

SPEECH PRESENTED BY  
MR HIEU VAN LE  
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR OF SA  
AND CHAIRMAN  
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL & ETHNIC AFFAIRS COMMISSION  
AT THE  
JEWISH COMMUNITY SERVICES AGM  
ROSE HARRISON HALL, BEIT SHALOM SYNAGOGUE  
SUNDAY 28 OCTOBER 2007

Ms Vini Ciccarello M.P. Member for Norwood, representing the Premier of S.A., the Hon. Mike Rann M.P.;

Ms Mia Handshin, representing the Hon. Jane Lomax-Smith M.P.;

Ms Vicki Chapman M.P., Member for Bragg and Deputy Leader of the Opposition;

Mr Christopher Pyne M.P., Member for Sturt;

Ms Kate Ellis M.P., Member for Adelaide;

Justice John Sulan, Chairman, Board of Jewish Community Services;

Mr Norman Schueler, President, Jewish Community Council, and member of the South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission;

Ms Debbie Boock, Chief Executive Officer, Jewish Community Services; and

Ms Dorit Ninio, Former Director, Jewish Community Services

Ladies and gentlemen

**SPEECH**

Thank you for inviting me to the Jewish Community Services Annual General Meeting.

I am pleased to be here today for many reasons - none the least of which is to pay tribute to the staff, management committee and volunteers of the Service.

Without the dedication and the commitment of time and other resources from its members, many of the clubs and places of worship that the Jewish community now have, would simply not exist.

I remember, with some emotion, that - on this morning, almost exactly 30 years ago, on the deck of a small boat anchored off the southern tip of Timor - I was listening to ABC radio for the weather forecast, and waiting.

We had been warned about the Timor Sea. The crossing would take us four or five days, we thought! We waited for good weather.

And finally we took to the sea again, the lonely sea and the sky .... and a fragile boat and little more than a compass and star to steer her by.

After over a month in the open sea, this was the last leg of our arduous journey in search of freedom.

I had the job of navigator, which often felt a fearful responsibility.

On the third day of the crossing, there was some sudden excitement on the deck.

Someone had seen birds, someone had said they were seagulls.

These seagulls were like angels, for they meant ... land!

I grabbed the binoculars and stared to the horizon - and there they focused on a most brilliant line of silver - I can't describe the moment, the feeling.

I turned to Lan and said quietly, "We are alive, look at that silver line over there - that is where our life and our future is."

Thus it is that I can relate now to the wonderful Biblical story of the arrival of the Israelites in the Promised Land – the land of milk and honey and the story of the dove coming to Noah carrying the olive branch.

Back to my story ...

This silver sliver of hope took form as we crept closer through the dawn light. It became an early morning mist across Darwin Harbour.

We chugged clumsily into the harbour, a couple of blokes in a tinny waved and one of them called out "G'day mate ... Welcome to Australia."

My personal navigation to Australia had been a combination of dark circumstance, accident, fear, despair, but most of all, of hope.

I arrived on this silver shore with nothing but my invisible suitcase of heritage and dreams.

At another time, another place, a traveller such as me might have been greeted with fear or hostility, but at that time, in this place, I was given the unfettered wish and opportunity to show gratitude.

What greeted me was a generosity of spirit.

What your organisation has done through its history has been to bring that generosity of spirit to the dispossessed of your people.

When I came here I learnt something about this new culture - about the language. That, deep down, "G'day mate" meant something about a society that fundamentally believed in helping, in shared responsibility, that if we we're not actually all in the same boat, we are all in the same harbour.

Some of us zoom along, some of us chug chug in, but we are our brother's keeper.

Our boat was not called Exodus, but nor was it a "voyage of the damned" but like so many of the Jewish people through their history we are humble seekers of a home in freedom and justice.

It has been said of the Irish that their greatest export has been their people. Australia is perhaps the country that has been most culturally influenced by that export.

Much of that exportation came out of pain and suffering and oppression – Irish rebels sent here as convicts, starving peasants convicted of stealing bread, victims of the Irish potato famine.

All that ensued was, that what first evolved here, was not an Anglo, but an Anglo-Celtic society. It ensured a mix that demanded, for example, religious tolerance.

That tiny island off the coast of Europe has an enormous impact on world affairs through its Diaspora.

My own Vietnamese culture was largely locked away to the outside world until suffering and adversity forced us to export ourselves.

There are probably more Vietnamese restaurants in Australia now than there are Irish pubs!

There is a profound paradox in the good that can come out of bad, the strength that can flourish out of dispossession.

There is nowhere in history where that is more profoundly demonstrated than in the history of the Jewish people.

The wisdom of the ancient prophets of the Tanakh (the Hebrew bible) was exported in the wake of the expulsions from Palestine in the first century A.D., becoming the bedrock of the other two great monotheist religions, Christianity and Islam.

And the other cultural gifts that the Jewish Diaspora gave to Europe for two millennia are incalculable.

As a model for multiculturalism, the history of the Jewish people stands above all others.

Over centuries, whilst preserving the key elements of their own culture, Jewish people in many other societies became model citizens, leavening the bread of ideas and creativity in the places they have lived.

And Australia is no exception to that.

Names like Myer and Monash come to mind as examples of the extraordinary contribution those nurtured in Jewish culture have made to Australian society.

There has been a Jewish community in Australia from the beginnings of European settlement here. There were Jews in the first fleet. As a result, Jews were treated as equal citizens from the outset.

In the 1860s a visiting rabbi from Jerusalem, Rabbi Jacob Levi Saphir, summed up this situation in his travelogue:

*“There is no discrimination made between nation and nation. The Jews live in safety, and take their share in all the good things of the country. They also occupy Government positions and administrative posts.*

*In this land, they have learnt that the Jews also possess good qualities, and hatred towards them has entirely disappeared here.”*

We know that was not the case at all times in all parts of the world for Jewish communities.

But even from persecution and ultimate brutality and dispossession, good can flow.

Heroism and generosity of spirit can create sanctuary. And in that sanctuary a melding of cultures brings such creative energy.

We can think of the extraordinary history of music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the mixture of African rhythm and European melody that produced jazz ...

...and then the likes of Gershwin, Rogers, Hart and Hammerstein, Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen who took those elements in such new and dynamic directions.

The part that Jewish culture has played in the symphony of human creative endeavour is immeasurable.

There were Jews of German nationality who fled to Australia to escape Nazi persecution.

By sad irony, during the Second World War, the Australian government put all German nationals into the internment camps here.

There were essentially two groups in those camps – the German nationals and the Jews who had fled the Nazis.

Perhaps it says something positive of Australian society that they were blind to any concept of Jewishness making someone not German – naive, but almost sweetly innocent.

A visit to the remarkable Jewish museum in Berlin shows anyone the huge contribution that Jewish culture made to that society.

Those who could escape the dreadful persecutions took their great gifts and bestowed them on the rest of the world.

That museum is a monument to the power of multiculturalism and to the tragedy of the dire consequences that come from narrow conformity, closed minds, bigotry and tyranny.

Many of the Jewish people in Australia, like we of Vietnamese background, have a direct connection to such tragedy.

We who have been dispossessed know the value of the cultural richness that we bring, and know how important it is to lend help to others who are dispossessed.

And your organization since its inception has demonstrated exactly that.

We are blessed to live in a society that accepts and celebrates diversity, and encourages and perpetuates the best of all its people's customs and traditions.

It demonstrates to the world that the fundamental principles of multiculturalism - inclusivity, respect, recognition of common bonds, and freedom of religious, cultural and linguistic expression are foundations for peace and social and community harmony.

South Australia is fortunate and proud to have such a vibrant and enterprising Jewish community.

I commend the Jewish community for their hard work and for maintaining their traditional commitment to education, excellence and achievement.

My very best wishes to each and every one of you, and for the future of Jewish Community Services and the Jewish community in South Australia.