

**Address presented by**  
**Mr Hieu Van Le AO,**  
**Lieutenant Governor of South Australia**  
*Panellist of high-level panel discussion for the promotion*  
*and protection of human rights through tolerance and*  
*reconciliation*  
Room 20, Palais des Nations, Geneva  
Wednesday, 28 September 2011

It is truly an honour to address you all today. For me, this first visit to Geneva is not just about speaking to such a distinguished group of people.

Geneva is also the place where history was made for my birthplace of Vietnam. It was on this soil in the year I was born, that the Geneva Accord was signed, dividing Vietnam into two separately governed zones.

This Accord started my life and the ramifications of it underpin the threads of my story.

I am one of the 90,000 Vietnamese who migrated to Australia in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

### **A warm welcome 'Down Under'**

I came by a small flimsy fishing boat and spent nearly a month in the open sea, searching for a safe and peaceful place to live.

On the last leg of our arduous journey, we crossed the Timor Sea and heading to the northern coast of Australia.

And as we slowly chugged our way into Darwin Harbour in a very early morning, we were all very nervous. Each of us was apprehensive about what awaited us and what reception we would receive.

Then emerging out of the morning mist, we saw a small fishing boat with two men, wearing shorts and singlets in it, sun hats on, white zinc cream on their noses, fishing rods primed and sticking up in the air, and the first beers of the day were in their hands.

They waved at us, and steered their boat very close to ours, and one of them raised his beer as if proposing a toast.

“G’day mate,” he shouted. “Welcome to Australia!”

### **An ancient multiculturalism**

This welcome, this spirit, not only exists today, but seemingly almost for an eternity rises from the lands we now call Australia.

I was one of a long line of people arriving in Australia to be assisted and welcomed by my new home.

In 1770, explorer Captain Cook whose ‘discovery’ of the great southern land led to European settlement, hit the Great Barrier Reef near what is now known as Cooktown and suffered significant damage to his ship, the Endeavour.

The local Aboriginal people came to his aid, showing him how to use local materials to repair his vessel.

They welcomed him, just as I and my fellow refugees were welcomed over 200 years later.

It is a little known fact that Australia’s cultural diversity is ancient.

From the sketches in history books of the ‘First Fleet’ of convicts to arrive and settle in Australia, you wouldn’t know that it included 60 different ethnic and cultural backgrounds amongst its crew and convicts including people from Africa, Asia, and all over Europe.

### **Australian migration – permanency provides social cohesion**

Indeed, history does not always reflect the complex nature of a society or a community.

Australia's first post-colonisation wave of migration was mirrored around the world in the 1850s during the 'Gold Rush'.

Where many nations sent these migrants home when the rush became a trickle, Australia did not.

There was mass migration to Australia after the Second World War and then following wars in South East Asia and the Middle East in the following decades.

As with most migration around the world, global conflict has preceded the biggest shifts to Australia's cultural mix.

Australia needed these people, as much as these people need Australia.

But one fundamental difference was that the migrant workers of the largest infrastructure project in Australian history, the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme, for example, were not in Australia to just **lay** the bricks and mortar of post war economic development for Australia.

They themselves became the bricks and mortar of Australia's cultural and economic development.

They built on our foundations, to become the foundations. And with each new arrival, so too we add layers to our core.

We are not a guest worker society. The fullness of Australian society is open to all who share our beliefs, laws and rights, whilst they are encouraged to celebrate their own cultural heritage.

### **Often difficult – but always worth it**

One point of observation in our immigration history is that virtually every large-scale arrival of new migrants has brought short-term challenges and created doubts in the minds of some Australians.

When the first Vietnamese refugees arrived in Australia there was resistance and objections from small groups of society.

At a time of economic recession, some locals claimed we were going to take their jobs and that our children should not be accepted into their schools.

There were political leaders from all sides of politics supporting us and explaining our situation to the Australian people. There was a sense that with such bipartisan support, people would come to accept us. We did not panic at their resistance.

Today, we again face new migration patterns in the modern era, unremarkable in that they are the result of global conflict and economic hardship. We face the same questions again.

But we must never view our successful multiculturalism through the prism of the immediate.

For Australia, multiculturalism isn't a fad or a choice.

It is just our way of life.

### **Creating the right conditions for thriving multiculturalism**

Some people say Australia is a lucky country. I can say that our community harmony has nothing to do with good luck.

It is because we have provided the right conditions for diversity to exist, and for multiculturalism to thrive.

Those who arrive in Australia, while expected to respect Australian values, are invited to continue to celebrate their cultures and traditions, not only within a broader culture of freedom but, more importantly, with respect.

And it is that combined approach, the reciprocal exchange of cultures, traditions and ideas, that makes Australia what it is today.

From my experience over this long period, what can I offer you as the elements of it that are most worthy of sharing with to other parts of the world?

**Firstly**, it is permanent. From the moment I arrived I knew that I was permanently an Australian, giving me freedom to develop an attachment to my new home.

Australia has a very high rate of citizenship uptake by new migrants and in my experience that is essential for a successful multicultural nation.

**Secondly**, it is a two way street. I knew that I needed to live by the rule of law, learn to speak the national language and respect Australian values. In return I knew that Australia would respect my cultural heritage.

**Finally**, political and institutional support is key. Whilst each wave of migrants before me and each after me has faced resistance and a period of settling in, the message from governments is clear: 'you are welcome.'

In these turbulent economic times, you can't escape the constant discussion of trade and exports.

We fill our newspapers with talk about **economic** strengths and weaknesses, and which cultural commodities will see us through these challenging times.

Yet, little is made of our relative **cultural** commodities.

Too rarely do we turn to each other to import the best of our cultural experiences.

Australia's multiculturalism is one of its greatest assets and I believe it is one of our most valuable experiences that we can share with the whole world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I stand before you today as a product of it, and one of its greatest champions.