

# What matters in Australia today

## *Four perspectives*

Monday 1 June, 6.00pm  
Adelaide Town Hall, 128 King William Street, Adelaide

*Jointly presented by the Australia Day Council of South Australia and The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre at UniSA*

### **Presentation by Hieu Van Le, Lieutenant Governor of South Australia and Chairman of SA Multicultural & Ethnic Affairs Commission**

Good evening.

It's a pleasure to speak to you and to take part in this inaugural Australia Day Forum.

I want to thank the Australia Day Council and the Hawke Centre for coming up with the idea of the forum and for organising it.

This promises to be an enjoyable and stimulating event – a chance for us to think about who we are and where we're going.

Ladies and gentlemen.

As to the question of "what matters in Australia today?" my answer this evening is simple and straightforward.

It's the people.

It's the culture, health, education and welfare of the people.

It's the freedom of people to fulfil their potential.

It's their desire to accord one another respect – while balancing rights and responsibilities.

It's their willingness to see and experience the value of cultural diversity and harmony.

And it's the ability of people to become – and to remain – open and outward-looking in their orientation to the world.

When people can't realise their potential, when they can't fully employ their creativity and energy, when they can't materialise their dreams, then as a nation we fail and as a society we are going backwards.

And when that occurs, then nothing else matters.

Australia fundamentally is not just an economy, a collection of peoples or a political entity on a map, but a society – an admired and truly leading society.

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**Contact:**

Louise Carnell  
The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre, University of South Australia  
T: 08 8302 0371 E: [louise.carnell@unisa.edu.au](mailto:louise.carnell@unisa.edu.au)

We are home to the oldest living culture on earth, and we are home to almost all the cultures of the earth.

Our culture is the crucible in which our society functions.

Our culture is rich, formed in that dynamism that occurs when cultures come together and connect, when art and ideas rub shoulders.

It leads us to the fertile ground of empathy and understanding.

The horizons that locate us expand and we are all enlightened.

This city of Adelaide is an expression of that.

Its founder, William Light, was half English, half Malay.

Given its geography – what was then seen as hanging upside down at the very bottom of the far end of the world – it might have had the potential to be a place narrow and confined and backward.

Instead, ideals and ideas flowed to this place and rubbed together, firing notions of the possible.

This is a spirit of place which locates the very idea of the interaction of cultures, perspectives and insights, and it has created the birthplace of many progressive social reforms.

We can find expressions of that everywhere we care to look.

I think of our radical voting system, I think of Sir Doug Nicholls, Australia's first indigenous Governor, of Dame Roma Mitchell, the first female Supreme Court judge and female Governor.

I think of Don Dunstan and his vision of multiculturalism, which goes back more than 40 years ago.

At the national level, I think of our admirable health and social welfare systems, the massive expansion in higher education over the past 35 years, our respect for workers' right, and the fairer go we have accorded the women of Australia – something that has culminated in the recent appointment of our first female Governor-General.

There are threads that we carry from the cultures and traditions that have formed us and which press a responsibility upon us.

It seems to me that Australia has too many assets – too many advantages – to just sit back.

We have a unique position, with our rich melding of cultural roots.

Our status as the only native English-speaking nation in the Asia Pacific, our high levels of education, our research and development, our talents in medicine and science, our legal system, our regulatory regime, our strong economy, our remarkably stable political system – all these things have a value to the wider world.

Although I am a beneficiary and advocate of multiculturalism, I want to emphasise that I do not see multiculturalism as an end in itself.

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Louise Carnell

**The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre, University of South Australia**

T: 08 8302 0371 E: [louise.carnell@unisa.edu.au](mailto:louise.carnell@unisa.edu.au)

It exists as an ethos and a policy primarily to empower and enrich people – both individually and collectively.

This, in turn, gives us the potential to release our energies, to harness our skills, to share our ideas and – most importantly – to find solutions to the problems that confront our world.

If we are not, ultimately, doing something to improve the lives of humankind, then our purpose on this planet is questionable and unsustainable.

Ladies and gentlemen.

My belief in the importance of practical human betterment is based on two things – my understanding of South Australian history and my personal experience of arriving here as a refugee.

It's worth reminding ourselves that the foundation and early years of colonial South Australia were strongly characterised by social reform – in other words, a focus on people and the social good from the very start.

Edward Gibbon Wakefield's theory of carefully balancing land, labour and capital – along with setting up a colony free of convicts – were considered radical ideas at the time.

Adelaide became known as the “City of Churches” not because we had lots of churches – though we did have quite a few.

We earned that label because religious “dissenters” were involved in the very planning of the colony and because – once it was actually established – no one church was allowed to crowd out others.

By the late 1800s, South Australia was home to an amazing range of peoples and cultures.

There were, of course, the indigenous people, the traditional custodians of this land, who had been here for tens of thousands of years.

Besides the Britons, there were dissenting Lutheran Germans, Chinese, Italians and so-called Afghan cameleers opening up our vast deserts.

Here in Adelaide, all manner of Christian churches shared the city with mosques and temples and synagogues.

Now, if that isn't an early form of multiculturalism, then I don't know what is.

All this was complemented by enlightened social attitudes and reforms, such as the early granting of self-government and a relatively broad franchise.

Indeed, by the 1890s, South Australia – in addition to places like New Zealand – was seen worldwide as a kind of “social laboratory”.

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Our progressive approach remained strong in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – finding perhaps its fullest expression in the remarkable period of social change instituted and fostered during the Don Dunstan era of the 1960s and 1970s.

It is time not to be shy about this heritage of leadership.

This place, South Australia, was the first place in the world to vote by printed secret ballot, one of the first places in the world where all citizens – male and female – could vote and stand for Parliament.

It is beholden on us to accept the responsibility of having established real representative democracy.

It is time to accept the responsibility that comes from this leadership we took, from the very beginning of settlement, in the ideas of social inclusion.

As I said a moment ago, my belief in the value of human betterment was also shaped by my arrival in South Australia in 1977.

My wife, Lan, and I risked our lives by escaping Vietnam in the middle of the night and in total secrecy, and we became just two of the many hundred of thousands of “boat people” to flee its shores – the largest seaborne exodus in history.

Our journey across the seas of South East Asia was so perilous that we often thought that we would never make it.

We and about 50 others travelled on a leaky old fishing boat that was designed to hold no more than 10 people.

By default, I became the navigator of that boat.

So our path was mapped out roughly, on a piece of paper, on the basis of what I had remembered from my high-school geography lessons.

Amid storms, torrential rains and huge waves, our boat was thrown up and down and around for days on end.

When we tried to make landfall, we were sent back out to sea, at gunpoint, by the coast guard of nations that had no wish to give us sanctuary.

We had encounters with crocodiles and an active volcano.

And we spent a short period in a truly dreadful refugee camp.

After more than a month on the open and treacherous seas, our clapped-out vessel eventually crossed the Timor Sea and chugged into Darwin Harbour when the early-morning mist was still rising from the water.

We saw a little boat speed towards us and we thought we were going to be pushed out to sea again or imprisoned.

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We realised, however, that this boat was just a “tinnie” with an outboard motor, and that aboard were two blokes wearing shorts, singlets, sun hats and white zinc cream on their noses.

Their fishing rods were primed and sticking up in the air, and they had the first beers of the day in their hands.

They steered their boat very close to our hull, and one of them raised his stubby as if proposing a toast.

“G’day, mate,” he said “welcome to Australia!”

Then he revved up the motor and sped off to continue with the fishing trip he had planned for the day.

We were stunned by this easygoing, laconic welcome.

And the generosity of spirit inherent in that greeting is something Lan and I experienced again and again in subsequent years.

I should say, however, that not everyone in Australia was pleased to see us.

In the Darwin newspapers of that time, you’ll find letters to the editor from people who were strongly against our arrival.

In Canberra, Federal Parliament was filled with heated debate on our fate.

The then Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, took the flak, made the case in our favour, and led a government that gave us practical help to settle in a strange new land.

Fraser demonstrated a type of political leadership that I have admired in many people – in different political parties – going back as far as Ben Chifley and his compelling image of “the light on the hill”.

Such leaders found a way to absorb criticism, to think long term, and to lift the collective sights of Australians in order to make ours a better and richer society.

They had the courage to resist fear and knee-jerk conservatism.

In the 1970s and 1980s, we in the local Vietnamese community simply got on with the task of finding a place to live, educating ourselves, working and providing for our families – just as every new wave of settlers had done.

Still, we had our ups and downs.

We were confronted by racist groups, such as National Action in the 1980s.

We also had to cope with the arrival of Pauline Hanson in the mid-1990s.

Incidentally, when Pauline Hanson came to Adelaide and went on talkback radio, I took the opportunity to call the station and have a chat with her.

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I told her, on air, that Adelaide was home to thousands of Vietnamese people and that they – like her – were keen to make the very most of their lives.

I said I would volunteer to be her tour guide, taking her to a place in Adelaide that would make her feel very, very proud!

I would lead her on a tour of Hanson Road – the street that bears her name – and introduce her to the many hard-working small-business owners of Vietnamese origin.

You never know, I said, we might even bump into a Vietnamese fish-and-chip shop owner.

Sadly, Pauline Hanson was not willing to take up my offer.

Australia today has reached a point where virtually every nationality, language, race and religion in the world is represented here.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Today, Australia is a place where people embrace certain overarching values.

These values include our belief in “having a go” and giving one another “a fair go”.

We’re a society where all citizens are respected for who they are – no matter where they were born, what language they speak, what god they worship, or what customs they practise.

It’s a place where we can share and appreciate our respective cultures, skills and viewpoints – and where we can all be nourished by this interaction.

Some people might see overarching Australian values and cultural diversity as opposing concepts – as mutually exclusive.

But I see them as complementary – as mutually enriching.

As I said at the start, multiculturalism is not an end in itself.

It is ultimately just one element of a set of beliefs that accords people freedom, respect and the opportunity to make a go of their lives.

The society that this brings about is generally one that is cohesive, deeply civilised, peaceful, creative and innovative – and that sets a good example to other nations.

The scale of the challenges facing our world today is huge.

The poor state of our natural environment and the global economy – along with the perennial problems of war, poverty and disease – mean that we need to work harder than ever to come up with answers.

It is Australia’s cohesion, it is our diversity, it is the rich spirit we find in our histories, which offer the possibilities and the responsibility to lead.

It is a cliché to say we are all in the same boat, but we are.

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All of us who have come to Australia – or who are the descendents of those who have come to Australia – must grasp with shared humility that we are all “boat people” and, with that, bear the responsibility for all the suitcases of ideas, traditions and dreams we brought with us.

When I returned to Vietnam for the first time after more than 29 years, I found I felt a deep sense of connection to Vietnam, and at the same time a deep sense of belonging to Australia.

This deep sense of belonging is tied to the spirit of this place, and it is a spirit with deep connection to the rest of the world from whence our cultures came.

It is beholden on us to be a bridge – between this wonderful land and the rest of the world, for our history gives unique insights.

It is beholden on us to realise the richness of our collective traditions, and to take on the responsibility and the humility that that demands of us.

Our history, the spirit of our traditions, the threads of our cultural roots demand it of us.

This is what makes “we the people” our greatest resource by far – the resource our world needs.

It is our sense of connection – to 40,000 years of wisdom, to the kaleidoscope of cultures that has come and rubbed shoulders of deep affection – which connects us to the world and to the future.

Thank you.

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