

Her Excellency Quentin Bryce AC CVO

Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

Valuing diversity: The Australian experience

When I was a little girl growing up in bush Queensland, people would scruff my hair and say G'day Snowy. Kids with red hair were called Bluey. We all looked pretty much the same in those days. Fair skinned, freckles.



In the 50's, when I went to boarding school, some of my pals were from Papua New Guinea – Chinese girls from Rabaul. £10 Poms, as they were called, were arriving by ship from the UK and refugees from Europe. Australia was changing. It felt exciting. Colombo Plan students from Asia opened new horizons and brought lifelong friendships with Indians, Malaysians, Singaporeans for us. Extraordinary social and cultural developments all around. I was in the midst of many of them. Heady times – personally, professionally, politically across my lifetime. A changing society. As I observe my country now, what delights me and inspires me most is our rich diversity. I love our vibrant multiculturalism - that we are one but we are many.

So, my friends. I am honoured to join you today at Canada's Global Centre for Pluralism. You are an international centre dedicated to the creation of successful societies, founded on the premise that tolerance, openness and understanding towards the cultures, social structures, values and faiths of other peoples, are essential to the survival of an interdependent world. These are most worthy goals.

This week I have led a delegation of prominent indigenous Australians to Canada for dialogues on the common opportunities and challenges faced by both nations' aboriginal peoples. We have travelled to Vancouver, and now in Ottawa and tomorrow to Iqaluit. The Canadian people are making us most welcome. Thank you.

Australia and Canada have close and unique linkages. We share a common legal and parliamentary heritage. We are founding members of the Commonwealth. Our

soldiers, sailors and airmen have served alongside each other for over a century. Like modern Canada, modern Australia has been built on migration. Both our countries value societies that are just, inclusive and socially cohesive. And we are both proud of our Indigenous peoples, with their unique heritage and cultures. Indigenous Australians have lived on our continent and on its islands for tens of thousands of years.

Before the early British settlement of Australia, which began in 1788, there were at least 200 indigenous language groups, indicating great diversity amongst our First Australians. Since 1788 Australia has experienced successive waves of migrants. They initially came from the United Kingdom and Ireland, but at the time that the Australian states federated to become a nation in 1901 there were also significant numbers of people of German and Chinese descent. Indeed then, as now, Australia had a high proportion of people born overseas. Almost 30 percent of the almost 4 million Australians in 1901, and around 27 percent of our current population of 22 million were born overseas. Some of us have been in our country for countless generations, since the “Dreamtime”. Others have now been in Australia for 2 or 6 or 8 generations. Others arrived just yesterday, and more will arrive today and tomorrow and in the weeks and years ahead.

Our countries are defined by our histories, our cultures, our laws and customs, our land and seas. But, in my view, it is our people that most define us. People are our past, our present and our future. We are shaped by where we live, our values and our heritage. We are shaped by our mothers and our and their mothers and fathers. And our hopes for the future are centred on the sort of country that we want for our children and their children. Millions of people have come from other countries to Canada and Australia seeking new lives and opportunities. Australia has welcomed more than 7 million migrants since the end of World War Two – 750,000 of them refugees and displaced persons. The first stage of that high influx of people – from 1945 to 1970 – effectively “Europeanised” Australia. Our migrants came from the UK, from Italy, from Greece, from the Netherlands, from Poland, from Hungary and elsewhere.

However, since the progressive disbanding of the White Australia Policy – a racially discriminatory migration selection policy – in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, the centre of our immigration programs has gradually moved from Europe to Asia. Today, our main source countries for migrants are the UK, China, and India. In Australia we now identify with around 300 ancestries and speak just as many languages, including Indigenous languages. So the picture I am painting is that in modern Australia multiculturalism is not just an idea, not just a policy, it is also a simple demographic fact.

Our diversity greatly enriches us. Many people believe that our successful settlement of those seven million migrants since 1945 is one of Australia's greatest successes. A British Migrant to Australia, Emeritus Professor Eric Richards of Flinders University in Adelaide, made this observation in his 2008 book *Destination Australia – Migration to Australia since 1901*:

Immigration has been the great conductor of change, tension and growth in this modern Australian experience; it has been critical to its political maturity, to its demography, its economic development, its social cohesion and its relations with the rest of the world, and also to its very self-understanding on identity...Immigration has clearly generated no revolution, little internecine conflict, no riots in the streets of any significance, little communal turmoil and no permanent ghettos

So how has this happened? Of course, it has a lot to do with the people themselves. People migrate to succeed, not to fail. Most make the momentous decision to leave their land of birth to seek new opportunities. But some have no choice – being displaced by war or persecution. But all who come to join us are looking for better lives for themselves and their children. And a lot has to do with enlightened and visionary public policy.

In 1945 the Australian government created the Department of Immigration to assist in the selecting and settling migrants and refugees. Visionary programs put in place after 1945 have been administered by more than 30 Immigration Ministers. They have included English language tuition, housing and other settlement support. But, in the eyes of many, the most significant of these public policies is the inclusive nature of Australian Citizenship. From 1949, access to full Australian Citizenship has been available to all permanent settlers, after a residential qualifying period and other requirements such as good character. This access to a common citizenship status - the same rights and responsibilities as people born in Australia or of Australian parents, is a key foundation of our modern, multicultural society.

We celebrate our diversity and our unity every day of the year, but we particularly celebrate our shared citizenship each year on Australia Day. We honour the extraordinary achievements of many citizens, those born in Australia and those born overseas. We welcome many thousands of new citizens, in hundreds of Citizenship Ceremonies – in our largest cities and our smallest country towns. In a few simple phrases, new citizens take the final step in their migration journey, by saying:

From this time forward [under God] I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people
Whose democratic beliefs I share;
Whose rights and liberties I respect and
Whose laws I will uphold and obey.

Ladies and gentlemen, Australia's best known traditional song is "Waltzing Matilda", written by Banjo Patterson in 1895. It's the story of a "swagman" - a travelling worker - who camps by a "billabong" - a waterhole - and who makes a cup of tea and steals a sheep to eat. He entertains himself dancing with his bedroll - known as a "matilda". When the sheep's owner arrives with the police, the swagman declares "you'll never catch me alive". He escapes arrest by drowning himself in the waterhole. The tragic stuff of traditional songs!

My friends, the Lieutenant Governor of South Australia is Mr Hieu Van Le. He was born in 1954 in Quang Tri in what was then South Vietnam. He arrived in Darwin Harbour, in northern Australia, as a refugee in 1977. He has gone on to forge a very successful career, contributing greatly to his state and our nation. His is one of those countless stories of refugees and migrants coming to make a new life, joining us to help create our contemporary society.

I want to conclude my remarks with those he made at Old Parliament House, Canberra, in June 2011:

When we arrived in 1977, we thought we had come with nothing, that we had not much more than our tatty bedrolls. But Australia taught me that we brought a great deal. For me, the experience of the last 34 years has been that of a sharing of cultures. It has been like sunlight through a rising morning mist in Darwin Harbour....We came with not much more than a bedroll - our Vietnamese Matildas - to this place where we could waltz them to the tune of a Vietnamese bamboo flute, and the melody of a Celtic ballad. Remember, there is a spirit that resides here, which may be heard as we pass by life's spring, which sings, you'll come a waltzing Matilda with me.

My friends, I wish you well in the important work we share in promoting and celebrating multiculturalism.

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Her Excellency Quentin Bryce AC CVO

Quentin Bryce was born in Brisbane in 1942 and spent her early years in Ilfracombe, a small town in Central Western Queensland. In 1965, she graduated with the degrees of Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws from The University of Queensland and, in the same year, was admitted to the Queensland Bar. She has since enjoyed a rich and distinguished career as an academic, lawyer, community and human rights advocate, senior public officer, university college principal, and vice-regal representative in Queensland, and now Australia. On 5 September 2008 Quentin Bryce was sworn in as Australia's twenty-fifth Governor-General. As the first woman to take up the office, she remains a pioneer in contemporary Australian society, and yet one who brings more than forty years of experience in reform, community building and leadership to the role.

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