maintaining a homogenous population and of assimilating those who were different. Both attempts failed. It is a great credit to Australians and to ethnic community leaders that they failed peacefully.

The hope that settlers from the United Kingdom would greatly outnumber others was confounded by the composition of successive migrant intakes. This was inevitable. War had ravaged all of Europe. Many people had been persecuted. It was certain that tens upon tens of thousands from Nazi-occupied Europe would want to leave and seek a better home in a more peaceful land.

Migrant actions also refuted the suggestion that they would assimilate. It was again inevitable that new migrants from one country would tend to gather in one place. It was a natural phenomenon to hear the old language spoken, to be around people who came from the old land. It was obviously comforting to many people who had come so far to a country so different. Later generations moved more widely through the community.

But while Australia did not assimilate people who became new Australians, the record shows that those who believed assimilation was the only course were wrong. Between 1947 and 1980, three and a half million people from more than a hundred countries came to Australia. During this period Australia embraced an ever increasing degree of ethnic and cultural diversity. The record shows that the Australian people, from wherever they have come, have enriched and strengthened this country with their cultures, their energies, their commitments and their children.

We could not have built Australia without them. Together we have built a nation which, by any international standard, must be judged a success.

This achievement was obviously greatly assisted by the economic prosperity of the fifties and sixties. There was a shortage of labour, people could get jobs. Patently the migration programme was adding to productivity, to demand. It was a significant factor in creating more jobs.

But there has been far more to our acceptance of diversity than favourable economic circumstances. Social and political processes made vital contributions to the outcome.

The way Australia's ethnic communities developed, the initiatives they have taken and the responses they have provoked, have played a central part in Australia's progress. Migrants established churches, community groups, welfare associations, schools and sporting clubs, through which they could preserve and develop those aspects of their inheritance which they valued. Australia's general tolerance and freedom were important in enabling this to happen.

There are some people who through this period spoke of ethnic ghettos. Ethnic communities were established but they did not cut themselves off from the community at large. They asserted their right to be accorded a place of respect within the Australian community, a place that acknowledged their linguistic and cultural needs. Ethnic communities sought out and changed the attitudes of the press, educators, welfare agencies, churches, politicians, public servants and the general public. They secured acceptance of issues which concerned them as legitimate and significant on the nation's social and political agendas.

In terms of the life of the nation, these changes took place with relative speed. What occurred is profound and subtle. It was not just the recognition of the needs of ethnic communities. We have not merely grafted an ethnic dimension to an otherwise unchanged view of ourselves. There is a fundamental change in the established way of seeing Australia.

In multiculturalism we have forged a radically innovative basis upon which we can respond as a nation to Australia's diversity, to its challenges and opportunities. It is a basis which offers at once both an understanding of the present and a vision of the future. Multiculturalism is built on realism and idealism. There had to be an idea of a nation, a vision of what we could become.

It also involved a practical recognition of what Australia was fast becoming – a population derived from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Perhaps we have learned from some of those earlier years and the bitternesses and hatreds that flowed from the English relationship with Ireland. In the first part of our history as a nation those religious and ethnic differences had left Australia deeply scarred.

There can be two reactions to diversity. We had probably learnt even then that any efforts to enforce conformity carries with it high costs to the individual and to society. It denies identity and self-esteem. It can drive a wedge between children and parents. It poses a threat of alienation and division. It is not possible to demand that people

renounce the heritage they value and also expect them to feel welcome as full members of our society. Realism dictates that cultural differences must be responded to in a positive way.

Multiculturalism involves far more than the passive acceptance of diversity. It sees diversity as a quality to be actively embraced, as a source of social wealth and dynamism. It encourages groups to be open and to interact so that all Australians may learn and benefit from each other's heritage. Multiculturalism is about diversity and not division. It is about interaction, not isolation. It is about cultural and ethnic differences within a framework of shared fundamental values, which enables them to co-exist in a complimentary, rather than a competitive basis. It involves respect for our law and for our democratic institutions and processes. Insisting on a core area of common values is no threat to multiculturalism but its guarantee, for it provides minimal conditions in which the well-being of everyone is secured. It is about a quality of opportunity for the members of all groups to participate in and benefit from Australia's social, economic and political life. This attitude is dictated by morality and hard-nosed realism.

I am talking about basic human rights, not benevolence, which the giver bestows or withdraws at will. No society can long retain the commitment and involvement of groups that are denied these rights. If particular groups feel that they or their children are condemned, whether through legal or other arrangements, to occupy the worst jobs, the worst housing and to suffer the poorest health and education, then the society in which they live will pay a high price for that division.

Thus multiculturalism speaks to us forcefully and directly about a range of fundamental issues relevant to all Australians. It is not an abstract or alien notion, it is not a blueprint holding out Utopian promises, but a set of guidelines which grows directly out of our society's aspirations and experiences. That is why, in a little over a quarter of a century, multiculturalism has so quickly entered our political and social vocabulary and become a simple reference point. It is too strong, too deeply ingrained, too much part of Australia, ever to be set aside.

It needs to be understood that multiculturalism, from the outset, involves the firm acceptance of Australian core values, a commitment to the freedom and well-being of this society. An acceptance of our laws and our rules, of our political and judicial processes.

That commitment has been absolute and without equivocation. It was never a question of placing loyalty or affection for another country above and beyond affection for Australia but the days are well and truly gone where one had to be Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, or pretend to be, to be accepted as a good Australian. As a nation we have come a long way.

We might all have our own perception about when multiculturalism became more than an aspiration. I have two benchmarks in my own mind. The Commonwealth's total acceptance in 1978 of the Report and Review of Post-Arrival Programmes and Services to Migrants – the Galbally Report. That Report identified Multiculturalism as a key concept in formulating government policies and recognised that Australia

was at a critical stage in its development. It re-examined existing assumptions and methods and urged the need for policies and programmes to take new directions.

Central to the report was a commitment to the principles of equal opportunity and equality of access to general services. The provision of special services where these are needed, respect for cultural diversity, consultation, self help and self reliance. The Galbally Report chartered a new course. The Government moved rapidly across a broad front to implement the report in full.

In the next few years, the Commonwealth developed a major orientation programme for new arrivals and introduced innovative English language instruction; promoted multicultural education in government and non-government schools; boosted the child migrant education programme; extended the provision of special welfare services to migrants by substantially increasing the number of grant-in-aid social workers; established a network of migrant resource centres; established the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs. We extended ethnic radio services and carried out a range of projects in particular areas of need.

While time and circumstance have impacted on these programmes, the underlying philosophy remains.

Another of the report's recommendations related to the establishment of a Special Broadcasting Service called multicultural television. It was deliberately not called "ethnic television".

There were some who argued at the beginning that the ABC should be responsible for this work, that we did not need a second government service. The ABC had not been good at going beyond the narrow confines of the old Australia. It had shown no sense of obligation, of providing services that may be specially attractive to three and a half million new Australians. When the ABC Board found that the government was determined to proceed, they ultimately came forward and said that they would do the job after all. By that time I had no confidence the ABC would really do the job required, that it would be sincere, that it would have conviction.

We went ahead and established the Special Broadcasting Service. Its programmes are not designed to be ethnic programme for ethnic communities. The programmes are designed to enable all Australians to learn more of the history, of the culture, of the background of the tradition of the people who make up modern Australia. In a very real sense it was a programme for all Australians. This was also one of the recommendations of the Galbally Report.

Governments clearly can do a great many things. They can lead, they can define directions, they can set the tone. But in the end, it depends upon people. The essence of multiculturalism can be realised only in the attitudes and behaviour of people in areas which are beyond the proper reach of democratic government.

A law on the statute book punishing those who use racial or ethnic insults will not compel neighbours to respect and appreciate each other's cultural heritage. A code of conduct for the media which warns against denigrating ethnic groups will not prevent advertisers and scriptwriters using exclusively Anglo-Saxon models for their heroes

and heroines. Educational institutions can introduce multicultural courses to raise awareness of social diversity but these cannot guarantee cultural sensitivity where it is most needed, by doctors towards their patients, by teachers towards their pupils, by lawyers and social workers towards their clients. Ultimately, responsibility for multiculturalism rests on the community at large.

We can record with a sense of satisfaction but not with complacency that, during the first bout of Hansonism, support for multiculturalism ranged between 70%-78% of the entire Australian population. Her attacks on multiculturalism had not dented general support.

In addition, formal enquiries by the National Multicultural Advisory Council were launched to see if the term “multiculturalism” should or should not continue to be used. The Council concluded that multicultural policies have served Australia very well, contributing to a fair and more just society. Inclusiveness was the key to the principles of Australian multiculturalism recommended by the Council. These principles articulate the essential balance of rights and obligations that are necessary to a just and united society.

Support for and understanding of multiculturalism is affecting Australia in profound ways. It will make it easier to accept a natural relationship with countries of east and south-east Asia and to play a role in east and south-east Asian institutions, as a country whose future will be determined by the sense of security and economic well-being throughout the whole region.

The changes brought by multiculturalism encouraged us as a nation to make a distinctive international contribution to the struggle against racism and to the defence of human rights and to the needs and aspirations of people in the developing world. Thus we have had recognition and support from nations with whom we once had little in common.

There have been attacks on multiculturalism, there have been continued misunderstandings that suggest that multiculturalism puts loyalty to another country above loyalty to Australia, that it diminishes Australian values, that it weakens Australian culture. It does none of those things. We only have to ask ourselves what kind of country are we now, what kind of country were we before the changes began?

Since I have been involved with CARE Australia, I have seen more of countries where racism, ethnic division and hatred, are rampant. In the last fifty years we have avoided racist and religious problems seen so sharply in Somalia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Serbia and Kosovo and in Northern Ireland. It is significant that leaders of ethnic groups within Australia have played a greatly different role from that which was played during the worst English-Irish divisions in the earlier parts of the last century. What governments and individuals then did exacerbated the differences and the hatreds and Australia was scarred.

In the second half of the last century, we had all learnt much from earlier divisions and failures. So it was not only political leaders from the old Australia but ethnic community leaders from new Australians who were saying that we have come to a new country to make a new land, we want to work together. We are not going to

import old divisions and old hatreds. Nowhere has this been more fully recognised than in recent years with the problems in the Balkans.

In this country we have people from all groups in the Balkans, from Serbia, from Croatia, from Kosovo. It would have been so easy, amidst the intense hatred that torture that unhappy land to have these problems imported to Australia. The fact that this has not happened is greatly to the credit of ethnic leaders and of the inclusiveness of our free and open society. Above all, it shows that ethnic leaders understand what Australia is about. It shows that their commitment to this country, to its peaceful well-being and progress is absolute. We have had Australians in the Balkans fighting on many sides of the Balkans issues, but they have done it in the Balkans, not here.

This is an essential message. We are a new land and we must not import old differences.

Australia has been remarkably successful in general programmes of migration. New settlers from many lands have been accommodated. The old idea of assimilation is dead and new Australians find their own way in a country which tolerates and respects their heritage, their culture and diversity.

Simply because we have done well should not blind us to two failures.

We still have not adequately come to grips with the question of reconciliation. We have not been prepared to look at the past honestly and take actions that will enable that past to be put aside, allowing us all to move on to build a better and a more credible country.

We should remember that authorities in the United Kingdom, through the 19th century, sought to persuade the colonial governments that Aboriginals should be treated with respect and decency. We know that, for a large part, those injunctions were put aside. In Western Australia, control of indigenous policy was left in the hands of the colonial office because of distrust in Britain of the local administration.

Even today we have legislation that is discriminatory and which adversely affects indigenous Australians. Mandatory sentencing is contrary to international obligations. The idea of allowing the police to have discretion but giving none to a magistrate, so that he cannot take into account all the circumstances of a case, is indeed a basic denial of justice.

Undoing mandatory sentencing would offend some sections of Australian society, especially in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. This is a classic case where governments should lead and persuade their masters in the electorate that what they are doing is correct. It would also create a greater urgency on behalf of governments and communities in tackling the basic problems which mandatory sentencing was designed to combat. It treats the symptoms, however, and not the cause. It seems to me that all major political parties are equally guilty of neglect on this issue. How long will we have to wait before one or other of the major parties is prepared to stand on principle and act accordingly?

With Sir Gustav Nossal, I believe that the next Prime Minister will make an apology and I believe he should. It is not, as we have been told, a question of transposing what people did in the nineteenth century and in the earlier part of the last century, onto the shoulders and consciences of today's Australians. It was then a different and a harsher world. An adequate expression of sorrow does not make today's Australians guilty of past events. An appropriate apology would, however, place on record our official attitude to that past and assist significantly in healing still-open wounds.

The present course of pushing people through the courts has already cost around \$12 million. The cost will rise because appeals are under way and more cases are to be heard.

Perhaps most importantly, an apology would do much to enable us all to get on with building the future together. An apology would unlock the past and make it possible to put it behind us. In addition it is clear that a number of the approaches to Aboriginal problems have not been particularly successful. It will enable indigenous and non-indigenous Australians together to work more effectively in seeking appropriate and effective solutions.

There is a second area where, in more recent times we have failed in our obligation and responsibility to treat all people with respect and self-esteem. Both political parties are responsible for the policy of putting migrant detention centres in remote and inhospitable parts of Australia. We have placed those detention centres within the hands of a private administration which, on all accounts, seems to be harsh and extreme. As people enter those centres, they are given numbers by which they are known – a prison characteristic and one which seems to dehumanise life.

Reports which have been recently published indicated significant shortcomings with the operation of detention centres. All too often these refugees have been treated as people outside the law. We have been told that they are illegal, that they are queue jumpers, that there are terrorists amongst them.

It is interesting to see what happens to most of them at the end of their period in the detention centre. Overwhelmingly, unauthorised refugees are ultimately given permission to stay in Australia. The Parliamentary Library Research Service has advised me that in the year ended 30 June 1999, 97% of Iraqi and 92% of Afghani boat people were given refugee status. In the next six months, 96.2% of Iraqis and 90.4% of Afghans were given refugee status. These were people who have been overwhelmingly denigrated in public statements. The rhetoric totally fails to match the ultimate outcome.

We know the Minister has learnt that many countries treat these categories of refugees more humanely than we have in Australia. It is a blot on our reputation. When we look at the overall numbers of illegal arrivals, in 1998, 8,000 came to Australia, about 52,000 to Britain, 98,000 to Germany and 427,000 to Canada and the US.

Recently, when 1,000 Kurdish refugees were beached on the southern French coast, we saw a French Minister moving to the place to see that the refugees were properly treated. It is plain she thought they had been through a considerable ordeal. A

number had already been taken to hospital for treatment. The first task was to make sure that anyone who needed medical care, received that care and then they could talk about longer-term solutions. It was a humane and sympathetic approach. The refugees were treated with dignity and esteem.

On Australia's record of recent times, our reaction would have been very different. What we do damages Australia's name as a compassionate and humane country.

It would seem clear that our approach to the problem is indeed in breach of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Conventions. It would seem to be in breach of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. This view is supported by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. It is also in breach of the Convention of Rights of the child. Current practice runs counter to UNHCR guidelines on detention. Australia is seriously out of step in these matters.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Australia's welcome to refugees who have come here without authority, has been made as tough as possible to deter others from coming. When we consider the conditions that they have left, it becomes clear that no democratic government could make conditions tough enough to succeed in that objective. There is a growing international consensus that harsh treatment is not a deterrent to asylum seekers.

A country like Australia, which, despite the exceptions, has a good reputation in relation to human rights, needs to protect its reputation assiduously. It is that reputation that allows us to use our voice in the forums of the world to advance the cause of human rights around the world. When we put ourselves in the wrong, we damage our capacity for advocacy and soil the reputation we have gained over fifty years.

Perhaps the major lesson of our own experience in recent times, the lack of effective progress concerning reconciliation and the harshness of our treatment of asylum seekers is simply that, even in an open and vigorous democracy like Australia, we cannot afford to be complacent about basic human rights. It is so easy to slip into habits of mind and actions which are discriminatory, which deny basic human dignity. We have not been immune from that slide in Australia.

There are two sides to this coin. The importance of actions that citizens can take cannot be over-emphasized. At the end of the day, it is our own personal determination to treat people with respect and self-esteem that wins the day. This is the grass roots of a decent society. The other side of the coin, however, involves government. The attitude and actions of government are critical in shaping our society for the future. They are critical in providing a lead where citizens may be hesitant. It is for the government to define the path for the future, to re-emphasize the need to maintain a just and humane society. It is a combination therefore of action by citizens and leadership by government that is essential to the creation of a just society.

We still have a way to go before we establish a truly just society. We need to have a future that is shared by all our citizens. But when we talk of a shared future, we need to recognise that the future is not shared by far too many. There is still a great need to work against prejudice and bigotry and to establish a truly equal and fair Australia.