

**SPEECH BY MR HIEU VAN LE**  
**LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA**  
**CHAIRMAN, SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL AND ETHNIC**  
**AFFAIRS COMMISSION**  
**TO THE ASIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION NATIONAL FORUM**  
**HYATT REGENCY HOTEL, ADELAIDE**  
**MAY 19 2008**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- Asia Education Foundation Advisory Board members
- Leading educators present
- Delegates especially interstate delegates and observers
- Distinguished guests
- Ladies and gentlemen

## **SPEECH**

I acknowledge that this land we meet on today is the traditional land of the Kaurna people and that we respect their spiritual relationship with their country.

I also extend my respects and thanks to Uncle Lewis O'Brien for his welcome to country.

I welcome you all to this forum, and I particularly want to extend a warm South Australian welcome to all the interstate delegates; I hope your stay with us is pleasant, and I encourage you to linger, if you can, after the forum, and to take time to sample South Australia's many delights.

It goes without saying that I wish this forum every success.

In some ways, this forum comes as a revelation of just how much Australia and her people have changed in the space of just one generation; a generation that saw radical political and social change in Australia and in her relationship with her Asian neighbours.

My own story as a refugee begins at the same time, and I was, in my small way and in concert with other refugees, both an active part of this change and a passive part caught up in the winds of change.

Here were Asian refugees – the Vietnamese “boat people” – coming in waves just as Australia was dismantling the White Australia Policy that had kept Asians out since Federation in 1901.

So the narrative of Asian migration, contribution and achievement in Australia, which had been a feature of colonial days before 1901 and had been abruptly interrupted, resumed.

But, of course, there had been a thread of people-to-people engagement with the Colombo Plan, which allowed Asian students into Australia to study in our universities and return to work and serve in their countries of origin, and who have gone on to provide important links between Australia and Asia.

Australia’s strategic engagement, at the same time, was quite substantial, with active military involvement in Malaysia during the conflicts known as the “emergency” and the “confrontation”, and, in quick succession, the Vietnam War.

Australia also played an active diplomatic part in supporting the independence of Malaysia and Indonesia.

Even though at the time Australians thought themselves “British” and the nation maintained a cultural distance from the Asian region, it was beginning to dawn on our leaders that elements of our future, not least our security, lay well and truly in Asia’s course.

But divided national sentiment about Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War, the tumultuous currents of the 60s that flowed through Europe and the United States and the social changes of the time, brought radical changes in Australian politics and foreign relations, and unprecedented changes in Australian society, social policy and immigration law, and the legislative frameworks for these.

And so, just as all these things were being reappraised from the early 1970s, along came the Vietnamese “boat people”, of whom I was one, following the fall of Saigon in 1975, and a watershed event occurred for both the Vietnamese refugees and Australia.

It happened at the time that “White Australia” was finally ‘out’, immigration was opened to Asian peoples who had been excluded since federation in 1901, and multiculturalism was coming ‘in’.

This new policy that was meant to make Australian society complete by including everyone in national life, with a common language, universal respect for the law of the land, the rule of and by democracy, acceptance and equal participation in civic life – values for a nation that thrives on diversity, and values inherent in multiculturalism.

In 1975, Australia was facing the first litmus test of all these changes; Australian culture was changing, and notions of identity had begun to be discussed in earnest.

The nation crossed over from an era defined by a monochromatic, insular view of the world and an official denial of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Australian people, to an enthusiastic recognition and embrace – indeed, a celebration of diversity – and we called it multiculturalism.

The leaders and ministers who led this change at that time were Gough Whitlam, Al Grassby and Malcolm Fraser nationally, and Don Dunstan, David Tonkin, Chris Sumner and Lynn Arnold in South Australia.

Today, some 30 years later, the conclusion of the timeline that takes up one generation, we can see not only how much real progress we have made, but that we need to do more; indeed, progress and previous successes create new challenges and promise.

We have achieved much in human, social, trade and cultural relations.

Australia’s largest markets are now in Asia; China is now officially our largest trading partner, Japan is second, and Asian countries take up seven positions out of our top 10 trading partners.

Not a day goes by that debate about the economy does not mention Australia's resources boom and its importance to our Asian trading partners and, of course, to our own prosperity.

Indeed, we can say that this has become a symbiotic relationship; Asia needs our resources and Australia needs the wealth that need creates.

Asian-Pacific economies – APEC – account for 71 per cent of Australia's trade.

Asia was, historically, a powerful region dotted by great empires and flourishing cultures long before European imperial expansion.

With increasing economic power, Asia is resurgent in regional and world affairs, and is reclaiming that history with foundations built upon increasing wealth and power, and on Asian cultural terms.

In his address at the opening of the 2020 Forum, Professor Michael Wesley said:

*“For the past 220 years Australia has lived in a world dominated by societies that spoke our language, shared our sense of right and wrong, and had similar institutions and outlooks.”*

*“That world is passing. The English-speaking powers and their close allies must now negotiate with Asia's giants to manage the big issues. The rules governing how we act and what we can achieve in the world will be less familiar to us.”*

Asian nations are proving that it is no longer necessary to “westernise” – as some had done in the 19th century – to be successful.

That means that we have to deal with them on different, but mutually beneficial, terms.

Our trade with Asia is now robust.

In talking about the value of trade – of goods and services – important as they are, we must be careful not to shade the importance of what I call “export services for humans”; that is, providing those things and services people need to improve themselves and their

lot in life, to educate themselves, to learn how to do important jobs and how to provide important services.

The best way we can engage with Asia is through the more human and social means of approach; that is, through cultural and educational exchanges.

Asians are hungry for education; they know, from their own history and from that of other peoples, that knowledge is power, and they are coming to Australia in astounding numbers to get that education.

Again, Asia is Australia's largest source of international students, and there are tens of thousands studying here as we speak.

Because of this, we have the potential to achieve world-beating excellence and to open up new links and make positive and enriching exchanges.

For our part, we need to learn more about Asia and the Asians, for it is only then that we could stand as equals in the region with which our economic and strategic interests and cultural future are intertwined.

If the best way to lead is by example, then we are fortunate that we have a Prime Minister who leads by his example, with his intimate and empirical knowledge of Chinese history and culture, and his fluency in Mandarin.

Kevin Rudd is sowing the seeds of closer cooperation with, and knowledge of, Asia, by starting a positive and foresighted dialogue about the teaching of Asian languages in Australian schools.

This will not only help to bring us closer to our ascendant neighbours, who are raising their cultural profile along with their trade and strategic stocks, but will make Australia's multicultural society even more cohesive because it will incorporate the cultures and languages of Asian Australians more closely, to the extent and with the manner that will give them their rightful place in Australia's pluralistic society.

Just imagine the potential there is for establishing friendships, opening business opportunities, and fostering cultural exchanges between Asia and Australia, helped by the talents and energies of the young people from Asia whose minds and careers we have helped to educate and shape, and the expatriates of each place in the other, and by you, here today, using this Forum to build on the foundations of friendship and cooperation that the Asia Education Foundation has laid.

I, too, hope to visit many Asian nations and regions to build on these foundations, because I have made a public undertaking to use my position as Lieutenant-Governor to engage with Asia.

I have in fact just returned, yesterday, from a trip to my birthplace, Vietnam, where I discussed matters of English language training for professionals as well as professional education opportunities that can be provided by South Australian universities.

The aim is that, when Australia looks to Asia for workers to fill skills shortages in Australia, those workers would have been trained to the highest levels of Australian competency standards by Australian educators in their professions and in the English language.

South Australia's cultural life is enriched by a multitude of multicultural festivals every year, and now we have established the OzAsia Festival, of which I am pleased to be the patron, and which was inaugurated last year.

The OzAsia Festival celebrates Asian arts and culture in a fitting manner, it is a tribute to the long presence of Asians in Australia, and it gives Asian Australians the opportunity to reach across cultural demarcations and to engage with each other, as well as with our closest neighbours.

Asians in Australia have made their own journeys for many different purposes and for many different reasons, and some of us can plan every part of our individual journey, while others are at the mercy of circumstances they can not control; but ultimately, there is a conclusion, or at least, a "landfall."

When my journey brought me to Australia in search of a safe haven, I could not foresee, not even in my wildest dreams, that I would occupy the position of Lieutenant-Governor today, the first person of Asian origin to do so.

I am privileged to have been chosen to symbolise the South Australian Government's recognition of the contribution of Asian communities to South Australia, and of Asia's business, trade and cultural importance to our state.

This journey will take me to a place where I will use my role as Lieutenant Governor to promote friendship, business, trade and cultural links with the Asia-Pacific region.

And it will take me to a place where I can use my own history and experiences to become an advocate for the dispossessed and the disadvantaged, an advocate for peace and friendship, a symbol of promise for the Asian communities, and the best, most forceful and convincing spokesman I can be for the benefits and rewards of cultural diversity.

I ask you all to treat that as an endorsement of the fine work that the Asia Education Foundation does, and as an invitation for us; you, me, and the South Australian Government, to a visionary future of collaboration and successes to be shared by Asia and South Australia.

I wish you the best possible success in your deliberations.

Thank you.